



Scope

- The Learner Experiences of e-Learning theme of the JISC e-Learning programme funded a total of ten projects from 2005 to 2009, to explore learners' perceptions of and participation in technology-enhanced learning in a digital age
- Earlier research addressed learners' experiences of single modules, technologies or curriculum interventions; the Learner Experiences of e-Learning theme covered the holistic nature of learners' experiences of learning, with a focus on learners' own words
- The projects piloted a range of innovative methodologies and techniques for eliciting the learner voice
- Nearly 3,500 learners responded to surveys, and around 260 were involved in a sustained way

Audience

This guidance is designed for:

- Senior managers and policy makers in higher and further education with responsibility for learning and teaching
- Deans of faculty and heads of departments
- Heads of e-learning and ILT managers
- Network managers
- Heads of libraries and learning resources

A guide for institutional managers

What have we learnt?

Ownership and access

There are high levels of ownership of and access to personal technology among learners in higher education, with most arriving for induction with their own computers and mobile phones. However, some of this equipment is old or unsuitable, and those with poor or no access feel increasingly disadvantaged.

Similarly, while a large majority in higher education are confident users of email, social software and the internet, some have no ICT skills or have had negative experiences with technology.

In further education, access to and ownership of personal technologies is less common, and levels of confidence in using technology vary considerably.

To address the narrowing but deepening digital divide, institutions can consider:

- Monitoring ownership of personal technology
- Assessing the ICT skills of incoming learners and providing early support
- Continuing to provide computers for learner access, for example laptops on loan and desktop computers in a range of campus locations
- An entitlement to access as part of the institutional offering

This guide forms part of *Responding to Learners*, a synthesis of outcomes of the Learner Experiences of e-Learning theme of the JISC e-Learning programme. For further information on the other guides in this series, the projects and their findings, and downloadable resources for practitioners, researchers and managers, visit: <https://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/JISCle2>



'I find [online access] beneficial because I can basically take my work along with me wherever I go. I quite often find I work in a friend's house or a parent's house, or if I am in work...'

Student, The Open University

Arrival and transition

Many learners enter further and higher education confident, positive and enthusiastic about their use of technology. Learners expect to be able to use institutional and personal technologies as soon as they arrive, and in a way that they find familiar. This is especially important for those learners who are using technology to maintain social contacts, for example international and ESOL (English as a second/other language) students.

Learners are much less clear, however, about how technology can benefit their studies, and in many cases they are unwilling to change patterns of study they have used successfully in the past. Learners in this JISC-funded research for the Learner Experiences of e-Learning theme were not pushing for the use of particular technologies and were generally conservative in their approach. They often experience induction as a time of uncertainty with the loss of familiar processes, and new software and institutional technology add to the demands.

To ease the transition to higher-level study, institutions can consider:

- Offering learners pre-arrival guidance on what technology to bring and how to access the institutional systems
- Clarifying what technologies learners are likely to encounter in their courses of study and how they can use technology to help them learn
- Providing access to the institutional portal or Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) prior to arrival
- Providing access to online and physical social spaces, tailored for learners before enrolment

Developing maturity

At least on entry to further or higher education, learners lack sophistication in their capacity to find and evaluate information. As they mature in their studies, they become more sophisticated in their research strategies, make more extensive use of academic tools and resources, and learn to use technology to help them manage time and tasks.

To support learners' development, institutions can consider:

- Embedding digital and information technologies into the curriculum

'I think the university should be careful that new students aren't feeling pressurised into buying their own laptops – it is extravagant, they can be broken or stolen, and some people can't really afford it.'

Student, University of Edinburgh

- Ensuring that provision of library, learning and ICT skills is well integrated
- Offering learners opportunities to reflect, self-assess, and share strategies with peers, for example through the use of e-portfolios and micro-blogging

Flexibility, reliability and convenience

Learners live complex lives and may be managing study, family and work commitments. They particularly value uses of technology that allow them to fit learning into their lives, such as 24/7 access to online resources and services, and podcasts of lectures. For some disabled learners, access to learning materials out of hours, off site and on their own computers is an essential requirement to enable them to study effectively.

From learners' experiences of online commercial services and social networks, they have high expectations of robustness, responsiveness and ubiquitous access. Learners are positive about the provision of course-related information on VLEs, and most regard this as an essential aspect of course administration. They are reassured by the idea that everything they need can be accessed from one location, and are highly critical when they cannot easily find materials. Learners also increasingly expect consistency in how the VLE is used to support teaching. They will use their personal technology as an alternative if institutional technology does not meet their expectations.

To give learners the flexibility and convenience they demand, institutions can consider:

- Ensuring that course materials can be accessed via the institutional VLE, as standard
- Providing learners who are working off campus with access to institutional technologies
- Providing single-sign-on access to a range of online services, for example email, VLE and online journals

- Offering learners access to IT support from a distance, for example via phone, email or instant messaging
- Investigating how learners choose to study on and off campus
- Finding out what restricts learners' choices about their study, for example poor wireless coverage or lack of access to specialist software

Personal technology

Learners use many personal and public technologies in their daily lives, and some extend this to support their habits of study. Media players and USB devices allow location independence; learners can use assistive software on their own laptops; and mobile phones or instant messaging tools assist with scheduling group work and with peer support.

Learners value the use of personal technology in institutional settings, and for some, such as learners with disabilities, personal technology is essential. For learners with disabilities, having access to electronic materials that can be personalised is an essential requirement to enable them to participate fully in learning.



To support learners' use of personal technology, and to better meet the needs of learners with disabilities, institutions can consider:

- Providing learning resources in multiple electronic formats, including audio-visual
- Ensuring sufficient network access and power points for learners' personal devices
- Providing technical support for personally owned laptops
- Allowing access to external online services where this does not compromise network security or learner safety

Learner diversity

Learners in further and higher education are not a homogeneous group: they differ in their prior educational experiences, current home and work contexts, and individual learning goals. Experience of technology and confidence in using it to learn are new sources of diversity in the student population. All these factors can have an impact on learners' capacity to participate in learning and to reach their full potential.

To meet the needs of diverse groups of learners, institutions can consider:

- Identifying the barriers experienced by particular sub-groups such as international, work-based, disabled and part-time learners
- Offering targeted support for specific groups of learners
- Ensuring learners have opportunities to reflect on their needs and plan their development
- Supporting individual choices, including choices about technology use and non-use, and location of study

'I am very highly dependent on the internet and the networks that the university runs.'

Student, University of Hertfordshire

How can we embed the learner voice?

Learners have a lot to say about their experiences. This JISC-funded research for the Learner Experiences of e-Learning theme has had an impact on many of the participating institutions, but the findings cannot always be translated into other contexts. Institutions need to ensure that their learners' experiences are recognised and their learners' voices are heard in decision making.

To embed the learner voice, institutions can consider:

- Ensuring recognised structures and roles for learners to represent their views on the curriculum, for example through Students' Union representatives and student liaison officers
- Developing formal links to national bodies representing learners, such as the National Learner Panel for further education and the National Union of Students
- Inviting learners to join multi-role teams so that they can contribute to the next-generation academic experience (including curriculum planning, design of technology-rich learning environments, and provision of ICT learner support)

Responding to Learners

Further information:

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