

Online Learners' expectations and experiences of the digital environment.

Scoping and commentary

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Contents

Questions for this study.....	4
Scoping the relevant literatures.....	6
Describing the relevant literatures.....	8

Summary of findings from the previous Digital Student studies

This section with welcome comments from Rhona Sharpe, Ellen Lessner, David White, Nick Jeans.

1. Learners expect digital technologies to facilitate their transactions with service providers, including learning providers.

Students would like their transactions with learning providers to be facilitated by digital technologies wherever possible, e.g. enrolment, registration, payment, course/module selection, access to course content and course information, day-to-day communications, access to support, submission of assignment, receiving feedback, monitoring personal progress.

Students would like to carry out these transactions using (or in conjunction with) their own devices, networks and third party services, and for the interface between personal and provider systems to be seamless.

Students would like provider systems to be easy to access, navigate and use.

Students would like access to robust wifi and mobile networks wherever they are on provider sites and campuses.

2. Learners would like their learning provider to provide fixed computing facilities to allow them to access learning content, specialist software and institutional systems, and to print. This continues to be true even in settings where most students have access to their own networked laptop, tablet or other device.

3. Learners would like their course of study to include access to digital practices and technologies that will equip them for work. Access to workplace technologies, including up-to-date specialist software and systems where relevant, is important to most learners. Many learners want to be (or wish they had been) introduced to more advanced uses of their devices and systems, and encouraged to explore more advanced digital practices than they are comfortable with already.

4. Learners are divided on whether learning at the post-compulsory level should include basic ICT skills or issues of e-safety and ethical/responsible behaviour. Many – in our studies the majority – feel they should have been covered in school or picked up in daily life, and expect other learners to be reasonably proficient already. These students dislike compulsory sessions on basic use of ICT. However, we note that those without basic ICT skills are increasingly disadvantaged in learning as in other areas of life. When pressed on this issue, most learners believe that the digitally disadvantaged should be supported to reach the required standard and not excluded from opportunities.

5. Outgoing students often cite pedagogical uses of digital technology that have been positive and even transformational for them. For example, technology used to support:

- their development as learners, including their development of independent study habits;
- their acquisition of subject-specialist practices such as data analysis, design, project management, use of data systems, use of specialist digital tools;
- discussion, sharing of ideas and collaboration with others;
- collation, curation and showcasing of their achievements e.g. in blogs, online CVs, professional sharing platforms and eportfolios.

6. However, incoming learners have very little idea about how digital technologies might be used pedagogically, other than in ways that replicate their previous experiences e.g. in school.

7. The reviewed literature and our consultation exercises - not to research standards - indicate that learners would like institutional uses of digital technology to:

- respect their individual differences, preferences and access needs (more below);
- give them a sense of belonging to the institution and a cohort;
- allow them to express their digital identity e.g. through the use of profiles, personalised interfaces, social networking features (liking, following etc.);
- be consistent i.e. similar technologies used and with a consistent degree of staff confidence/professionalism (not the same tech used in all settings);
- have a clear educational rationale, rather than e.g. an economic rationale (saving money, dealing with higher numbers);
- reflect the high quality and production values of the digital content they access for personal use;
- be mediated by teachers who are digitally confident and proficient, at least in the context of the subject they are teaching;
- keep them safe from negative online behaviours;
- provide bounded spaces for the rehearsal of emergent identities, while supporting them to develop a public digital identity;
- not undermine the central place of the learning/teaching relationship.

8. Within the same learning cohort, students have different experiences of the digital technologies and online spaces offered, and come to learning with very different levels of confidence and digital capital.

- The majority of learners – the 'mainstream pragmatists'* – accept the digital infrastructure and technologies they are offered. They look to teaching staff and course requirements to guide their online activities, and their experience is strongly determined by these factors. They need clarity about expectations and norms.
- Learners who are highly proficient and confident with digital technologies are likely to use a mix of personal and provider technologies. Their know-how is a potential resource for other learners and even for teaching staff, but they are also more likely to be dissatisfied with their digital experience. A flexible and innovative digital environment - alongside innovative teaching - supports them best.
- Learners who are digitally disadvantaged and excluded – for whatever reason – are focused on access and functional skills. These learners are likely to need support to acquire new skills and to fulfil the basic requirements of participation. A secure and highly structured digital environment supports them best.

9. There are also significant cultural differences in how learners engage in online spaces. For example: students from some political cultures are extremely wary of expressing personal views online; students from some educational backgrounds have been taught that online learning experiences are not valuable or valid; in some cultures women are expected to observe particular norms and values when expressing themselves online as well as offline etc.

10. Learners with disabilities and access needs have particular requirements. Digital provision can support these learners well, because it allows for them to participate via their own preferred devices and via interfaces which are adapted to their needs. However, digital systems and digital content must be designed to be accessible to all.

11. In addition to these perceived and experienced differences, there continue to be very real differences between courses and course providers in terms of the digital technologies available, the support given to learners' developing digital practices, and the confidence of practitioners.

12. Learners want to be consulted about their experiences with technology in the learning environment. Many have valuable ideas and skills to offer.

The earlier studies identified 12 areas of good practice, summarised in the Digital Student Experience benchmarking tool developed collaboratively with the NUS and TSEP.

* The term 'mainstream pragmatist' was coined by Chris Davies: Davies, C. (2008) 'Digital Literacies: A view from young people', in *The Educational and social impact of new technologies on young people in Britain*. University of Oxford / LSE.

Questions identified for the study

Over-arching question: what makes for a successful online learner?

1. What are successful online learners like?
2. What do successful online learners do?
3. How do successful online learners feel about learning online?
4. What differences among online learners are significant to their success?
5. How can providers and teachers/facilitators support online learners' success?

Defining online learners

For the purposes of this study, online learning is defined as all of:

- exclusively online courses of study, conducted away from any physical campus (e.g. home or work based), such as many professional development qualifications offered by UK HEIs;
- courses which are delivered largely online, or have online elements to support a variety of access needs and attendance patterns, in both HE and FE;
- online learning which replaces some face-to-face lecturing time in courses that are otherwise delivered traditionally, e.g. where FE and skills providers are following the FELTAG recommendations to include a higher proportion of independent online study, or where students in HE are required to undertake online tasks, view online resources and participate in online interactions/collaborations as part of their independent study time.

It is our assumption that most learners in post-compulsory settings will experience some online component to their learning, formal or informal, and that as they move into lifelong learning/professional development this component will form a larger proportion of study time. Online learners are not, then, a distinct group of learners: they are post-compulsory learners in particular situations and/or with particular preferences and needs.

Scoping the relevant literatures

There is a robust literature on **factors influencing the outcomes** of online learning using measures such as learners' engagement, progression, satisfaction, successful completion and credits/grades achieved. These studies help us to understand how differences among learners influence their experiences of online learning. In this report we will include recent (post 2012) research, with a preference for meta-reviews and synthesis studies, in order to summarise the key factors (learner differences) found to be of significance.

There is also a **comparative literature** which contrasts online and offline versions of similar learning activities, tasks, or larger portions of the learning experience – or contrasts differently designed online learning components - within the same course of study. These studies help us to understand how features of online learning design influence the learning experience. Again we will include recent (post 2012) research and synthesis studies of these issues, with a preference for synthesis studies.

There is a vast body of **case study evidence**, largely conducted from the perspective of teachers and online learning designers, and evaluation studies of specific online courses or interventions. These studies help us to understand aspects of the learner experience in more detail, but only where the learner perspective has been elicited and explored, and typically only with relevance to fairly specific settings. We will review case studies provided by Jisc and direct partners/contacts, and other case studies and evaluation studies exposed by database searches where the learner perspective has clearly been elicited. However, the corpus of such studies is large, extremely variable in quality and focus, and poorly described elsewhere, and we are not resourced to analyse even a small part of it in any detail. This aspect of our literature review will necessarily be serendipitous rather than thorough-going.

There are **qualitative and mixed-method research studies** which provide a focused, theoretically informed and rich picture of online learners' experiences from a variety of perspectives. We will aim to review as many of these as possible.

Finally, most online and hybrid (offline/online) courses gather **feedback from learners**, and/or carry out learner surveys. Researchers, online learning providers, and some national bodies have carried out larger-scale surveys of learners. Unless written up in one of the other literatures e.g. evaluation studies, this material is not generally available. However, we will review survey data where it is exposed by our database searches, and we will use our contacts with online learning providers and Jisc partners to access unpublished survey data where available.

Search terms and keywords

At the outset our database search terms were:

- online_learning
- online_learners
- MOOC
- open_learning
- virtual_learning
- networked_learning...
- plus (learner)...
- experience
- engagement
- satisfaction

- motivation
- identity/identities
- progression
- development
- perception

To these we later added emotions, disability, retention, curriculum design, socio-economic status, social class, educational disadvantage, cultural, second language students,

We retrieved thousands of references so decided to include studies for more detailed analysis on the basis of:

- Recency (post 2012 unless studies were particularly relevant and frequently cited)
- Involvement of learners, especially via large-scale surveys and/or detailed qualitative work
- Focus on the learning experience, rather than teaching, course design, or organisational issues

Studies filtered for inclusion (over 250) were then tagged using the following keywords

Context

distance learners, online Learners, disabled learners

HE, FE, adult learners, International, country as appropriate

Online Learning (institutional provision), Open Learning (institutional provision), blended learning, learning technology, informal learning

Learner engagement/activity

MOOC, secondlife, social networks, collaboration, communication, interaction, problem solving, digital literacy, mobile devices, critical thinking

Study focus/theme

Learner perceptions, Learner engagement, Learner experiences, Learner expectations, Learner motivation, retention, learner achievement, learner attitudes, learner satisfaction, learner voice

Trust, Sense of community (use for belonging), self-regulation, study habits, cultural differences, transition, metacognition, self-efficacy, time management, learner differences

Describing the relevant literatures

Overall we reviewed over 250 studies and included 150 for more detailed analysis.

Far more relevant resources were identified and reviewed for this study than for the earlier three studies (of mainstream learners in HE, FE and Skills). We think it unlikely that substantially more literature has been published in the intervening 12/18 months, so we assume that there are simply more publications available that address the experiences of online learners. We speculate that some reasons for this may be:

- Studies into online learners/learning may have been a priority for funding from external agencies;
- Online learning is seen as critical to the future business case of many large-scale providers, who have carried out or funded internal studies;
- Online learners are relatively easier to reach with research instruments, e.g. with online surveys;
- Online learning leaves a data trail which makes it relatively easy to track (some aspects of) learner behaviour without additional interventions;
- Studies of the digital experiences of traditional learners are conceptually more complicated because they are learning in mixed (online/offline, personal/institutional) settings in which it may not be clear when and how digital technologies are being used. The online learning experience is inherently and overall a digital one.

We need to ask whether the greater volume of studies means we have a better picture of the experience of online learners.

Many studies are course-based evaluations. However, cross-course evaluations are also relatively common, perhaps due to the relative ease of applying online measures across cohorts.

Qualitative studies focus on a wide range of themes, but particularly:

- self regulation and self-direction in learning
- online study habits (time management etc)
- trust and community
- MOOCs as a specific social/educational/technological phenomenon
- participation and retention