Summary of Jisc Digital Student Skills Sector study: preliminary review of the Learner Focus Groups(January 2016)

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Background and methods

Phase 3 of the Digital Student project has been exploring the digital expectations and experiences of learners in the skills sector. The scope of the study covers work-based learning (including apprenticeships), adult and community learning and offender learning.

There is a wide spread of learners of all ages from 16 upwards in this study; they are studying at a variety of levels with a variety of aims and objectives, in a variety of environments. It is therefore not possible to categorise them as a homogeneous group.

By the end of 2015 we had conducted eight focus groups, but it has been difficult to get large numbers of learners to attend a one-off session that was not directly relevant to their courses. Providing travel expenses, lunch and shopping vouchers has recently led to much healthier numbers. We have not yet been able to conduct a focus group with offender learners: one is planned for late February and information from this will be reviewed at a later date.

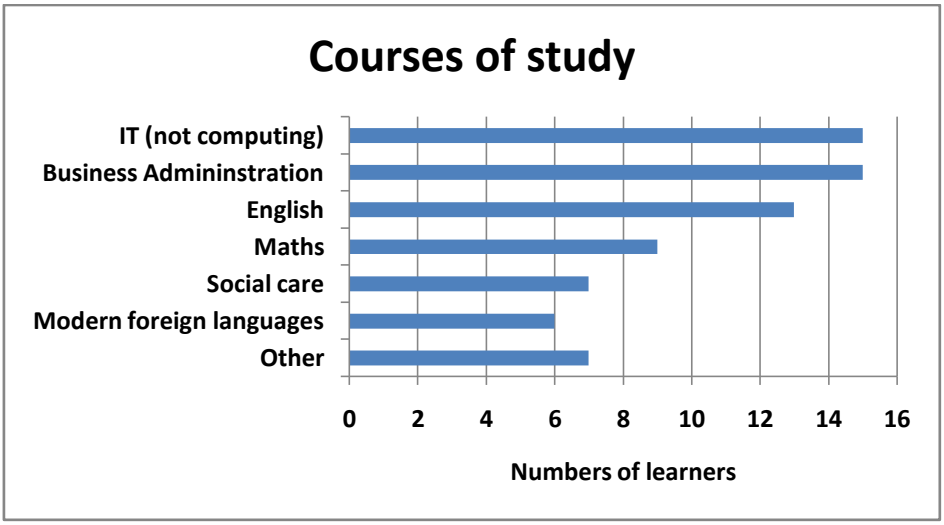
Location	*Provider*	*Type*	*Course(s)*	*Learners*
Sheffield	InTouchCare	Private training provider	Social care / childcare, Level 2	7
Stoke-on-Trent	Stoke ACL	ACL	Functional Maths, Level 2	4
London	LESOCO	FE college	Business management, Levels 2 & 3	13
Bristol	Lifetime Careers	Private training provider	Hospitality, Levels 2 & 3	10
Lowestoft	Realise Futures	Private training provider (social enterprise)	Land based ,Levels E & E1	3
Leicester	Leicester ACL	ACL	IT / basic skills ,Levels E, 1 & 2	7
Derby	Derby ACL	ACL	Recreational languages, Levels E, 1 & 3	6

Carmarthen	Carmarthenshire ACL	ACL	IT / Art / functional English & Maths, Levels E to 3	20
Totals		*ACL 4; private trainers 3; FE college 1*		*70*

The methodology has been similar to the first two phasesin HE and FE, with the core research involving the learners themselves. Each learner completes a Learner Profile form to reveal their ownership, access to and use of digital technology. We then conduct a series of learner focus groups to identify their needs, using a card-sort exercise as a prompt for discussion. We have also interviewed key stakeholders in the sector.

Key findings from analysis of learner profiles

We have sampled a reasonably broad range of study programmes, with the largest numbers in IT and digital literacy, Business Administration and English and Maths (including functional skills). Courses grouped under 'Other' include Construction, Hospitality, Retail and Sales, Art and Pottery.



The learner profile forms suggest that age is not an especially significant factor in technology device ownership or use. About three quarters of the sampled 70 learnersuse their PC or laptop every day, with females slightly more likely to do so and more likely to customise tool bars and colour schemes. They are also more likely to use social media and messaging (though not directly for learning) and to upload photos to a device.Over 80% of both sexes use Google.

Key findings from the learner focus groups

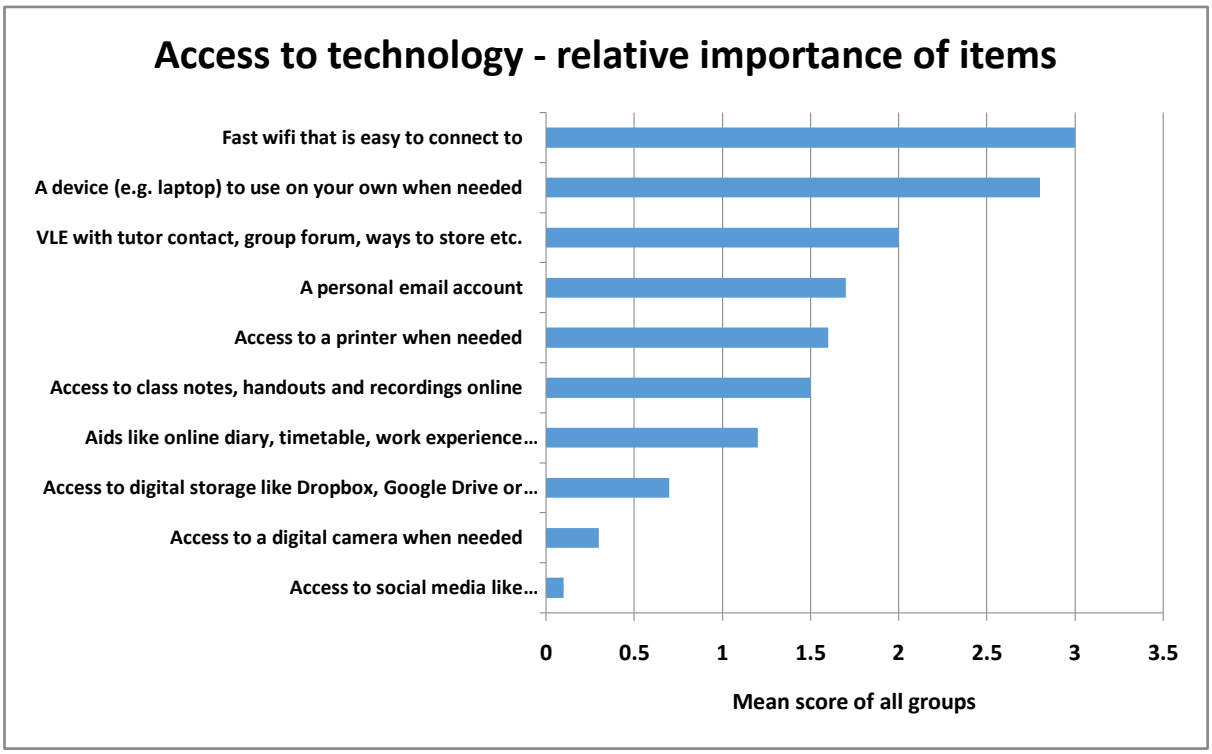
The main part of the learner focus groups has been a card sorting and prioritising exercise, in groups of 4 – 6 learners, with their discussions audio recorded. We reviewed the materials used for the FE study and used these as a starting point for the Skills sector work. We made a number of changes to the cards, discarding some where

the material did not seem relevant to the sector and subjecting the language to the NIACE smog index (**http://www.learningandwork.org.uk/misc/SMOG-calculator/smogcalc.php?redirectedfrom=niace**) which resulted in considerable simplification of the wording. The revised cards were trialled with a small group of ACL learners.

The resulting material has four categories:

- Access to technology (10 items – 5 to be selected, then prioritised)
- Useful skills (5 items – 3 to be selected and prioritised)
- Experiences (7 items – 4 to be selected and prioritised)
- Making good choices (6 items – 3 to be selected and prioritised)

The card sort results for each table in the focus groups were scored from 5 (most important) to 1 (least important), with items not ranked in the prioritising exercise scored as 0. Where fewer than 5 items were prioritised, all those not included were scored as 0. The figures below are derived from this scoring system.



Patterns are starting to emerge: regarding access to technology, fast wifi with good connectivity and the availability of a PC, laptop or tablet at the course centre are identified as the most important aspects of access to technology. A multi-functional VLE is also considered important by younger learners who had used one at school. Access to social media has attracted little interest, reflecting the perceived lack of connection between social media and learning. However there was interest in exploring how it might facilitate learning."It would be good if we (an apprentice group) had a private Facebook page where you put all the class notes, so we could access them when we're at work."

Despite some confusion over the phrase 'basic ICT skills', confidence in using technology scored most highly in the useful skills category. "In 5 years' time, basic IT skills will have changed, so you have to keep learning it. I can learn a lot on my own, but you need to be taught spreadsheets." Using technology to cope with learning difficulties or disabilities was seen as important both by those who identified themselves as having specific needs and by their peers. There was little interest in writing computer code. "I don't understand any of that, I'm not interested. But, if somebody had introduced me to it, it might have been an opportunity."

Experience with technologies used in the workplace was considered extremely important, as was the use of presentation software and working with others online: "It's easy to come across like you're being really abrupt and you don't mean to, so you've got to be really careful…and I think people really have to learn that."

Some learners – especially younger trainees who had recently left school – dismissed the importance of learning about internet safety because it had been extensively covered at school. It appears that schools vary widely in how they cover internet safety: some deal with it comprehensively, while others simply ignored the issue and banned access to social media. However the majority of learners felt internet safety was important, often linked to presenting a positive identity online. Keeping up with the latest gadgets and apps was not seen as important, reflecting a preoccupation with fitting in with current work practices rather than offering new ideas that might help the employer work more efficiently.

Learners want to use devices running standard Office packages, with access to a quality laptop, or the facility to use their own, with high speed, reliable wifi and access to printers. Younger learners, in particular, expect the same or better services than they had in school. Generally, students expect to be offered experience of the hardware and software which will prepare them for work and enhance their employment opportunities. Learners working in industries which make use of specialist packages expect their providers to furnish them with those packages – and machines of sufficient power to run them.

Emerging conclusions

Although conclusions at this stage are inevitably tentative, there are several messages coming through for providers from the learner focus groups:

- Learners' technology skills and use of technology are far from homogeneous – even amongst the same age groups.
- Learners want access to a device they can use, preferably through an open 'bring your own' (BYO) device policy
- Learners are highly responsive to being asked how they would like to use digital technology.
- The process gave providers a concrete model for eliciting learners' views of their provision.
- The process of engaging learners in discussions around technology can prompt positive changes in existing classroom practice.
- The cards are an effective way to raise awareness of wider opportunities to use digital technology among both learners and providers.
- Managers can use learner quotes from these discussions as powerful ammunition to persuade their superiors to improve or extend digital provision.