

# Responding to COVID-19 in the Liverpool City Region

After COVID-19: Supporting Learning Recovery  
Through a Blended Approach to Education and  
Culture

*John Corish*

## Map of Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) boundary (in red) and constituent local authorities



Data sources: Westminster parliamentary constituencies (December 2018 - ONS), local authority districts (December 2018 - ONS), and combined authorities (December 2018 - ONS)

# After COVID-19: Supporting Learning Recovery Through a Blended Approach to Education and Culture

## Key takeaways

1. Local schools, colleges and adult education providers rapidly innovated through the COVID-19 crisis. Over the last 12 months, they have moved from reactive change to pro-active adaptation of learning settings and methods, to deliver learning in-person, remotely and hybridly.
2. As in-person lessons resume, educators have a unique opportunity to harness a blended approach to learning, combining in-person with proven digital formats to best help students succeed academically and personally.
3. In the City of Liverpool, the council has developed a bold all-age [Liverpool Education Improvement Plan](#) and the newly elected City Mayor has a great opportunity to work with educational partners to enact its recommendations to do things differently in education and better than pre-COVID.
4. Sir Kevan Collins, the government's education recovery commissioner, has called for more art, culture and sport to be woven into the curriculum alongside academic lessons to reinforce learning. In Liverpool City Region, we arguably have the strongest set of [cultural assets](#) outside of London. The Metro and City Mayors should work together with our museums, galleries and sports clubs to deliver a new programme of evidence-led enrichment activities integrated with the national curriculum which would help prepare students to succeed.
5. To bring this agenda to life, the paper calls for a new Liverpool City Region Festival of Learning to be established to increase opportunities for educational enrichment and to celebrate the importance of education to individuals and to society.

## 1. Introduction

In a city region with a disproportionate share of absolute and relative deprivation that has been exceptionally challenged by COVID-19, the efforts of all those involved in the education system to ensure young people and adult learners continued to receive an education over the last 12 months has been commendable.

However, we know that many Liverpool City Region (LCR) neighbourhoods went into the pandemic with persistent educational challenges. For example, the City of Liverpool has the lowest Progress 8 score (which measures pupil progress from end of primary to end of secondary school) of all the [core cities](#); and despite some progress in recent years, within LCR there remain gaps in GCSE attainment

and at all qualification levels in comparison to the national rate.

Nationally, over multiple years, the most affluent parents have invested increasing amounts of time and money into ensuring the best educational outcomes for their offspring (Major and Machin 2018), with after-school clubs focused on music, art and sport, and tutoring companies the major beneficiaries of this increasing investment in enrichment and academic success. Against this backdrop, LCR can only prepare more young people to succeed educationally by striving collectively to ensure that the language of 'learning recovery' can be made real.

At the time of writing, vaccination continues apace and the gradual return to in-person classes in statutory education

has been largely successful. In this context, educational leaders are turning their minds to what the future may hold for educational delivery and what 'learning recovery' can do to improve social mobility and students' personal and academic success.

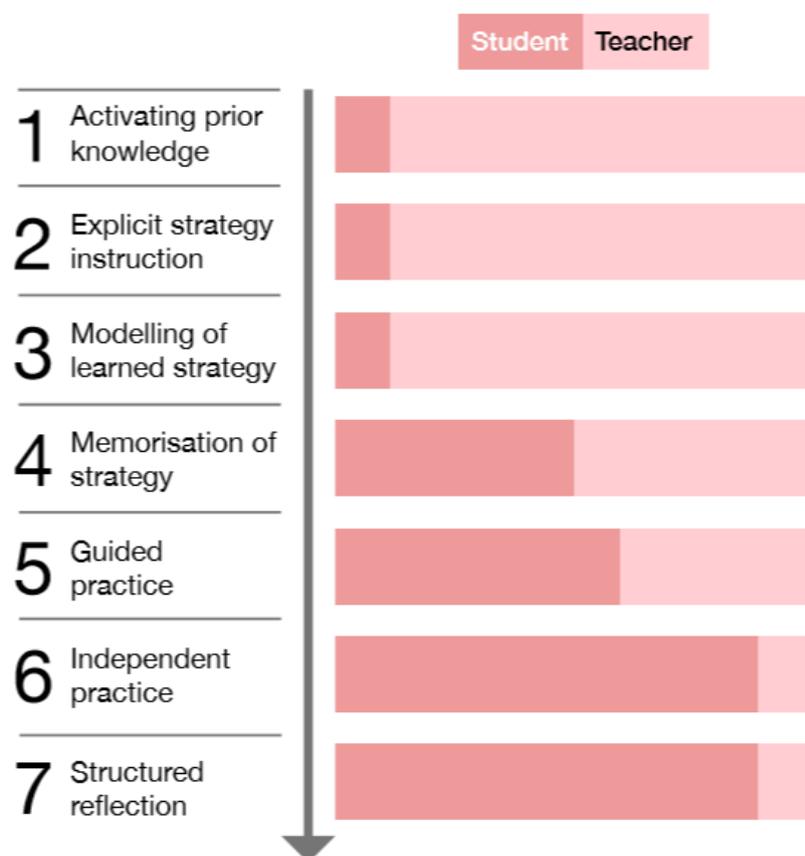
## 2. Educational policy context

Mounting [evidence](#) has revealed the widening gap in attainment between the least and most advantaged pupils (as measured by take-up of free school meals) resulting from lost learning during the pandemic. To seek to close these gaps, the Department for Education has appointed Sir Kevan Collins as the education recovery commissioner to

oversee a programme of catch-up learning recovery, including a national tutoring programme and proposed summer school activity.

Prior to his appointment, Sir Kevan led the Educational Endowment Foundation (EEF), which was set up by government to create a strong evidence base for 'what works' style evaluation in education. One example of the high-impact interventions EEF recommends to schools is the development of [metacognition](#) (learning how to learn) skills in young people. In a heavily knowledge-based GCSE and A-Level curriculum, with high stakes terminal examinations, the ability to self-manage learning and to memorise and effectively apply your own learning strategies is more important than ever to academic success.

**Figure 1.** A seven-step model to teaching metacognition



(Source: Educational Endowment Foundation 2018)

As Figure 1 demonstrates, the later steps in metacognition – from memorisation through to practice and reflection – require high levels of out-of-classroom time. This can create digital and in-person opportunities to use enrichment and cultural education to reinforce learning, and this theme is explored later on in the paper.

In Liverpool, the city council has set out, in the teeth of the pandemic, a bold all-age [Educational Improvement Plan](#) (LCC, 2021). The plan captures the need for both learning recovery and to address long-term educational challenges, and the council has assembled a largely external board, including representation from the University of Liverpool (UoL), to oversee its implementation. The plan and its five priorities (see Figure 2) provide a roadmap to a brighter future for the city’s

children and young people, and includes a high profile journey to gain UNICEF [Child Friendly City](#) status.

### 3. COVID-19 and education – what was the impact of digital delivery on learning?

From reviewing the available national evidence (e.g. Montacute and Cullinane 2021) and listening to members of UoL’s own schools and colleges network, the response to COVID-19 on education can best be illustrated in three phases:

1. An initial phase from March 2020 through to the end of Summer 2020 term, which saw rapid innovation, enabling educators to move from reactive delivery to pro-active adaptation of teaching and learning;

**Figure 2.** Five priorities for improving education in Liverpool



(Source: Liverpool City Council 2021)

2. An Autumn term of widespread re-opening of educational buildings, but which stretched the flexibility of simultaneous in-person and remote delivery (the latter needed for those isolating or shielding) to its limits;
3. A third lockdown phase from January 2021 onwards, with greater familiarity regarding digital delivery, but tempered by heightened 'digital fatigue' amongst many educators and learners.

The digital device and WiFi access divide between disadvantaged and advantaged learners was significant, although many educators sought to mitigate this impact, e.g., by recording lessons for later viewing. From national survey evidence (Montacute and Cullinane 2021), teachers in the least advantaged schools (based on free school meal eligibility) were more likely to report a lower than normal standard of work returned by learners; and most teachers (84%) thought the COVID-19 lockdown and associated disruption would increase the attainment gap.

Working with the schools and colleges sector, universities continued their valuable outreach to enthuse and prepare prospective students to study in higher education. At UoL, while not all of our outreach activities could take place, we adapted a range of recruitment and widening participation activities, and as a result were still able to support *circa* 30,000 learners in total over the pandemic. For example:

- UoL's recruitment team developed a series of live and pre-recorded online [events](#) to provide information, advice and guidance to prospective students digitally.
- Over 150 [Care Experienced](#) students from across LCR received revision and homework support using Zoom.

According to Alex Roper, virtual head teacher at Knowsley Council:

*"Our young people are finding it useful and reassuring to have the additional support of a mentor to talk through their work with, particularly as they adapt to virtual learning platforms. We would welcome using this digital approach into the future."*

- [Liverpool Scholars](#), UoL's flagship outreach project moved fully online, achieving a record recruitment of 280 students this academic year (2020-21).

In summary, based on local feedback and consistent with the national findings of the Sutton Trust (Bruce 2021), digital delivery has the following benefits:

- As a good alternative when in-person delivery is not possible, provided ideal technology and lesson preparation conditions exist.
- It can work particularly well for one-to-one and small group sessions, where post-16 learners are more likely to turn their cameras on to promote engagement and individual feedback can be provided.
- For larger group settings, its use for sharing factual information, e.g. complex concepts which may require repeated viewing, is recognised as being useful.

However, ideal conditions for digital delivery often did not exist, and for practical group work and skills development, and to form and renew friendships with peers, in-person delivery was preferred. Student disposition, home environment and access to digital resources all created a variable learning experience during the pandemic.

## 4. What now for learning recovery? Policy lessons for Liverpool City Region

### *Digital delivery*

Across LCR, our schools and colleges are placing high quality teaching for all, with targeted support for those most in need, at the heart of their learning recovery plans. As educators develop their plans for the 2021-22 academic year, it will be interesting to see what role the technologies and approaches used in the pandemic can be re-configured for a hopefully fully in-person academic year next year.

Digital delivery has the potential to enhance lifelong learning, as well as adding to the educational offer for under-18s. Lessons from metacognition practice suggest digital resources can be utilised effectively to support guided learning and apply to life or work-based scenarios. Despite the limitations of digital learning, there are sound educational reasons to continue to incorporate the best aspects of digital delivery into established teaching practice. EEF has produced a [guide](#) to the effective adoption of digital learning and, combined with the concept of metacognition, this provides opportunities for using technology to aid memorisation, practice and reflection. The popularity of apps such as Hegarty Maths and Quizlet are just two examples of this, but perhaps the more systemic change will be the increasing adoption of Google Classrooms and MS Teams into education at all levels over future years.

### *Cultural education*

Liverpool City Region enjoys a unique set of natural and cultural assets, from our wide range of museums, galleries and sports clubs, to our coastline, parks and green spaces. Both prior to and during the pandemic, cultural organisations have led the way in seeking to engage with

learners through the use of activities, exhibits, spaces and staff time to enrich cultural life and integrate cultural education with the national curriculum.

Cultural education is already a requirement of statutory education in England and all schools have a responsibility to promote the cultural, mental and physical development of their pupils. Many schools pull out all the stops to deliver on this commitment for their pupils; however, budget pressures and lack of time in the curriculum can often limit the cultural education opportunities students can enjoy.

So, while there is much high quality educational and outreach work already undertaken by cultural organisations locally, there is scope to refashion what already exists into a blended approach to delivery (using in-person and digital) that provides a net increase in the quality and quantity of such educational experiences.

For example, [National Museums Liverpool](#) expanded their online resources during the pandemic, with virtual 360-degree tour options of their museums and galleries. An extension of this approach could involve the International Slavery Museum offering live and pre-recorded Google Classrooms or Zoom webinar sessions on historical source analysis of the slave trade. Using museum artifacts and historical sources, students could be empowered to understand how to analyse what they are presented with by explicitly linking it back to curriculum topics and the exam specification and assessment criteria. The benefit of digital delivery is the ability to engage with multiple schools and colleges at any one time; this can then be supplemented with in-person trips to discover more and further apply what has been learnt.

There is merit in small groups of organisations working together to pilot such blended approaches to delivery

across a range of subjects. However, to consistently integrate such an approach into education locally will require an event to galvanise interest and enthusiasm.

### ***Our proposal: a Liverpool City Region Festival of Learning***

Liverpool (and the wider city region) has a strong record of cultural education based around events. From the 1984 International Garden Festival, to the 2008 European Capital of Culture and the recent [Events Research Programme](#) in 2021 to pilot the return of public events, the city has consistently shown it can galvanise goodwill and creative energy around an events and cultural programme to make remarkable things happen!

To bring this agenda to life, the Metro Mayor and the City Mayor should work together with our museums, galleries and sports clubs to deliver a new programme of evidence-led enrichment activities integrated with the national curriculum. This programme of activities, branded under a new Liverpool City Region Festival of Learning, should be aimed at increasing opportunities for educational enrichment and closing educational attainment gaps.

## **5. Conclusion**

The assumption that life will 'go back to normal' post COVID, while comforting to many, is in reality borne out of understandable cognitive bias and a desire to move on from a difficult period in our collective lives. In education, while many staff and students want to return to in-person learning as soon as possible, it would be detrimental to learning recovery not to continue to use and develop all means of delivery, including digital, in new ways to improve educational outcomes.

By using proven educational methods inside and outside of the classroom, learning can be embedded into our

everyday lives by connecting it to the city region's cultural assets and promoting a concerted programme of enrichment to help our citizens to fulfil their potential and improve social mobility.

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