Exploring the impact of digital and data poverty on BAME learners

Summary of findings from scoping study - February 2021

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Introduction

Jisc’s Shaping the Digital Future of FE and Skills programme last year reinforced digital and data poverty as a pressing concern for the sector requiring further understanding and action. The Covid-19 pandemic has widened the digital and social divide, and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities have been disproportionately impacted by the virus, hence the focus of this research.
The purpose of the deep dive is to understand better:

• The impact of digital and data poverty on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) learners’ educational experience and outcomes

• The extent to which BAME learners are disproportionately affected

• What steps can be taken to address digital and data poverty

To start this process we:

• Conducted desk research of existing literature and data

• Interviewed ten leaders and senior managers from three general FE colleges, one sixth form college and one adult and community learning provider:
  - Central Bedfordshire College (General further education college, England)
  - Glasgow Clyde College (General further education college, Scotland)
  - Gower College Swansea (General further education college, Wales)
  - The Henley College (Sixth form college, England)
  - Westminster Adult Education Service (Adult education provider, England)

• Obtained feedback from NUS further education student representatives about the experiences of learners

We are extremely grateful for the support and contributions from all those involved.
Executive summary

This is a complex social issue; we have only been able to ‘scratch the surface’ and large-scale empirical data linking digital poverty with learning experience/outcomes of different demographic groups is lacking. An early analysis of data from Jisc’s FE Learner Digital Experience Insights Survey (DEIS) 2021 is helping to bridge this gap, however.

This is an ongoing survey so it is important to note that all reported figures are preliminary at this stage and subject to change. The data (around 5,300 responses from 10 providers collected between October and December 2020) is pointing towards some noticeable differences in digital access between ethnic groups and together with findings from our interviews and desk research a clearer picture of which learners are being particularly impacted is emerging.

- The study has reinforced what we already know about the fundamental issues such as access to suitable devices, connectivity and learning spaces but has also highlighted more nuances around learners’ experiences and other aspects that go alongside this such as upskilling, building digital confidence and the importance of understanding learners’ differing situations and needs

- Early results from Jisc’s ongoing FE Learner Digital Experience Insights Survey 2021 show a higher proportion of BAME than white respondents have had problems with access to suitable devices, online platforms or services, software, Wi-Fi, mobile data costs and private and safe study space

- Black African and Black Caribbean learners appear to be the most affected BAME group which aligns to findings from the provider interviews. Digital access is a particular issue for many refugees and asylum seekers on entry level ESOL courses who have little or no access to any device or connectivity due to financial hardship and in some cases lack of any experience with technology
• Connectivity is an issue for all groups of learners, but cost is a key barrier. Mobile data costs are more problematic for Black/African/Caribbean learners and refugees and asylum seekers. In Wales, we found Adult learners were more likely to lack suitable connectivity. Learners living in rural or remote areas that are ‘off-grid’, are unable to access their learning online and have additional challenges in travelling with college with limited transport and current Covid restrictions.

• A key area which is often overlooked when it comes to digital poverty is that many learners lack the basic digital skills needed to just get online let alone engage effectively with online learning. Those with additional barriers including low level literacy and numeracy are at greater risk of not engaging effectively with their learning without the right level of support.

• The impact of the pandemic on learners’ mental health has been considerable with high levels of anxiety described by all the providers we spoke with. Research shows that BAME communities are suffering greater impacts on mental health and anxiety than white counterparts. While this is a wider issue than the impact of shifting to online learning, additional barriers relating to digital access compound the problem.

• Empirical data on the direct impact of digital and data poverty on learners’ educational experiences and outcomes appears to be lacking although there are factors such as attendance rates and levels of engagement that provide indicators of which groups of learners are more disengaged and where the attainment gaps might be. Some data suggests that BAME learners are likely to be less engaged and that the attainment gap is growing for certain BAME groups, but further research is needed to fully understand this area.

• Digital and data poverty is linked to social disadvantage which makes learners from particular groups more vulnerable. This includes those in or at risk of poverty where they or their families live in areas of high deprivation and unemployment, are from single parent households, work in low paid sectors or are unemployed, live in private and social rented accommodation and are from BAME backgrounds. Our data shows that many of the learners at greatest disadvantage fall into one or more of these groups. It is also important to include other vulnerable groups such those with special educational needs, care leavers and those with English (or Welsh) as a second language.

• A combination of these factors can lead to multiple deprivation. The UK poverty rate is twice as high for BAME communities as for white groups and BAME communities have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, so this leads to many BAME learners being at a greater ‘structural’ disadvantage.

• Not all learners from disadvantaged groups will experience digital and data poverty but awareness of the different needs of individual learners from these high-risk groups, data that can support early interventions and the right infrastructure and resources are essential foundations to ensure that no learner is left behind.
Key findings
1. Background

Digital and data poverty can be described as insufficient access to digital equipment, software or connectivity, the lack of access to technical support and repair when required, a trained teacher or instructor and an appropriate study space and the lack of basic digital skills and confidence to access learning effectively.

Digital exclusion and socio-economic disadvantage go hand-in-hand. People in the poorest households are at least four times more likely to be digitally excluded\(^2\). The pandemic has worsened the digital divide and "risks turning the problem of digital exclusion into a catastrophe of lost education and opportunity for the UK’s poorest and most vulnerable\(^2\). The impact of the pandemic is exacerbating poverty in the UK. By August 2020, almost 4.6 million households were receiving Universal Credit, an increase of nearly 90% from the start of the year. The groups being hardest hit are those already at risk or in poverty such as those living in areas of high deprivation and unemployment, low paid workers, lone parents (mostly females) and those from BAME backgrounds\(^4\).

The UK poverty rate is twice as high for BAME groups as for white groups\(^5\) which suggests that BAME groups overall may be more vulnerable to digital exclusion. We also know that the pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups who have suffered multiple impacts. These have compounded existing structural inequalities relating to mental and physical health, life expectancy, unemployment, in-work poverty and living in overcrowded conditions.\(^6,7\)
The proportion of learners from BAME backgrounds varies between the providers we spoke with, largely due to the different concentrations of ethnic groups across different geographical areas. However, in areas where there is a lower concentration of BAME communities, the proportion of BAME learners at a college can be much higher that of the local population. As an example, 30% of learners at Henley College are from BAME backgrounds compared to only 2% of the general population of the catchment area.

Early results from our ongoing FE Learner Digital Experience Insights Survey 2021 show a higher proportion of BAME than white respondents have had problems learning online because of no suitable computer or device, poor Wi-Fi, lack of access to online platforms or services, specialist software needs and mobile data costs. One in ten BAME respondents had a problem with a safe and private area to study. This difference is more pronounced among Black/African/Caribbean learners. Given the survey was administered online it will by default under-represent those with less digital access, meaning the differences are likely even more pronounced in reality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When learning online, have any of the following been a problem?</th>
<th>BAME</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black / African / Caribbean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No suitable computer/device</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor Wi-Fi connection</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile data costs</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to online platforms/services</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need specialist software</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No safe, private area to work</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Jisc FE Learner digital experience insights survey 2021. Percentages are based on all answering each question (therefore base sizes vary). BAME = all respondents selecting an ethnicity other than ‘White’. To note questions were not compulsory and we did notice around 25% of the 230 Black/African/Caribbean respondents in the survey typically provided no answer to each of these questions.
2.1 Access to suitable devices and software

Data from colleges revealed that as many as 100,000 students may be missing out on learning because they do not have a suitable device to learn on. As shown in the table above, BAME learners are reporting more problems compared with White learners with access to a suitable computer or device with over a quarter of Black African and Caribbean respondents citing it as a problem in their learning.

There are particular BAME groups of learners for whom access to devices and software has been a significant problem. Many refugees and asylum seekers on entry level ESOL courses have little or no access to any device or connectivity due to financial hardship and, in some cases, lack of any experience with technology. ESOL learners are often in greater economically challenged situations where they cannot work and access state support. Those from Middle East (Iran, Iraq, Syria) and sub-Saharan African (eg Eritrea) appear to be the most significantly impacted which is likely due to multiple factors relating to their level of English, life experiences, financial situation and experience of technology (WAES, Glasgow Clyde and Gower College).

"So that becomes an incredibly isolating circumstance and what they absolutely need is the language skills and the contact with tutors that help to unlock, not just their language and written skills, but to be able to engage with society."

Glasgow Clyde College

WAES report that of the 114 learners who received help through their Discretionary Learner Support Fund (DLSF)/Mobile Phone support this year 81% classified themselves as BAME. Analysis of the data shows for example, a higher proportion of African learners received support than would be expected based on the profile of total learners at the service. Given the fund is means tested for eligibility, this suggests that BAME learners are more at need than their White counterparts and, without the fund, would be even more disadvantaged as a result.

We know that in the first lockdown, FE learners were relying heavily on their smartphones to access their learning online. Across the UK population, having a "smartphone only" is nine times more common in DE than AB socio-economic group households. This links to what we’ve learned about learners who are unable to work from home, often in low paid jobs doing shift work during unsociable hours and need to commute to work during timetabled sessions, relying on their phones as the sole means of learning online. While many learners are comfortable accessing learning this way, there are concerns around the reliance on smartphones for learning more generally.

"I know we all make the cliché of younger people practically live on their phones and small screens are not an issue, but I doubt if too many young people at university, for example, are following their online lectures, just on a mobile phone, it’s just not sustainable… I still would argue that for anybody trying to follow a class for three hours on a mobile phone, it’s a struggle. So as far as we’re concerned, it, the digital gap that exists really is providing those learners with a suitable device."

WAES

2.2 Access to reliable and affordable connectivity

Recent data shows that 11% (7 million) people in the UK do not have home internet access and at least 1 in 5 adults who are offline said cost was a barrier for them. For many families, connectivity is a luxury they cannot afford.

"It’s not about lack of availability [of connectivity], certainly not in our case. It’s more around cost and people having to make choices - do I put food on the table or do I have a good Wi-Fi connectivity?"

Central Bedfordshire College

Poor Wi-Fi connectivity and mobile data costs are highlighted in our FE Learner Digital Experience Insights survey 2021 as being a greater problem for BAME learners than White
learners, particularly those from Black African and Caribbean backgrounds. The word ‘connection’ was the 9th most used word amongst FE BAME learners in response to an open question in the survey ‘what aspect of online learning has been most negative for you?’.

Where learners do have access to a device and the internet, these are often shared between family members so access when required can be limited. Broadband capacity may not be adequate to cope with multiple members of a family using it at once and for those using their inclusive phone data, additional costs can be considerable. This is a particular issue for learners living in larger families often all sharing one device.

There are also learners experiencing connectivity ‘exclusion’ because of their geographical location with examples of learners at Glasgow Clyde College living in remote areas which are completely off-grid and have no connectivity. The impact of this is that they are unable to engage with online learning but have additional restrictions travelling to college given the current situation.

2.3 Access to learning spaces
Alongside access to devices and connectivity, many learners do not have access to a conducive study space. This can be down to living in larger households where space is at a premium but also for those in crowded living conditions and those in temporary accommodation and hostels. According to the latest FE Learner digital experience insights survey 2021, 18% of Black African and Caribbean learners compared with 8% of White learners which is a marked difference.

While many learners enjoy the flexibility of blended learning, we identified a clear desire and need from students to be on-campus. They get access to the devices and connectivity they need, receive more in-person support from their teachers and get a level of social interaction with peers they do not get at home. However, for many vulnerable learners with additional support needs and no, or limited, access to a private study area, the college is their only safe space. All the providers we spoke with are ensuring these learners have the access they need on-site but this can be a challenge with current restrictions and limitations.

“Learners see the college as a sanctuary – it’s an important part of their lives and provides stability. A lot of learners missed the college when it closed”
Gower College Swansea

2.4 Digital skills
A key area which is often overlooked when it comes to digital poverty is that many learners lack the basic digital skills needed to just get online let alone engage effectively with online learning. Learners recognise this as an issue too; 27% of those in full-time education do not feel their digital skills are good enough.

“What sits at the heart of digital poverty is not only not having the kit, but what you do with it”
Central Bedfordshire College

Learners at entry level typically have very low-level skills, often with little or no experience of using technology. The lack of language skills for ESOL learners in particular creates an additional barrier. The providers we spoke to have recognised the need to provide some basic induction for entry level ESOL learners, often bringing them on-site initially to help build digital confidence. But while many learners do get up to speed quickly with using different platforms, those who are generally more digitally confident struggle with unfamiliar ‘institutional’ systems like Microsoft Teams and Zoom and needed some basic training. The development of staff digital capabilities and confidence is critical to improving the skills and experience of learners and providers recognise the importance of focusing investment and resources in staff CPD.
2.5 Mental health and anxiety
The impact of the pandemic on learners’ mental health has been considerable with a significant increase in requests for mental health support reported by the providers we spoke to. Mental health issues are impacting learners across the board including those from more affluent backgrounds. Figures show that as many as 10 million people in the UK, including 1.5 million children, are thought to need new or additional mental health support as a direct result of the pandemic. However, we know that the pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on BAME groups who have suffered a “triple whammy of threats” to their mental health, incomes and life expectancy. Children and young people from BAME backgrounds are showing greater increases in depression, anxiety, self-harm and suicidal thoughts than white peers during Covid-19 pandemic and Black males are more than twice as likely to experience mental health issues than their White counterparts. Asylum seekers and refugees face unique and complex challenges related to their mental health and they are often at greater risk of developing a mental health problem such as PTSD. The shift to online learning is not the only driver behind the rise in mental health issues but barriers to digital access only serve to compound anxiety, isolation and uncertainty about the future.

Walsall College found during the first lockdown in March-May last year engagement levels across all learners was positive at 80%. However, of the 20% of learners who weren’t engaged, many were from widening participation postcodes and just over half from BAME communities. The fact that BAME students make up a third of students at the College overall but account for half of those disengaged led them to conclude:

“It’s clear that digital poverty is particularly impacting learners from BAME backgrounds ...When learners become disengaged, they are at a much higher risk of dropping out, and with the current state of the job market many will struggle to find employment. This leads to a cycle of poverty.”
Walsall College

Attainment data suggests that the following learner groups have below average achievement rates which links with those identified as being at greatest social disadvantage in the UK:

- Learners eligible for free school meals
- Special Educational Needs (SEN) learners
- Learners for whom English is not their first language
- Black learners (particularly Black Caribbean learners)
- Mixed ethnicity learners
- White Gypsy and Roma, and Traveller of Irish Heritage
- White learners from disadvantaged backgrounds

This corresponds with what we have found in the research about the link between digital and economic poverty and the particular learner groups that appear to be most affected. However, more research and data would be needed to better understand the root causes and the direct impact of digital and data poverty on learning outcomes.

2.6 Learning engagement and outcomes
Empirical data on the direct impact of digital and data poverty on learners’ educational experiences and outcomes appears to be lacking although there are factors such as attendance rates and levels of engagement that provide indicators of which groups of learners are more disengaged and where the attainment gaps might be. For example, WAES has seen an increase in attendance over the past few months but are aware of a widening attainment gap for Black African learners. The causes of this are unclear and whether factors of digital access play a part.
Digital and data poverty is clearly linked to social and economic poverty so learners experiencing these circumstances are particularly vulnerable to digital exclusion. The groups being hardest hit by the pandemic are those already at risk or in poverty.

This includes Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic households, those living in areas of the UK where there were already higher levels of unemployment, poverty and deprivation, lone parents who are mostly women who work in hard-hit sectors and have struggled more with childcare during lockdown and part-time and low paid workers in sectors with higher rates of in-work poverty and those in private and social rental accommodation. Additionally, there are other groups of learners not necessarily in economic poverty who are vulnerable and disadvantaged when it comes to digital access and the impact of the shift to online learning on learning experience and outcomes.

3.2 White learners from disadvantaged areas

“We definitely have BAME learners who are in poverty, but we have an awful lot of the Glaswegian indigenous communities that are in multi-generational poverty”

Glasgow Clyde College

Although more detailed analysis of ethnicity data is needed, the demographic picture varies across the country so in areas such as Glasgow and Swansea where the proportion of BAME learners is lower than in Westminster, for example, the disadvantage is more pronounced among white learners from deprived areas. Gower College has had far higher levels of requests for digital access support from learners based at their Tychoch campus (which is based in one of the areas of highest deprivation in Europe) compared with their Gorseinon Campus based in a more affluent area of Swansea. The House of Commons Education Committee is
currently investigating the issues faced by disadvantaged groups, with an initial inquiry into the educational underachievement of white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds including white working-class pupils.

3.3 Vulnerable learners

Learners with special educational needs require high levels of in-person support and providers have prioritised these learners to come on-site. However, there are circumstances which mean that coming on-site is difficult, for example, due to physical vulnerabilities where they need shielding or carers are self-isolating. In these circumstances, supporting carers with digital access and skills is an important way of ensuring those learners continue to remain connected to their learning (WAES).

Other vulnerable learners such as care leavers are often at a disadvantage because of funding policies. Responsibility for meeting their digital access needs falls to the local authority who is often not set up to respond as quickly as the college in terms of procuring devices and dongles, for example (Central Bedfordshire College).

3.4 Off-grid’ learners

Glasgow Clyde College have many learners living in remote areas which are often ‘cut-off’ in terms of connectivity but this also applies to those in certain areas of the city where there is limited connectivity. This means that their only way to access learning is to come on-site which is problematic with limited travel options under current restrictions.

3.5 Learners below level 2 and learners on vocational courses

The level of course has a bearing on the level of on-site support a learner might need. We have seen with the example of ESOL entry level learners that digital access is as much about developing basic digital skills and confidence as getting access to devices and connectivity. Additional barriers such as language mean that online learning is not appropriate without basic upskilling.

Learners on courses requiring access to specialist equipment, high levels of on-site work experience or are more susceptible to awarding bodies decisions around accreditation, could be at greater disadvantage because of the nature of their courses. The providers we spoke to raised a number of frustrations citing examples of where learner progression has been hampered by the pandemic and inflexible awarding body policies. While this is not the primary focus of this research, it does shed light on some of the barriers and challenges learners are facing during the current crisis and areas which need addressing to prevent learning and life opportunities being negatively impacted.

These examples are not exhaustive but illustrate the issues of different learner groups and the multiple factors relating to digital and data poverty.
4. What steps can be taken to address digital and data poverty?

Providers are tackling digital and data poverty in a number of constructive ways that are helping make sure disadvantaged learners as a whole are not left behind. Our interviewees emphasise that supplying the technology will not in itself, improve engagement, learner experience and outcomes for BAME learners.

Alongside technology and connectivity, colleges need better data to help their understanding of digital exclusion, skills development for both staff and students, flexible delivery methods to suit the diversity of learners, and the right levels of support to suit the individual context of the learner’s background.

“It’s about making sure that the right infrastructure is there to actually support them. So whether that’s about making sure that they have the right data connectivity or they had the right devices and they have the right skills and our teachers have the right skills to make sure that they can coach support and enthuse motivate and support learners to actually engage. That’s what it has to be about.”

WAES

4.1 Funding to meet technology, connectivity and support needs is vital

We heard during our interviews that current levels of resource are insufficient for these providers.

- In terms of access to technology, there is evidence to suggest that the inability to supply learners with the technology they need could directly impact BAME learners’ ability to succeed. For example, the findings from Jisc’s FE Learner digital experience insights survey 2021 highlight differences in access and WAES saw that a high percentage of learners that applied for support through the Discretionary Learner Support Fund (DLSF) this year classified themselves as BAME and demand is much greater than supply

- Alongside this is the need to ensure access to the right technology, and sufficient access to those devices given the conflicting access needs of family, co-habitants or other situations. While some colleges report that access to smart phones has been adequate for some learners, WAES question whether this is acceptable for effective learning

- Sufficient connectivity is needed for those that can’t make in-person or require blended learning

- Colleges have worked to access funds outside of government allocations, including working with local authorities, accessing hardship funds, and buying necessary technology from existing budgets. For example, Glasgow Clyde College secured funding from its arms-length foundation to fund the purchase of 300 new laptops to distribute to students along with dongles
One interviewee pointed out The College of the Future report\textsuperscript{26} recommendations included the role of the college as a digital hub for the community to help local communities address digital poverty. However, it needs to be an officially recognised role that forms a core part of the college mission and is funded accordingly.

### 4.2 Improving the digital skills and confidence of staff and students is key to successful interventions

Interviews suggest that investing in digital skills, including how to use technology and resources effectively and safely, can help to overcome disadvantage.

- WAES have put considerable effort into understanding learners’ individual backgrounds at induction to put in place an effective support programme that takes individual situation into account, but not exclusively, access to digital and skills. They have found that once the support is put in place whether it is to address learning difficulties or offer training in the use of IT and where necessary/possible the loan of a suitable device or access to the Learning Centre, their Black African learners are overcoming disadvantages.

- Although not specifically related to BAME learners, Gower College also tell us that the low digital skill levels of learners needed to be addressed before they could learn effectively using tools such as Zoom and Teams. With the right training and development, students were able to overcome barriers to learning.

- Walsall College has specifically targeted parents in an effort to provide them with skills and software so they themselves can help their children. This concept of a ‘whole family approach’ is also being taken by other providers such as WAES.

Building the digital confidence of learners goes hand-in-hand with upskilling staff effectively, particularly so they can support learners better, identify those struggling to engage and improve the learning experience. Providers have invested heavily in CPD but there are still significant challenges such as resourcing the support infrastructure effectively and ensuring the consistency and quality of remote online learning which will have a direct impact on learner engagement.

"The role of the teacher is changing – need to become more of an actor now and know how to engage students and win hearts and minds. Important to have engagement from students – can be more difficult online eg having video switched off. Need to look after staff and give them skills for the future – not just digital skills but the creativity and emotional wellbeing. Some staff are nervous about eg students’ ability to record lessons and Teams and how they will be used.”

Henley College

- Glasgow Clyde College describe how staff have had to adapt from wholly onsite to wholly online and have had to completely rethink their teaching. They are addressing digital skills through CPD, recognising that attainment and retention will be affected if staff can’t engage learners online. Their research and development team are working with course leaders to share good online practice and develop CPD activities

- WAES also describe a focus on staff digital skills, explaining that research into staff confidence and subsequent effort to upskill staff has contributed to a levelling up across the college. They appointed digital champions to work with staff to help develop their skills and confidence as part of the service’s digital transformation plans

- Henley College also acknowledge an upskilling issue for staff, stressing the need to help teachers engage students to win hearts and minds

How can staff and students be provided with the skills and confidence they need to thrive in a digital environment?
4.3 Understanding learners at a local and individual level is essential, including learners' backgrounds, situations and needs

A theme throughout the interviews is that providers themselves are best placed to understand their learners, and that targeting of interventions, including prioritisation of learner need, must be informed by this local knowledge. Providers need to actively get information/needs from learners from the outset and integrate that into their induction programmes and forward learning:

- Central Bedfordshire College stress that organisations know their learners and so are best placed to understand their specific needs. They indicate that policy makers need to consider who is best placed to provide support for learners quickly and suggest it is services like Student Support that understand learner needs and how best to deliver the support.

- Glasgow Clyde College explain how support is facilitated through the faculties on the basis they are closest to the learners, and therefore able to identify and prioritise learners with device and connectivity needs.

- Gower College have also worked with local support groups to help identify issues.

Would the sharing of learning, experience, effective practice, case studies be useful to the sector?

4.4 Flexibility of delivery and approaches can help remove barriers for BAME learners

Linked to the need for individual support, some of the most compelling evidence comes from providers that have introduced flexibility into their delivery methods to take account of circumstance and need. The move to hybrid or blended learning models during the pandemic has highlighted there isn't one model that works for every provider or every learner, but rather there needs to be a mixed approach depending on the needs of their learner cohorts. Providers have offered some examples of where adapting approaches has improved outcomes for their BAME learners.

- Glasgow Clyde College describe how those doing practical courses or ESOL were prioritised to come into campus with restricted class numbers. Having identified additional support needs, ESOL cohorts were given socially distanced contact hours on campus and supported to work remotely as it was clear that trying to deliver 100% online learning would be detrimental to their learning experience.

- Similarly, WAES identified that remote induction approaches were not working for their ESOL students and so welcomed these students in person. They stressed that an induction should not be a tick box exercise, and should instead be about understanding learners' personal circumstance, background and learning stage, which was better achieved in person for these students. WAES is running provision at about 50%, so a classroom that previously held 20 learners now has 10. They make this work by alternating delivery between online and in-person on a weekly basis. With on-site delivery classes are split over two adjacent classrooms with one teacher in one of the rooms teaching, the group next door watching live stream through a smart board. The teacher then alternates between the classes to ensure that everyone gets an equal share of the 'physical' teacher.

- Gower College made a decision in September to move to a hybrid model where learners would come on site 3 days a week and 2 days remotely. This has helped minimise some of the differences and problems. Attention and attendance are the highest ever at the college; learners like greater flexibility and the hybrid model appears to be meet the needs of diverse learner groups. They employ RAG rating for students to identify those who may be struggling...
These interventions rely on an understanding of learner needs and digital pedagogy in order to implement the right approaches. Who is best placed to support this? Would a deep dive on particular group help to identify interventions for specific needs? Who would be best placed to advise on pedagogy?

4.5 Gathering better and more granular data is important to help providers understand needs and challenges within different groups

Underpinning all these interventions is a need for better insight and understanding. There are known issues with the quality, comprehensiveness and granularity of data (qualitative and quantitative) needed to build an informed picture of digital exclusion, particularly how digital exclusion impacts BAME learners along with other socio-economic groups.

The complexity of self-identifying ethnicity was raised during the interviews. It was noted that the tick box ethnicity self-classification codes can mask a lot of difference, there are so many variables in any one category on a list and people may interpret them differently. For example, African learners may identify as Arab or vice versa.

Examples of where research and data are helping colleges to understand need and make data driven decisions are.

- At Glasgow Clyde College, understanding prioritisation for technology provision is based on a number of factors, including eligibility criteria from the Scottish government for access to bursary funds, and learner profile data collected for those on gateways courses and those coming through the ESOL framework.

- WAES use attendance data as a key flag (5% tolerance threshold for observing ‘significant’ differences driven by the GLA/ESFA and Ofsted) as it has an obvious correlation with achievement. This has allowed them to identify a disadvantage for BAME (particularly African) ESOL students at entry level 2 and 3.

However, there are gaps. While all providers we spoke to were collecting data, for example through student surveys and anecdotally by staff, longer term they expressed a will to look deeper into issues around digital exclusion and BAME learner experience.

- Henley College, identify they are seeing the attainment gap widening, including for their Muslim learners, but that they need to collect more detailed data and do more research to understand why.

- Central Bedfordshire stress that digital poverty should be mapped in the same way as free school meals, but that they do not have the means or resource to do this at present.

- WAES indicate the need to do more work to understand the achievement gap for Black African students compared to last year but highlight the difficulties in accessing this information. E.g. focus groups aren’t well attended and those who do turn up are not necessarily the right people. WAES also suggest that an aggregation of data across providers would be most useful to help identify underlying issues.

How could the collection of data and information be better facilitated to promote understanding about digital exclusion and BAME learners?

Could this be done locally by providers alongside existing student data capture and aggregated nationally or through a survey tool such as the Jisc FE Learner digital experience insights survey working with providers to develop a standard question set for learners, or providing advice for colleges on how to collect data consistently? For example, asking learners “do you have sufficient access to a device that enables you to access your learning when you need to”, rather than simply “do you own a laptop”. “Do you have sufficient connectivity to do x,y,z” rather than “have you experienced problems with connectivity”.

4. What steps can be taken to address digital and data poverty?
Options and recommendations

There are a number of options and possible ways forward to consider. These are around a) the next steps for this deep dive project and b) possible actions and approaches arising from the report.

1. Continuing to broaden understanding around digital and data poverty in FE

This scoping phase of research has provided additional insights into the issues but, given the complexity of the subject, has only been able to scratch the surface. A key question is what value will further deep dive research bring to the sector at this stage?

If there is appetite to continue with further research, our recommended approach would be to focus on a wider exploration of the impact of digital and data poverty across all learner groups to understand similarities and differences in experiences and, in particular, the impact of digital disadvantage on learning experience and outcomes. Another option would be to continue to focus on BAME learners or a particular aspect of digital disadvantage such as “rural poverty”. Whatever the focus, the approach would likely involve a mixed methodology involving a wider pool of providers across the sector.

Should the option of further research be taken forward, we recommend working with external researchers and agencies with experience in social/action research and/or expertise in engaging with specific learner cohorts to ensure maximum value.

2. Using the findings from this study to inform action

Evidence from our desk research has already been used by Jisc and partner agencies to help influence the wider policy agenda. Based on what we’ve uncovered in this initial phase of research, we feel solution/action-based approaches to help address some of the differences identified are likely to be of most benefit to the sector. Potential areas to consider include how the sector can:

2.1 Engage with and influence local and central government and other funders. For example, to further progress the accessibility agenda putting the term ‘vulnerable’ front and centre to these conversations, increasing pervasiveness of support across FE and
Skills sector (noting the success of Connecting Scotland programme), use their convening powers to engage with the tech sector to support the affordability agenda, influencing the conversation on longer term digital strategy for UK.

2.2 Continue to build the **digital skills and confidence** of both staff and students. This could be through a short funded programme, considering ‘whole family’ approaches such as skilling parents and carers.

2.3 Increase **flexibility of delivery and approaches** to help remove barriers for all learners experiencing digital disadvantage. Introducing hybrid or blended learning delivery models that take into account the individual needs and contexts of learners can lead to increased attendance and engagement.

2.4 Share **good practice, knowledge or examples of interventions** that identify and prioritise learners with their digital access needs to offer timely support and that offer inclusive learning opportunities through effective pedagogies ensuring no learners are disadvantaged by online learning. It is important that Jisc links the findings here to the digital pedagogy and leadership deep-dives.

2.5 Encourage or facilitate **consistent and improved data** collection at the local and national level. Action is needed now but should be supported through ongoing data collection and analysis that ensures interventions are best focussed in the right places and most impactful over time but are not overly burdensome on providers. Noting differences in how retention, success and achievement data is captured and reported across devolved countries in the UK.

2.6 Engage with content providers and EdTechs around the affordability of **content and bespoke curriculum resources** and designing more accessible learning platforms that meet the needs of more learners.
Appendix

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Find your Jisc account manager jisc.ac.uk/contact/your-account-manager – we are ready to discuss any, or all aspects contained within this strategy.