Learner digital experience insights survey 2021/22
UK further education (FE) survey findings
Jisc data analytics
September 2022
Key statistics

The digital experience insights learner survey took place between November 2021 and April 2022. Participating colleges and sixth form colleges were able to select their own survey period within these dates, typically a three-to-four-week window.

There were 11,498 respondents from 25 different FE colleges and one sixth form college. 20 of these were based in England, two in Scotland, two in Wales and two in Northern Ireland.

The highest number of responses from a single FE organisation was 1,589 learners (32% of their total learner population) and the mean number of responses was 442 per organisation (on average 17% of the total number of learners in each organisation that participated). However, four of the 26 organisations contributed fewer than 100 responses.

Gender of respondents

- Male: 49%
- Female: 48%
- Other: 3%

Ethnicity of participants

- White: 82%
- Asian or Asian British: 8%
- Black, African, Caribbean, or Black British: 5%
- Mixed ethnicity: 4%
- Other ethnic group: 2%

Ages of participants

- Under 16 years old: 0%
- 16-18 years old: 76%
- 19-21 years old: 13%
- 22-24 years old: 2%
- 25-29 years old: 6%
- 30-59 years old: 6%
- 60 and one: 0%

Levels of learning by respondents (England, Wales and Northern Ireland)

- Entry level: 6%
- Level 1 or 2: 32%
- Level 3: 62%

Data limitations meant we were not able to differentiate by level for Scottish Colleges in the 2021/22 academic year.
Executive summary
Returning to normal while retaining the lessons learned

At a time when learning was emerging from a period of disruption due to COVID-19, our 2021/22 digital experience insights survey for further education explored key aspects of learning using technology, including how much learning continued to take place online and the digital experience of learners.

Mode of learning
The majority of respondents (73%) had experienced taught classes mainly on site with just 3% taught mainly online.

Learner experience
• 65% of respondents rated the quality of their online learning as ‘best imaginable, excellent or good’
• 65% stated they had the ‘best imaginable, excellent or good’ support for learning effectively online
• Just 38% of respondents agreed their online learning materials were engaging and motivating

Help and support
• When respondents experienced difficulties with online learning they were most likely to seek help from lecturers or tutors (54%), followed by friends and family (34%) and other learners on their course (34%)
• Learners were also more likely to seek help from online videos and resources (30%) than IT staff (18%) and library/learning resources staff (11%)
• 17% stated they did not look for help when experiencing difficulties with online learning

Devices and connectivity
• 68% of respondents stated they had completed online learning using a smartphone, while 5% stated that a smartphone was the only device they used for online learning
• 11% stated mobile data costs had made it difficult to learn online
• 38% stated poor wifi had made it difficult to learn online, however this reduced 11 percentage points from 2020/21 when 49% faced issues with poor wifi. This improvement may perhaps be as a result of learners returning to campus

Learner voice
• All learners have unique experiences – what is successful for some, doesn’t always work well for others
• Free text comments about their home learning environment are just one example of this. Some learners cited working at home as a positive due to the peace and quiet and ability to focus, while others said they had no suitable place to work in their home environment and experienced distractions. This was something that was identified in our shaping the digital future of FE and skills report and an important consideration when 90% of respondents in 2021/22 stated they had completed some of their online learning at home.

Make the most of your data
The 26 FE and sixth form colleges who took part in the 2021/22 survey have their own survey results and benchmarking data that they can use to understand and improve their own unique situation.

1 NB: It is important to note that different providers and respondents took part in 2020/21 so caution is required when comparing statistics across years.
**Theme one: you and your technology**

In theme one we establish which devices and technologies learners were using for learning, and their demographics (gender, ethnicity, level of study, age, and location).

- **Support to loan or buy devices**
  - 78% No
  - 22% Yes
  
The majority of learners (78%) had not been given, loaned, or helped to buy devices.

- **Learner quote:**
  “My PC and phone are outdated and don’t support some of the platforms I need to use.”

- **Devices regularly used for learning**
  - 68% smartphone
  - 66% laptop
  - 43% desktop computer
  - 24% tablet
  - 7% additional mic or headset
  - 5% additional screen
  - 3% additional camera or webcam
  - 2% none of these
  
  68% of respondents regularly used a smartphone for learning. While multiple options could be ticked for this question, 5% of learners only selected smartphone.

- **Use of tools or features that assist learning**
  
The percentage of learners who used the following features commonly found in apps or software to assist learning were:

  - 13% spelling or writing support
  - 8% captions or transcripts on video
  - 6% screen reader: text to speech
  - 5% dictation: speech to text
  - 4% screen magnification
  - 1% alternative ergonomic devices
  - 77% none of these

  Only 23% of learners said they used at least one of these features.

  As only 13% of respondents stated they used spelling or writing support, this suggests that they may not class spell check as an assistive technology and are reporting use of additional features above and beyond a generic word processing feature.

- **Support to use assistive features**
  
  Just over a third of students said they had received support to use any of the listed features to support learning.

  - 36% yes
  - 64% no

  Many of these features are now provided as standard on free to use or commonly used software and use of these is an area that colleges can easily promote and encourage.
Theme two: technology at your organisation

In theme two, we looked at learner perceptions of the quality of the online learning environment, how well they were supported to access it off campus and at communication online. We also looked at the apps that students found useful in their learning, and their preferences for future investment.

Overall quality of online learning environment
72% of learners rated the quality of the online learning environment as above average (best imaginable, excellent, or good) and only 6% rated it as below average.

- 4% best imaginable
- 22% excellent
- 46% good
- 22% average
- 4% poor
- 1% awful
- 1% worst imaginable

Support, communication and involvement
The percentage of learners who agreed they had various aspects of support for using systems and services at their organisation and for communication online were:

- 68% agreed they were supported to access online platforms and services off site (27% neutral, 4% disagreed)
- 63% agreed they were communicated with effectively online eg messaging, notifications (30% neutral, 6% disagreed)
- 59% agreed they were supported to use their own devices (35% neutral, 6% disagreed)
- 47% agreed they were given the chance to be involved in decisions about learning platforms (40% neutral, 13% disagreed)

Future investment preferences
Learners were invited to choose one item from four choices to indicate their preferred area for investment, should funds be available:

- 36% upgrade platforms and systems
- 29% more computers and devices
- 24% specialist software for your course
- 11% IT support

Digital tools or apps learners found useful for learning
Learners were asked to give an example of a tool or app they found useful for learning. There were 9,283 responses to this question.

While 138 different digital tools or apps were mentioned, Microsoft Teams dominated with 29% of respondents citing it as an app they found ‘really useful for learning’.

Amongst the responses were many course specific software/apps, although they did not come up as frequently in the responses.

The top ten most mentioned apps or software were:

- Microsoft Teams (2,684)
- Showbie (757)
- Google Classroom (537)
- Google (482)
- Canvas (451)
- Microsoft Word (381)
- Moodle (379)
- Kahoot (273)
- Learnzone (221)
- YouTube (204)

Learner quote:
"Include a dedicated tutorial focusing on online learning and how to use the technology."

Learner quote:
"Make the Teams meetings more collaborative.."
Theme three: technology in your learning

In theme three we looked at how technology was used in learning – the quality of online learning, the range of activities learners engaged in, where their learning was taking place and how closely this met their preferences. We also asked learners whether they had experienced any problems when studying online.

The overall quality of online learning

65% of learners rated the overall quality of online learning on their course as above average (best imaginable, excellent, or good) while 8% rated it as below average.

- 5% best imaginable
- 19% excellent
- 41% good
- 27% average
- 5% poor
- 1% awful
- 1% worst imaginable

Where learners did their online learning (could tick all that applied)

- 90% at home: own, shared or family home
- 21% on site: study spaces, libraries
- 3% student accommodation
- 3% at work
- 3% in public spaces eg cafés
- 4% none of these

Nine in ten students had studied online at home. Two in ten had used on site facilities such as study spaces and libraries. This reflected a continued practice of setting ‘homework’ and coursework to be completed outside of lesson time.

Problems encountered when learning online (could tick all that applied)

- 38% poor wifi connection
- 12% no suitable computer/device
- 11% mobile data costs
- 10% can’t access learning platforms
- 9% no safe, private area to work
- 49% none of these

Over half of respondents encountered problems that impacted on their ability to learn online. 38% encountered poor wifi connectivity although this was lower than was reported in 2020/21 when it was 49%.

Learner quote:
“What’s positive about online learning is that I am able to make better revision notes and do more research.”
Convenience, fairness, impact and effectiveness of online learning

The percentages of learners who agreed with statements about online learning were:

- **49%** was convenient for them (36% neutral, 15% disagreed)
- **41%** allowed them to contribute in the ways that they preferred (41% neutral, 18% disagreed)
- **57%** enabled them to make good progress in their learning (41% neutral, 18% disagreed)
- **34%** made them feel part of a community of staff and learners (46% neutral, 20% disagreed)
- **40%** allowed learners to be assessed fairly (45% neutral, 15% disagreed)

Range of learning activities

The percentages of learners who had carried out a range of online learning activities in the two weeks prior to the survey were:

- **43%** online research tasks
- **29%** live online lecture or class
- **27%** mixed face-to-face/online class
- **22%** live quizzing or polling
- **14%** computer-marked test or practice paper
- **13%** access recorded lecture or class
- **9%** collaborate online eg shared report
- **8%** online game or simulation
- **8%** online text-based discussion
- **5%** virtual lab, practical or field work
- **1%** use a virtual reality headset
- **28%** none of these

72% of respondents had carried out at least one of the digital learning activities above in the last two weeks. While 43% of respondents had engaged in online research tasks, only a third or less had participated in other activities.

Learning Materials

The percentages of learners who agreed with statements about their learning materials were:

- **38%** agreed they were engaging and motivating (50% neutral, 13% disagreed)
- **49%** agreed they were at the right level and pace (44% neutral, 7% disagreed)
- **66%** agreed they were accessible to them (31% neutral, 3% disagreed)
- **57%** agreed they were available in good time (38% neutral, 5% disagreed)
Theme four: developing your digital skills

How much support, guidance and training did learners receive to help them develop their digital skills and to use technologies effectively to learn online? In theme four, we find out more about the overall digital development support offer.

Who did learners turn to for help with online and digital skills? (could tick all that applied)

- 59% lecturers/tutors
- 34% other learners on my course
- 34% friends and family
- 30% online videos and resources
- 18% IT staff
- 11% library/learning resources staff
- 10% teaching and learning/e-learning staff
- 3% other learner service
- 17% I don’t look for help

Most learners turned to lecturers and tutors for support with online learning. This reduced by eleven percentage points from 2020/21 from 70% to 59%. Over the same period the percentage of learners who turned to library/learning resources staff for help rose from 3% to 11%, perhaps reflecting the move back to in-person teaching and collective tuition.

However, in the free text responses learners highlighted that teaching staff sometimes faced problems with technology and stressed the importance of staff also being able to access digital training and support.

Who did learners turn to for help with online and digital skills?

64% of learners rated overall support to learn effectively online as above average (best imaginable, excellent, or good), 28% rated it as average and 7% as below average (poor, awful or worst imaginable).

Overall support for effective online learning

- 6% best imaginable
- 19% excellent
- 40% good
- 28% average
- 5% poor
- 1% awful
- 1% worst imaginable

Skills training and support (could tick all that applied)

The percentages of learners who said they were offered support or training to develop digital capabilities were:

- 45% learning online
- 41% basic IT skills
- 34% tracking your progress and achievements
- 32% behaving safely and respectfully online
- 29% avoiding plagiarism
- 26% keeping personal data secure
- 19% specialist software for your course
- 11% data analysis
- 9% information literacy
- 8% coding or scripting
- 22% none of these

For each skill listed, less than half of the respondents said they had been offered support. Learners were most likely to receive help for learning online (45%) and for basic IT skills (41%).

Nearly three quarters of respondents had not been offered support or training for keeping their personal data secure, and over two thirds had not received support or training in behaving safely and respectfully online.

Support for online learning and digital skills development

The percentages of learners who agreed they had received support for learning online and digital skills development were:

- 53% guidance about the digital skills needed for their course (41% neutral, 7% disagreed)
- 40% an assessment of their digital skills and training needs (46% neutral, 13% disagreed)
- 43% time to explore new digital tools and approaches (46% neutral, 12% disagreed)
- 34% reward and recognition for their digital skills (47% neutral, 19% disagreed)
Listening to learner voices

Learners were asked to say what they thought the most positive and negative aspects of online learning were, and what one thing they felt their colleges should do to help them learn effectively online. Their responses reveal that learning preferences are very individual – what some learners really like, others do not.

The most positive aspects of online learning

There were 6,690 responses to this question. Learners were positive about:

- **Efficiencies and financial savings** – learners benefited from the time and cost savings of learning online, some commented on the convenience of less time spent travelling.

  Learner quote: “I made savings in the costs of travelling and parking.”

- **Pace** – learners appreciated the ability to learn at their own pace and the choice of when to take breaks.

- **Accessibility** – features of online learning such as video playback made learning more accessible.

- **Learning support** – online learning provided more opportunities for learners to ask for help in completing work.

- **Advantages of homeworking** – many learners highlighted the advantages of being able to study at home including feeling comfortable, having space and quiet, reduced distractions and an enhanced ability to focus.

  Learner quote: “I’m more comfortable at home, which helps my mental health.”

- **Assessments and quizzes** – learners liked being able to submit tests, quizzes, and assignments online. One learner stated that they enjoyed being able to retake quizzes until they achieved 100%, signalling this clear metric of success was rewarding. Others said that quizzes were fun and refreshing.

  Learner quote: “I like being able to learn without interruptions.”

- **Wellbeing** – many learners found the flexibility of learning online and study in a comfortable environment aided their wellbeing. For some it eased social anxiety and improved their mental health.

- **Software** – learners expressed satisfaction with various features of software and online learning platforms.

- **Independent research** – the ability to carry out independent research online was positive for many.

- **Interaction with others** – learners appreciated the ability to connect with others through digital platforms, enabling them to communicate and talk to friends without leaving their homes.

Learner quote: “Provide loan Laptops/iPads for learners because many don’t have technology to use at home.”
The most negative aspects of online learning

There were 6,862 responses to this question. The aspects of online learning that learners found negative were:

- **Mode of study** – not all perceived online learning as a good substitution for face-to-face learning. Some cited a lack of opportunity to learn in person and missed practical, physical and laboratory sessions.

- **Technical issues** – learners experienced issues with poor wifi connection, difficulties logging in, time lags and other technical issues.

- **Lack of support** – learners highlighted a lack of support at point/time of need. Some felt it meant reduced opportunities to ask questions, seek help and clarify understanding.

- **Difficulty concentrating** – some learners found it difficult to concentrate and were more easily distracted.

  **Learner quote:**
  “I have difficulty finding helpful apps or websites, and when I do find them many require monthly subscriptions which can be hard to afford.”

- **Lack of interaction** – some learners missed the opportunity for social interaction and found it harder to communicate without being able to talk face-to-face.

- **Lack of motivation** – online learning was less engaging and motivating for some.

  **Learner quote:**
  “Be more interactive with students to keep our attention, at home there are lots of distractions.”

- **Online learning platforms** – learners found it difficult to access and navigate around learning platforms.

- **Lack of appropriate devices and office equipment** – not all learners had access to appropriate devices such as laptops and computers, or to office equipment like desks and chairs that could provide an ergonomic study space.

Learner quote:
“I am not getting any face-to-face or practical learning which is how I learn best.”

- **Unsuitable study space, especially home environment** – not all learners had suitable study environments at home, sometimes describing these as noisy/loud or as not providing private or quiet space to study.

Improving the effectiveness of online learning

Learners were asked what one thing their organisations should do to help them to learn effectively online. There were 4,895 responses to this question. Suggestions from learners included:

- **Mode of study** – while many learners wanted more face-to-face learning opportunities, others preferred online learning, highlighting the importance of variety in mode of teaching.

- **Monitoring and feedback on learner progress** – learners highlighted their desire for regular check-ins with feedback on progress in addition to revision time and sessions.

  **Learner quote:**
  “Offer weekly check-ins to ask how I’m progressing with outstanding work.”

- **Guidance and training** – learners requested more support for study skills including learning effectively online and for more guidance and training.

- **Help and support** – to be given the opportunity to ask questions, to be able to ask for help when needed, for more one-to-one support and smaller class sizes.

- **Recorded lessons** – learners wanted live lessons to be recorded so they could be played back afterwards.

  **Learner quote:**
  “Add easy to access links for each subject that can guide you to revision tools and sites to search for information.”

- **Technical support (internet and devices)** – many learners requested improved wifi connectivity and better access to devices such as laptops and computers.

- **Enhanced accessibility** – more easily accessible resources for everyone, to reduce barriers to study.

  **Learner quote:**
  “Provide more accessible resources for people with learning difficulties.”

- **Access to appropriate software** – including funding for paid software as well as training and support to use it effectively.

- **Improvements to online learning platforms** – learners highlighted both the benefits and disadvantages of different named learning platforms and their features, demonstrating an awareness of different platforms and a desire for a high-quality user experience.

  **Learner quote:**
  “Adapt pace to learners needs.”

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- **Adapt pace to learners needs** – learners stated the need for breaks while learning online and for teaching staff to consider the length of online sessions when planning.
Next steps

How the FE and skills sector can create an engaging blended learning experience

Technology can never replace the human element in teaching and learning, but it can enhance it. Anecdotal and data-driven evidence, including this survey report, indicates to us that learners want a blend of digital and face-to-face learning.

However, there are several elements that must be considered collectively and work together in harmony to ensure an engaging and inclusive blended learning experience.

Recommendations:

Ensure learners gain the technical skills and knowledge that employers want

Further education and skills (FES) providers can maximise learners’ employability by utilising the same new and emerging technologies as industry and business, including artificial intelligence, machine learning, automation and the Internet of Things.

Support learners to gain competence and confidence in digital skills

• If they are to thrive in the workplace, learners need to develop digital confidence and skills because all industrial sectors are increasingly shaped by and depend upon digital technology
• Make sure learners know where they can go to for help and support with technology, including using their own devices as well as college systems and platforms
• Consider creating digital ambassadors or champions among the student cohort who can inspire others
• The senior leadership team should lead by example by learning and showcasing their own digital know-how

Provide curriculum-mapped and accessible digital resources and tools

• Technological innovation is shaping learning content and resources. The digitisation of textbooks, content gamification and emerging AR and VR resources are highly relevant to FES learners. Whether on or off site, all learners should be able to access digital resources relevant to their course
• Remote and blended learning should also be supported with a range of digital collaboration tools, such as Teams, Google Classroom, Canvas or Moodle, which encourage teamwork and engagement with teachers and peers, even when in dispersed locations

Work with learners to optimise the learning experience

• Involving learners in decisions about what and when technology is used in teaching and learning. They are far more likely to be enthusiastic and engaged with new ways of learning if they’ve had input in its planning.

Support disadvantaged learners

• Our research over several years indicates that a significant minority of learners don’t have access to reliable or affordable connectivity on campus or at home, or can’t access a suitable device of their own. To avoid being disadvantaged, these learners need practical and financial support to be able to work online and/or remotely

• Join the Good Things Foundation’s Online Centres Network. This gives organisations access to the national databank, which helps provide learners across the UK via support from Virgin Media, O2, Vodafone and Three. The Digital Poverty Alliance also offer help

Invest in a fit-for-purpose IT infrastructure as part of an overall digital strategy

• As all education providers increasingly rely on technology, reliable connectivity is essential. To help ensure business continuity, Jisc is providing a second fully funded 1Gbit/s connection to the national research and education network, Janet, for all its eligible UK FE members
• The education sector is suffering a sustained increase in potentially devastating ransomware attacks. To minimise risk, the board should have responsibility for a cyber security strategy that protects the organisation, its systems and data

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Get involved

See the digital experience through the eyes of your learners and staff

Our 2022/23 digital experience insights learner survey will open in October 2022. There is no charge for UK FE colleges to participate this year.

If you would like to find out more about your learners’ digital experience or if you are interested in participating in our other surveys for teaching staff and professional services staff, please contact us at help@jisc.ac.uk putting ‘digital insights’ in the email subject line.

Find out more at: digitalinsights.jisc.ac.uk

Supporting you

Jisc elevating the UK further education and skills sectors

See our three-year strategy for 2020 to 2023 showing how Jisc, as a trusted lifelong learning digital partner, will support the UK FE and skills sectors. Read the strategy.

Shaping the digital future of FE and skills

Realise the potential of technology to benefit the further education sector now and into the future. A joint project with the Association of Colleges (AoC). Explore the work to shape the digital future of FE and skills.

The digital elevation tool

An online self-assessment tool for senior strategic leaders in FE and skills organisations, designed to build organisational agility and resilience. See how our digital elevation tool can support your digital journey.

Let’s work together to transform your digital experience

Contact your relationship manager: https://jisc.ac.uk/contact/your-account-manager

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