Student digital experience Tracker
Case study: Royal National College for the Blind

Context

The Royal National College for the Blind (RNC) provides further and higher education to students and adult trainees with visual impairments. As a primarily residential college, RNC places as much importance on Orientation and Mobility (O&M) and Independent Living Skills (ILS) as on academic or vocational qualifications. Up to 90 students are enrolled at one time, and they follow a highly individualised curriculum to ensure they meet their potential. The RNC helps more people who are blind or partially sighted into employment and higher education than anyone else in the UK.

Why the Tracker was used

RNC is currently developing the IMPACT initiative to promote the importance of IT to people who are visually impaired and to increase access to such technology beyond the College. The Tracker pilot seemed like a valuable way of raising awareness. At the same time the College was keen to find out which technologies students were using, including assistive technologies, and whether their personal use could be extended into the classroom. The Tracker question set was adapted to include a question about assistive technology use because this was such a critical issue at the RNC. Learners were also asked to describe how they accessed content and what ‘other’ devices and software they were using to support their learning.

Students with sensory impairments have particular needs, and enjoy particular benefits if the digital environment is designed with access for all in mind. Given the potential of digital technology to level up the playing field for students who are visually impaired, it was significant that the Tracker supported benchmarking with mainstream providers in the FE and skills sector.
Engaging key staff and learners

The Senior Management Team were fully behind the Tracker initiative. To encourage participation, 83 students were emailed personally. They were also encouraged to complete the Tracker questions during IT skills tutorials, and this contributed to the very high response rate of 52 out of 83.

What the Tracker found

Students at RNC were more likely to have a personal laptop and ‘other’ digital device for personal use than the sector norm. Not surprisingly given the ethos of the College, they also enjoyed high levels of support and guidance for all the issues covered in the Tracker. They were especially likely to say they had help to ‘modify digital devices to meet my personal needs’.

In free text responses about who gave them the most support, students mentioned IT teaching and technical support staff most often, but many simply said that ‘all staff’ were supportive of their digital skills, for example: ‘Support for modifying devices or dealing with any minor issues with devices I have found comes most from the residential staff if the issues are linked with a personal device out of college hours. However, during lessons help is given if needed, I’ve found that the teachers on my media course are very helpful when it comes to using the specialist software in those lessons and are available to help with issues outside of software.’

When asked what the College could start doing to improve their digital experience, a significant number could think of nothing more that could be done, for example: ‘nothing I think it’s great’ and ‘there is nothing at the moment that can be done to improve my learning experience. Everything is done already’. Similarly the most common answer to what the College might stop doing was ‘nothing’: ‘Keep everything the same, It’s pretty good as it is.’

Desirable changes that were mentioned were often ‘more of the same’ e.g. more online, more practice, more variety, better wifi. There was also an emphasis on finding out from individual students what would help them: ‘Tailor lessons to students’ needs and requirements’ ‘ask students how confident they are’ ‘[have] a formal assessment’ ‘Focus more on people’s individual needs’. ‘Explain which technologies are for which issue and why they help and determine which the learner will need.’
### Responses and reflections

The College required several changes to the standard FE and Skills sector question set to be relevant to RNC students: for example asking about how learners accessed their learning resources rather than assuming that they would use a VLE/LMS, and asking about specific assistive software. The Jisc team also worked with BOS to make several changes to the presentation of the question set to better support the use of screen readers, e.g. some adjustments to the table-less option. Many students found the question set took longer than five minutes to complete, and this estimate will be adjusted in future to account for the use of screen readers and other assistive technologies.

“This has been great for us. We will be using the data to analyse student opinions and see where we are in relation to other colleges. IT is essential for our students, it is therefore important that we listen to them.”

*Teresa Allen, Teacher in charge of ICT skills and development*  

### Key lessons  

1. With adaptations for assistive software, the Tracker can be used to bridge mainstream and specialist colleges, allowing for a direct comparison of the digital experience of students in different settings.  
2. Input from RNC has been invaluable in ensuring the entire BOS system – and not just the Tracker – is more accessible to all.