

## Addressing the equity gap for learners in rural areas: Virtual School Highlands

### Partners

West Highland College UHI, Inverness College UHI, North Highland College UHI, Highland Council, Balfour Beatie, Sightkit Solutions and 29 secondary schools

### Focus

Providing learners in rural and remote areas with online access to a wider curriculum than was on offer locally.

### Highland Virtual School

This highly innovative tri-partnership initiative was established to provide learners in rural and remote areas with online access to a wider curriculum than was on offer locally. In the past geography and lengthy travel times have been barriers to attending college for learners in these areas.

Led by the colleges with the Local Authority, the partnership engages 29 secondary schools across Highland Region to develop the *Virtual School*<sup>1</sup> (VS). The VS now delivers 20 qualifications to pupils based anywhere in the Highlands in a range of SCQF levels 5-7 subjects including apprenticeships involving remote work placements.



The VS provides an accessible and inclusive curriculum designed for remote delivery, which seamlessly continued when the country went into lockdown in March 2020.

Seven years ago, within secondary schools there was a steady decline in the subject “Computing” and pupils had limited or no option. West Highland College UHI scoped out and built up a pipeline of curriculum for Senior Phase through Highland Virtual School. Today, Nat 5, higher and advanced higher levels enable school pupils to access and engage with Computing and Digital Media whilst at school and can progress on to post-school options HNC, HND and degree.

### Success factors

- Helping to address the equity gap in rural/urban education landscape
- Providing an accessible curriculum
- Providing a computing curriculum
- Expanding choice for pupils
- Successful digital pedagogy
- Building learner networks
- Intrinsic digital skills acquisition
- Inclusive
- Sustainable

➤ “I think the Virtual School is a really positive way to learn. It gives people that added flexibility not only in their vocations and where they are based but it also brings people together from disparate areas from across the Highlands, so it has that sociable aspect too. Virtual School allows people to develop skills in areas such as digital technology and flexible learning which is becoming more common place in the world of work.”

Ben Williams, Lecturer, Business

➤ 95% of pupils indicate that: “I am confident that I have the digital skills required for my studies this year”.

➤ “I think the course is taught well, with a variety of activities including podcasts and videos which help engage me with the subject.”

Virtual School pupil, 2021

### Benefits to learners

Feedback collected via annual student feedback surveys indicate provide evidence that learners benefit from:

- Accessing a subject of their choice that they would not otherwise be able to study until leaving school
- Gaining a qualification relevant to their chosen career
- By learning and working with others online, learners become digitally competent and confident whilst enhancing their meta-skills and work readiness
- Feeling better prepared for further study and working online
- Learning with like-minded pupils from elsewhere
- Experience cultural differences by learning with pupils from all over the Highlands
- Foundation Apprentices are immersed in work experience with national and international companies, equipping them with a solid knowledge of the industry from where they live
- Virtual experts and visits including a conference in Las Vegas

A clear benefit from the perspective of VS subject expert teachers is that they have the flexibility to be based from where they enjoy living.

### Impact

- In 2019-20, 350+ pupils benefited from VS with positive outcomes. Most pupils progress into college programmes, retaining more young people in the Highlands.



West Highland College UHI, North Highland College UHI and Inverness College UHI's Virtual



School model is a perfect example of collaboration and cooperation between FE providers in the Scottish Highlands, using technology to engage and empower learners remotely.”

Bob Harrison, Tes FE Awards 2021 lead judge

- VS is not just accessible; it is also inclusive. The model provides small rural schools and home educated pupils with a greater choice of qualifications. Pupils with school issues (illness, bullying etc) continue with high attendance in VS. The VS also contributes towards reduction in carbon emissions and wellbeing (zero travel-time).

During the pandemic VS pupils have continued to enjoy a high-quality learning experience in their online-classrooms and successfully achieved their qualifications without deferrals. Indeed, lockdown has highlighted the strengths, areas for development, scalability, and the relevance of an effective future-proof model of learning that delivers successful outcomes.

### Plans for development



The three colleges will continue to work with schools and the local authority to explore options for expanding subject choice and to improve access to timetables. The colleges are keen to extend the virtual offer, particularly to reach out to home schooled children and interrupted learners and would welcome expressions of interest from other areas. Virtual School is a very portable model. For more information, please contact [info.whc@uhi.ac.uk](mailto:info.whc@uhi.ac.uk)

