

E Brief Text May 2021

1 Introduction

Since the last ebrief at the end of March, the journey to normal appears to continue on a positive trajectory. While the end is clearly still some way off most of the signs are encouraging. There may still however be some bumps in the road. Regional variations and restrictions now appear more likely than one national position. WEA Scotland will continue to follow Scottish Government advice on a return to offices and with our partners and stakeholders on the blend of learning we will offer to our learners

While COVID has been traumatic for everyone, it has also created some opportunities and incredible successes. Previous ebriefs highlighted learner successes. This resulted in both learners and staff receiving recognition at the WEA Awards Ceremony on May 6th. In terms of opportunities, the WEA continues to secure renewal funding to improve its financial sustainability. The WEA is also helping close the digital poverty gap, by securing devices, data packages and mobile telephones for learners, who would otherwise be unable to access learning. Finally, the WEA is also a significant contributor to and stakeholder in the emerging Adult Learning Strategy for Scotland. This Strategy aims to ensure that adult learning and adult learners have equal access to opportunities and resources. The WEA anticipates a significant role in realising the ambitions of that Strategy.

2 WEA Awards: WEA Scotland Award Winners

I am delighted to announce that three people from WEA Scotland won awards at the recent WEA Awards Ceremony. Kenny Rae won the WEA Student of the Year: Enhanced Digital Skills.

Kenny Rae

Kenny is a Reach Out Learner in the North East who during lockdown supported fellow students to improve their digital skills through the use of gaming. The innovative ideas but particularly his support of his fellow learners was instrumental in the judging panel deciding that Kenny was the well-deserved winner of this award.

Graham Robb

Graham is also a Reach Out Learner. Graham was runner up in the WEA Student of the Year: Community Contribution Category. During lockdown Graham has been supporting homeless people with food parcels and checking on their welfare in both the early morning and late in the evenings

Emma Williamson

Emma is a WEA Scotland Tutor and Education Coordinator who has made a huge contribution in the availability quality and access to digital resources for WEA Scotland learners and staff. The recognition at these awards was for Emma's innovation and diligence in ensuring that high quality accessible digital learning tools were available to speakers of other languages

3 WEA Scotland Learners/Project Updates

3.1 Reach Out Project

The Reach Out Project spring term has just been completed delivering a broad range of provision to 46 learners and generating 88 enrolments as several learners participated in more than one activity. A welcome development for the project is greater levels of access to the programme by females. Previously the programme was very male centric with the gender balance 3:1 males to females. In this latest term, the gender balance is now almost 50:50

The easing of restrictions has enabled the delivery of a more flexible blended programme. A significant number of classes such as employability, financial first aid, art and music, information advice and guidance and the student's forum still take place on line. However, the easing of restrictions on meeting outdoors has enabled walking groups, gardening groups and the John Muir Award to begin outdoors again instead of being delivered on line.

3.2 Women in the Highlands

The Women in the Highlands Project has enabled women across the Highlands to remain connected and engaged during lockdown. Despite its many attractions many people living in the Highlands face the challenges of rurality and isolation. This project has meant that some people who previously had to stop learning have re-engaged through the virtual learning opportunities on offer. This virtual learning has also opened up provision to everyone across the Highlands who no longer have to travel to classes. This means that more learning has been available to more people. As a result, new learner numbers have also grown and the project is reaching more remote locations than was previously possible via face-to-face delivery.

The quotes from three learner below perfectly capture the impacts of this project and the difference it makes to individuals and Highland communities:-

Catriona: "I enjoyed meeting with other women on line and the virtual course has worked well....Its kept me sane during lockdown"

Susan: "It's been amazing to connect over the internet. The course has been good for discipline, to have the regularity. It has been a lifeline"

Frederica: “Living on a small island of 200 people means this course has enabled me to connect with women elsewhere in the Highlands”

3.3 Employability and Personal Assistants Project

In southwest Scotland, the WEA delivers an employability programme in health and social care to meet the skills gaps and shortages of local employers. All of the learners improve their employability skills and gain a number of nationally recognised qualifications. The latest course completed in April. Of the approximately 40 learners who have completed the course in 2020-21 almost half have secured permanent sustainable employment.

The Personal Assistants Project provides events and a network of support for personal assistants across Scotland. During lockdown the team introduced a new on line learning offer for their personal assistants enabling them to access and achieve accredited on line qualifications in health and social care. The new programme for 2021-22 was launched on May 4th Already 116 personal assistants have registered for training and of those, 71 have already completed their awards and had their certificates issued

3.4 ESOL in Highland North East and Glasgow

ESOL is another example of provision that by necessity, changed during lockdown. Across the WEA, there were significant concerns about whether the learners would be able to engage effectively if at all. Far from being a problem, this has proven an unexpected success, with high levels of effective learner engagement and delivery of provision transcending traditional geographical boundaries

Highland

At the beginning of the year, WEA Highland successfully secured funding from the Scottish Refugee Council to secure devices and deliver a suite of courses to enhance the digital skills and improve the on line learning experience for learners and volunteers. Within Highland Digital Training for ESOL Volunteers provides on line courses in digital skills for volunteers that will enable them to better support ESOL learners. A digital skills course for ESOL learners is also underway providing them with the basic skills and confidence to learn on line. Finally, an ESOL Conversation Café provides a more informal setting where learners can practice their language skills and engage with volunteers and other learners. In so doing their capabilities increase and they more effectively integrate to their new communities.

The provision in Highland also highlights how learning now extends beyond geographical boundaries. The Digital Training for ESOL Volunteers course was delivered to colleagues in both the northeast and Highland. Similarly, learners in Glasgow attended the Digital Skills for ESOL Learners course. This model of provision is one of the unintended consequences of lockdown that will create the basis of a sustainable long-term opportunity

North East Scotland

In Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City, there are nine ESOL classes taking place at various levels plus a new weekly conversation café. There is a significant focus on beginner's literacy skills but some learners are making significant progress and are working towards a National 2 Literacy Assessment. The Conversation Café meets once a week and is split into two groups. The beginners group focus on basic communications while the more advanced group practice their language skills through story telling. Attendance across all groups is high with attendees from all over the world.

Glasgow

In Glasgow there are currently 48 learners participating in a variety of programmes. 12 learners from Sahelia attend ESOL Skills for Everyday Life classes. These classes provide beginner/elementary provision for female refugees and asylum seekers, many of whom are very vulnerable. Already there are significant successes. Attendees from earlier groups advance to the National ESOL Digital Skills Course in Highland and some intend to progress to further study for an SQA award.

A further 36 learners from the Glasgow Communities Fund also attend ESOL Skills for Everyday classes at different levels who are recruited from the Glasgow ESOL Register. Many of the learners comment on the quality of their WEA learning experience and that it is better than other providers are. Specifically they cite the group sizes, the atmosphere in class and the skills of the tutors as significant differentiators.

3.5 Visual Journaling: NHS Staff and Care Professionals

There were almost 70 applications for 12 places on this journaling for wellbeing course run for NHS and Care Professional staff in Glasgow. The focus of this provision was a series of creative workshops to help participant's wellbeing and mental health. At the time of writing, 7 of the 12 participants have completed their on line evaluations with delegates reporting the course helped them to relax, become more creative, learn new things and improve their mental health and wellbeing.

Several of the participants had faced significant challenges during lockdown with some sadly reporting the loss of family members. Clearly, they benefitted from the course as the quotes below highlight:-

"In the past four months I have sadly lost five members of my family and I have struggled emotionally and mentally....it was such a good feeling to focus on something that I have loved in the past..... Some of my journaling looks pretty dark, but it will get brighter"

"Journaling has freed me to be more artistic and helped me process my feelings in a whole new way"

3.6 Glasgow Digital Inclusion Fund

Throughout lockdown, the WEA has secured devices for its learners where those were needed. Some were secured via the national Digital Inclusion Fund while others were secured more locally in areas such as Highland. This latest success from the Glasgow Digital Inclusion Fund by Emma Williamson means that 10 WEA Scotland learners from the Glasgow ESOL AMIF Project receive a digital device with Mi Fi and unlimited data for a year. These learners were previously participating in learning spasmodically from poor quality or broken devices that were affecting their ability to engage and participate fully. They are now able to fully participate in class, are engaging with all activities and accessing CANVAS for further out of class study.

3.7 Trade Union Learning: Green Issues

As the campaign to “Net Zero” gathers momentum, more organisations are looking at what they can do to contribute and to make their staff aware of their wider responsibilities too. This course was funded by Scottish Union Learning and attended by UNISON members from across Scotland. The aim of the course was to raise awareness of green issues among learners to enable them to create a greener life for themselves and their families and to modify their behaviours in both the workplace and the wider community. Topics included the origin of environmental problems, climate change, why human rights and poverty are green issues, and what people can do to improve the situation

Applications for the course were massively oversubscribed and feedback from the delegates was unequivocally positive. This has secured funding for three further courses for delivery between now and October with the aim of increasing interest and participation leading up to COP 26 in Glasgow in November.