

# #OLSUCCESS Week online consultation (4-10 July 2016)

Report for the Jisc Digital Student project 'Online learners' experiences and expectations of the digital environment'

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## Introduction

#OLsuccess week was established as part of the **Jisc Digital Student Project** Online learners' experiences and expectations of the digital environment. The intention was to gather experiences, ideas, thoughts and strategies of online learners with a focus on what makes them successful. We anticipated that practitioners would also contribute as both learners and educators. Conversations were encouraged through the use of several key questions on twitter using the hashtag #OLsuccess, and on a **discussion forum**. We also developed a **short survey** and **daily polls**. An **#OLsuccess storify** was updated throughout the week and made available for people to catch up with conversations. Engagement was encouraged through a **Jisc 'Get involved page'**, emails to the project advisory group, promotion at events during the week, posts on social media, **a short animated video** and posts on the **Digital Student blog**.



## Day one: What do you like about online learning?

We had well over 60 **#OLsuccess tweets** in response to our question 'What do you like about being an online learner?' and 45 posts in our **online forum**.

Here is a selection of contributions from the course of the day:

*'The ability to study when I have time, fit the on-line courses into my busy schedule (work, family, voluntary work...) is probably the greatest advantage.'*

*'I also enjoy the interaction with the course leader during the webinar. The last but not least I would like to mention is knowing you are studying with people from all over the world. It is truly international. This type of education does not discriminate. It is all-inclusive, regardless of race, nationality, disability'*

*'Nowadays I find that convenience is the most obvious benefit. With the vast amount of online courses and other resources out there in internet-land, I can pick out what I want fairly readily. I choose stuff that I can do at my own pace, mainly to fill in perceived gaps in knowledge or understanding. Occasionally I'll find interesting material through serendipity.'*

*'I really like the freedom of choice in online learning: time, space, medium and mode.'*

**'Opportunities:**

- learn at your own pace.
- collaborate with others
- personalised learning
- independence
- enhances traditional learning'

*'Mainly I like it because I don't feel pressured to be with other people, which I struggle with due to my autism. Being in an environment with noise and distractions makes learning difficult whereas learning at home I can create the best atmosphere for me.'*

We also had some creative contributions such as this **thinglink image map** from Scott Hibberson, which summarises the main points made during the day.

Early contributions to the **ten-minute survey** chose 'convenience' and 'independence' as the things they appreciated most about learning online, while other pleasures such as participating with other learners – and learning itself – received fewer votes. (Note that a final analysis of the survey results is provided separately to this report.)

## Day two: Why do you learn online and how do you measure your success?

Twitter traffic continued to build and there was a lot of activity around the #uogapt conference as well as the dedicated hashtag #OLsuccess.

Much of the discussion picked up themes and thoughts from the previous day (lesson one: online conversations can't be coralled into convenient 24-hour blocks). So we continued to hear plenty about **what learners like and value** in the online experience. New points included: working with others, especially further afield; feeling part of an learning community; and seeing new learning put into practice.

**Mainly the opportunity to connect with people beyond my day-to-day geography. Also the feeling that the learning is taking place where all the resources and conversations are, i.e. online. @daveowhite**

A participant on the long-running online course/community DS106 summarised what he liked about that experience:

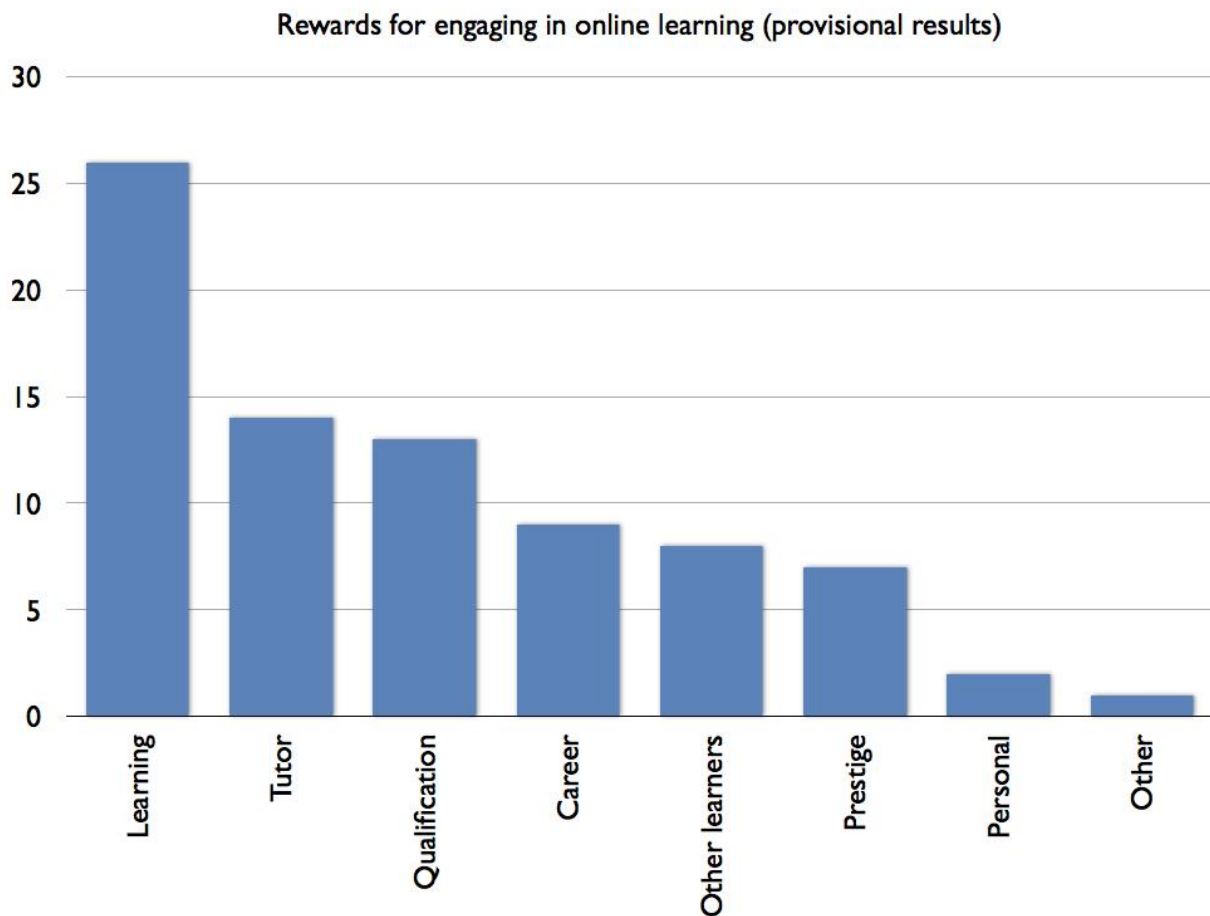
*it was of the web, not just on the web*

*huge efforts were made to build and cohere a strong community – in terms of promoting comment, interaction and reaction.*

*it was fun! ... the spirit of anarchy and playful intertextuality was compelling and refreshing.*

*it was non-prescriptive and unbounded. There was no concept of "drop-out" (indeed, it was more of a "drop-in" course...) and it was possible to take what you needed from it.*

As the day went on we delved more deeply into **why learners go online to learn and what rewards they expect**. This chart shows how participants in our survey responded to the question 'what makes you feel successful when you learn online?' (Note that this is a snapshot in time: a final and more detailed analysis is provided separately to this report.)



'Enjoying the learning itself' was chosen by 26 learners, almost twice as many as chose 'Gaining a credit or qualification' or 'Positive feedback from a tutor'. And 7 respondents chose *only* 'learning itself' as their measure of success – far higher than chose any other option on its own. However, our approach did not attract any learners under 24 and it's quite likely that qualifications and career goals are more important to younger online learners, so this result should be treated with caution.

Comments on the forums and on twitter added some fascinating detail to this picture. So several participants felt successful once they were actually **using what they had learned** – incorporating online CPD into their ongoing work, developing their career in new directions, cascading learning to other people. 'success = learning & then using' tweeted @ClareThomsonQUB. From the forum:

**'With CPD there is the added element of being able to relate learning to practice and, via the reflective learning cycle, to be able to show how this has improved personal performance / knowledge.'**

*And again from twitter:*

**'Q: Why d'you learn online and how d'you measure success? A: CPD. Changes in my practice + dissemination to others. @SueWatling**

**Would be having learned a skill that I sent out to learn, and being able to use that skill going forward. @cpjobling**

Others acknowledged that people still opt to learn online because they are interested in the experience itself. So for example *'[teaching] staff learning online get unique insight into student experience to loop back into teaching practice'* (@suewatling).

Another theme of the day was that online learning is **a different experience for different students**. Not only do we bring different motivations and enjoy different rewards, we also experience the online environment differently according to our preferences and needs. Several forum participants disclosed that they are on the autistic spectrum and that working online suits them in particular ways:

**'I prefer to work alone online and offline, but it is easier to have conversations online than face to face because I don't have to make eye contact and I can take as much time as I need to answer people.'**

**'Sometimes you can do it completely, utterly alone, just you, your brain and the material.'**

**'Being in an environment with noise and distractions makes learning difficult whereas learning at home I can create the best atmosphere for me.'**

This echoes a complexity we identified in our literature review. While some online learners really value social contact and opportunities to collaborate, others prefer the freedom of studying independently and may find socialising a distraction or source of stress. There really is no one way of organising online learning that will suit everyone, but perhaps we can be more aware – and help learners themselves to be more aware – of the diversity of learning needs.

Another participant identified as dyslexic and in his case online learning presents additional barriers rather than opportunities:

**'A site that isn't dyslexic friendly makes it almost impossible for me to continue with that course. Too much information just on the first page can be challenging and this is an area that I sense hasn't actually been investigated enough.'**

We (Sarah Knight and Helen Beetham) took time out from #OLsuccess to present other findings of the **#digitalstudent programme** at the University of Greenwich **Academic Practice with Technology conference**. **Our workshop** focused on the Jisc/NUS **Digital student experience benchmarking tool** and the **Digital student experience Tracker**. A possible outcome of the current study into online learners would be new versions of these tools. We used the workshop to ask teaching and learning staff how resources of this kind can be useful in their own settings.

We also managed to collect some ideas for #OLsuccess week while we were there – see our post-it collage and lego creations.





## Day three: What makes you a successful online learner?

For this round-up the focus is on the tips and strategies for success that online learners shared in our [#OLsuccess twitter stream](#) and [forum posts](#). Top tips mainly concerned motivation and organisation, though there was also advice on how to work productively with others, and a few bits of digital know-how.

To stay **motivated**, online learners say:

- » Relax and learn at your own pace. Accept that other learners may get through work faster or do things differently – that's OK. *'Give yourself time – Rome wasn't built in a day'. 'If you feel stressed then reflect on your motive for doing the course'.*
- » Be clear about your own goals and what you want to achieve. Be sure an online course will actually open doors (e.g. will be recognised by an employer) if that is what motivates you; don't take lots of short courses if what you really need is a qualification.
- » Be ready for set-backs and bad days, and plan for how you will keep going. *'There are ups and downs and you may sometimes feel like things aren't going as planned. Keep pushing and you will succeed.'* *'Understand that setbacks are part of life and not the end – develop a growth mindset!'*
- » Be pro-active: get involved, ask questions, ask for clarification, share what you know.
- » Identify your strengths and weaknesses as an online learner.
- » Schedule time away from the computer, especially out of doors.
- » Enjoy what you're studying: only take online courses that really inspire you, choose content and activities that match with your interests and goals.

To stay **organised**, online learners say:

- » Research the course to see if its objectives and structure will meet your needs: understand the course aims and how it works; check the course requirements, due dates etc.
- » Prepare: navigate around the course before you start, find the resources and forums, introduce yourself to other learners, take time to get to know the environment and how everything works
- » Organise your time, don't expect someone else to do this for you: create a timetable suited to your lifestyle, decide when and where you will study, ringfence your study time.
- » Plan your learning in detail and monitor progress: think about how and when you'll complete the readings, videos, activities; set yourself goals from day to day.
- » Create a positive study area; minimise distractions and interruptions.
- » Develop a system to organise the information and resources, including a variety of different media.

- » (Some learners advise): Keep up to date: don't leave everything until the last minute, keep up with other learners so you can collaborate and share with them.
- » (Other learners suggest you use the flexibility of learning online to) go at your own pace, customise the learning to suit you, decide what is relevant to your own goals and skip the rest: '*you're making your own learning path; take a mix and match approach*'.

There was advice to make **working with others** more enjoyable and productive (bearing in mind our findings that working independently is preferable for some learners):

- » Get to know other students on the course and get involved as early as you can; join in online discussions; share ideas, resources, problems, and use this to motivate you. '*A mutual support network is hugely motivating*'.
- » Maintain regular contact, even if it's just a positive comment on someone else's contribution.
- » Accept and explore different viewpoints, use the opportunity to meet people you would not otherwise encounter e.g. from different subject backgrounds, cultures, countries.
- » See other learners as a resource: what do they know that you don't? What new perspective can they bring to your learning?
- » If you do fall behind, reach out to other learners and teachers for support. Don't be shy to ask for clarification, help, guidance, advice. '*The online community is generally very supportive. Don't be afraid to reach out.*'
- » Understand where your support comes from – home, work, colleagues, family, peers.
- » '*If you do find it difficult to have a voice – start small and work up to more as your confidence grows*'.

There weren't as many comments about **technology use**, but a few pieces of valuable advice from online learners were:

- » Make sure you have reliable technology to work with before you start!
- » Use open web tools to support your learning, wherever this is possible, e.g. open educational content, online lectures, open e-books and journals to complement course content.
- » In the same way, use social media and web tools to support your connections with other learners. '*Skype chat allows you to share with other learners in a controlled way*'. '*Maybe there's a FB group*' '*Even if you are using a LMS, develop a digital support infrastructure using the web.*'

We also had the Open University Library following the discussion: they pointed us to their **quiz to self-assess digital learning practices**.

If you follow some of this advice you may achieve online learning success on a grand scale:

- » *'I've completed more than 40 MOOCs, so I know it's achievable!'*
- » *'I have a BA and two graduate degrees...it is sometimes about endurance and rigor.'*

For people interested in **analytics**, we've had well over 800 tweets sent out with the #OLsuccess hashtag and over 200k impressions (twitter accounts reached by those tweets). Some of that is due to people with many followers retweeting us – stand up @EricStoller and @jisc – but we are reaching a large number of separate accounts and our reach is building as we go along.

## Day four: How do different kinds of online learning make you feel?

On day four we asked people how they feel about different kinds of online learning. We wanted to ask this question to find out about some of the emotions experienced as online learners – both positive and negative.

We had some great contributions to the discussion forum today with people identifying what they like:

**'researching topics for end of course dissertations has been very much my high point in online study'**

**'I like to get useful feedback when I'm learning. It does make me feel that I'm doing well if I can test my knowledge. It's similar to playing online games – I like to aim for the next level and get some kind of reward. It keeps me motivated.'**

**'Surely the beauty of the internet and technology is its ability to connect individuals and communities, and to promote the exchange of ideas between different cultures and age groups, so I do feel that online learning has a way to go to truly embrace the possibilities.'**

**'Supportive tutors are also key to keeping me engaged and focused. Regular catch ups with tutors, or emails to check on progress really help me to keep my motivation.'**

**'I was able to fit this learning in around my job and also around my family life. This often meant working late at night on the online activities but this enabled me to complete the course and meet the tight deadlines. Having the flexibility that online learning offers was something I really appreciated.'**



Others highlighted problems for students who find collaboration difficult for personal or disability issues: *'Minus 90000, being forced to do it in certain courses is the worst. Lost tons of marks this year for refusing.'*

Questions have been raised throughout the week about learners being required to engage in collaborative tasks and the potential impact on their learning, for example if other learners do not engage, or if they find online contact difficult. We were reminded that for some people it is the flexibility and self-reliance that are attractive in online learning. We also had one learner question whether it was really the responsibility of learners to support one another:

**I have another Q: should online learning be #students and or #academics #staff responsibility?@kium**

## Day five: Who or what supports you most when you are learning online?

We wanted to find out if online learners are mainly supported by tutors and other learners in the online environment, or by people around them in the real world (at home or at work perhaps), or perhaps even by friends and colleagues in different online spaces such as facebook.

Comments on twitter included:

**Myself first & then tutors/learners depending on context. Conversations with colleagues also clarifies things @ClareThomsonQUB**

**Different people at different times, for different reasons? No 1 more or less important than others? @hopkinsdavid**

**Nobody, if I liked people I would learn in a bricks and mortar. I should be safe from people at home, solo learn. @catspergers**

**Mix of them all - depends on context - as an online student I was more aware of my own self regulation too @sheilmcn**

Forum contributors noted:

**Where I have problems – online tutorials can be useful (when the technology doesn't let you down) but I still find I can get far more across and engage more in a face to face tutorial.**

**Supportive tutors are also key to keeping me engaged and focused. Regular catch ups with tutors, or emails to check on progress really help me to keep my motivation.**

Another participant connected the kind of support needed with the kind of learning being undertaken:

**What helps me in learning online is the ability to set my own projects and goals, to have access to a wide range of resources and a group of peers to support me. What doesn't help me is a course structure or timed-delimited focus,**

The question of monitoring came up once, reminding us that learning analytics are being used in some online courses to identify which students might be in need of support and guidance at different times. A few contributors over the week have also mentioned the value of regular prompts and timely feedback – whether these come from real other people or are built into course activities.

So while @kiumsum reminded us that guidance, help and support are important to many learners, some learners – especially with a lot of learning experience, or with a strong preference for independence – do well without it. This might explain why many – but not all – studies in our literature review found that the quality of guidance was a significant factor in learners' success, while a lack of 'anyone to help' was often aspected in a negative way. Some types of online learning will attract learners who are happy and confident learning with minimal support, and providing this is clearly signposted in any course materials, this can still be a positive experience for those types of learner. But learners who are less confident or self-sufficient will need more structure to their course and more guidance, encouragement, help, and regular prompts to support their learning. Learners without existing online networks or the habit of turning to them for support will need access to supportive other people through the online course itself, and may need those encounters to be carefully structured for them, at least at the start.