

Student digital experience insights survey 2020/21

Findings from UK further education
(pulse 1: October– December 2020)

March 2021

Jisc data analytics

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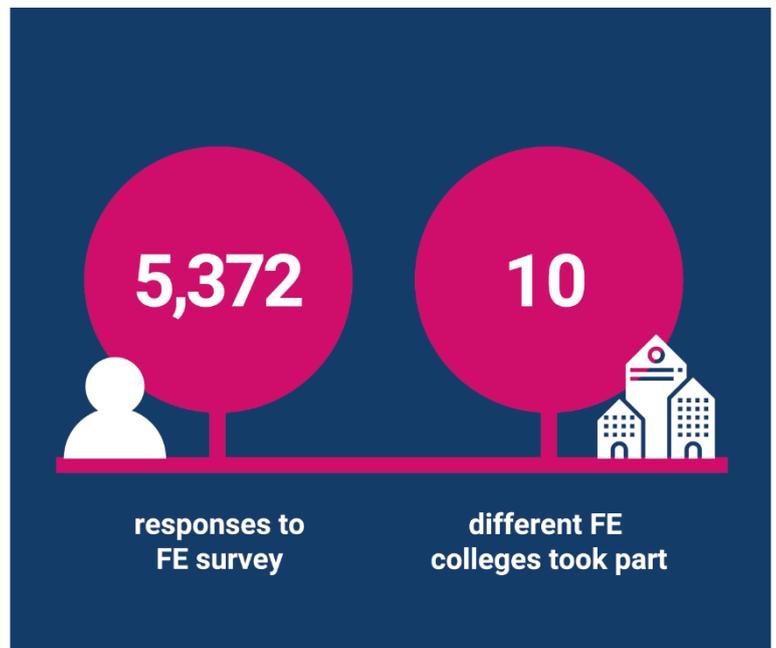
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Note: survey responses may not add up to 100% due to rounding or questions where learners had the option to select more than one response.



Key statistics

Between October and December 2020, 5,372 learners from UK further education (FE) took part in our learner digital experience insights survey, the first in a series of snapshots of the ongoing survey data designed to support further education and sixth form colleges to respond promptly to the changing situation caused by the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. In total 10 UK FE organisations took part; all of these were based in England.



Listening to the voice of 5,372 learners

This snapshot of data gathered in the 2020/21 survey was taken at a time when learners, teaching staff and colleges were continuing to experience the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Different levels of lockdown were in operation across the UK and a month-long national lockdown took place from early November to early December 2020. Colleges had to respond rapidly to a changing environment to support and reframe the teaching and support they were able to offer as well as to address many other operational aspects of delivery. Learners were asked to respond to the survey based on their experiences over their previous two weeks of study.

Positive quality ratings

68% of learners rated the quality of online digital learning on their course as 'best imaginable', 'excellent' or 'good' and 71% of them also rated the support they received for online learning equally highly. This is a strong acknowledgement of the efforts of all staff involved; the dedicated support staff gave to groups and individuals was particularly appreciated and commented upon.

Learner quote:

"The teachers were extremely supportive, very understanding and helpful when I was struggling. I felt extremely supported, especially when they took time to ring me and check in on my mental wellbeing."

Mixed modes of delivery

The way learning was delivered was mixed, 38% were still studying mainly on site, 48% were studying using a mix of physically on site and online learning and just 14% were studying solely online (note: learners who were not able to access remote digital education in England were classed as vulnerable by the Department for Education and were therefore able to attend on campus).

A range of learning activities

Learners enjoyed a range of different online activities and were particularly positive about being able to access lecture recordings and participate live online – a new experience for some, made possible by more commonly available online communication and collaboration technologies. Analysis of their free text responses was particularly insightful and highlights how being able to watch sessions again helped learners note-taking skills, improved their understanding and encouraged further independent study.

Learner quote:

“The most positive aspect I would say would be the ability to ask teachers to send the lesson recordings over should I have missed anything. This is very useful, especially in my subjects where the lessons have been fast paced and difficult to understand.”

Where well-structured and well-paced asynchronous learning opportunities were offered to learners with easy access to resources, feedback was positive. Small group work, collaborative tasks and discussions with peers and lecturers helped to keep learning engaging.

Acknowledging issues

Inevitably, some learners experienced problems with access to computers/devices, reliable and affordable wifi, in accessing the systems and platforms used to support online learning or to specialist software. Privacy when studying was also an issue for some who said they had no safe or private place to work.

Understanding the extent of the issues for your college is a vital first step in formulating an informed plan to address these. This is where having your own data is extremely valuable. Colleges who participated in the survey have a rich data source to draw upon pertinent to their own unique situation.

Working with learners

It is really encouraging to note that 50% of learners agreed they were given the chance to be involved in decisions about online learning. With such an intense focus on providing a robust and positive learning experience throughout the pandemic it is vital that we listen to, and work with learners. Their thoughts on what they like and don't like, what works well and where the problems lie are well articulated. Of course, likes and dislikes can be reverse sides of the same coin, there is no one solution that fits all. But engaging in conversations with learners will result in a deeper understanding of the issues and perhaps yield solutions not thought of before.

Our 2020/21 digital experience insights survey for learners is open until 30 April 2021 – it's not too late to take part. There is no charge for UK FE colleges to participate this year. Find out more at: digitalinsights.jisc.ac.uk



Theme one: you and your current learning situation



The move to more responsive pulse surveys means that we are asking learners to respond to the questions based on their experiences in the two weeks immediately prior to taking the survey. This includes their expectations of what learning would be like and the reality of their lived experience (type of learning, location, class sizes) and whether they have experienced any problems.

How long learners had been studying with their organisation

- **55%** – less than a year
- **35%** – one to two years
- **9%** – two to three years
- **2%** – four years or more

More than half of those who responded in this period had been there for less than a year. This may affect the answers they give in relation to their expectations and comparisons with previous learning experiences. The time they completed within the academic year could also affect their answers – they may not yet have experienced all of the things they were asked about (eg use of specific software and learning platforms, support options).

Expectations of course

- **35%** – blended online/campus learning
- **63%** – fully on campus
- **3%** – fully online

Most learners expected to study fully on campus, although over a third expected a mix of blended online and campus learning despite the ongoing pandemic.



Class sizes

Learners were asked about the class sizes they had **mainly** experienced (could tick all that applied):

- **2%** – just you (eg one-to-one tutorial)
- **14%** – 2–6 learners
- **48%** – 7–16 learners
- **28%** – 17–50 learners
- **2%** – 51–100 learners
- **2%** – Over 100 learners

The majority of learners experienced class sizes of seven to 16 learners and a sizeable percentage experienced class sizes of between 17 and 50 learners.

Mode of learning

- **38%** – physically on site
- **48%** – a mix of physically on site and online learning
- **14%** – online learning (with other learners on course/shielding/quarantine)

A second month-long national lockdown took place from early November to early December 2020 which may have impacted on the mode of learning colleges were able to offer.

Despite expectations from 63% of learners that their study would be fully on campus, the reality was that only 38% said they had experienced this in the two weeks before they took part in the survey. 35% of learners expected to study using a mix of blended and on campus learning, the reality was 48%, and while only 3% of learners expected to study fully online, 14% said they did so during this period.

(NB: learners who were not able to access remote digital education in England were classed as vulnerable by the Department for Education and were therefore able to attend on campus).

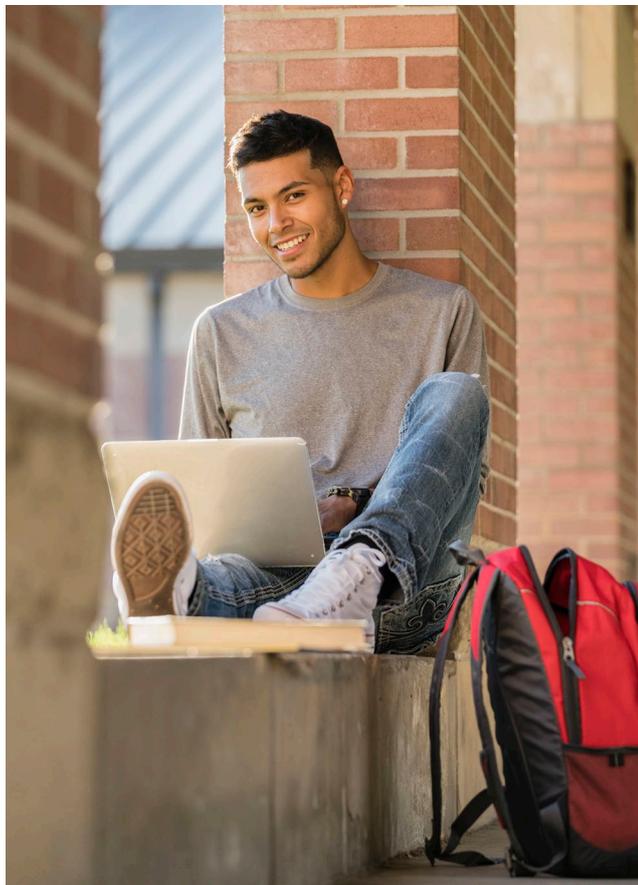
Where were learners doing their online learning? (could tick more than one)

- **80%** – at home (own or family home)
- **3%** – student accommodation
- **13%** – on campus in study spaces, libraries etc
- **2%** – off campus in public spaces (eg cafes)
- **15%** – I have not been learning online

The majority of learners were doing their online studying at home. Some students had been using study spaces on campus to learn but many also said they had not been learning online.

Learner quote:

“The most positive aspect of online learning is that it still feels like a classroom as we can engage in calls and I don't have to physically travel to learn.”



Problems encountered when learning online

- **36%** – poor wifi connection
- **18%** – access to online platforms/services
- **15%** – mobile data costs
- **15%** – no suitable computer/device
- **10%** – need specialist software
- **9%** – no safe, private area to work

A third or more learners experienced problems with poor wifi connectivity. This didn't change much when re-evaluated against where learners were studying (physically on site, mixture of blended/on site, entirely online) when 32% of learners who had studied physically on site still reported problems related to poor wifi. Problems linked to access to online platforms/services also rose for learners who were not physically on campus all of the time.

All of these problems are major obstacles for online learning and raise concerns about digital poverty.

Learner quote:

“Wifi has been a massive issue for me. Bad connection means sometimes I can't access the calls, even when I can the quality is very bad and I struggle to interact with the lesson.”

Use of assistive technologies

12% of learners said that they used at least one of four assistive technologies but only **46%** of all learners who said they used them were offered support to do so. The national data set for the 2019/20 survey reported that substantially more learners who used assistive technologies were offered support, so this reduction is a concern.

- **8%** – screen readers (text to speech)
- **7%** – dictation (speech to text)
- **5%** – alternative input devices (eg switches)
- **7%** – screen magnification
- **93%** – none of these

Theme two: digital platforms and services at your organisation

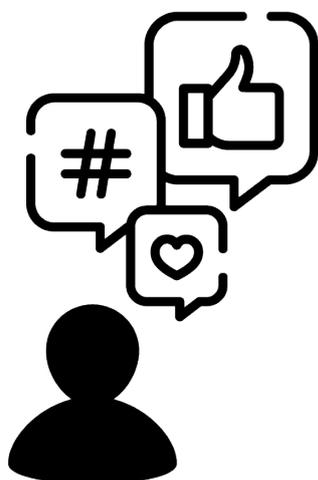


In theme two we look at how well learners feel their organisation supports them with the technology they need to access online learning – the learning environment, the digital platforms, systems and services and how effectively the organisation communicates with learners and facilitates collaboration online. Also important is to what extent organisations involve learners in decision-making about online learning.

Organisational systems, services and support

The percentages of learners who agreed with statements about technology in their organisation were:

- **65%** – supported to use own digital devices (31% neutral, 3% disagreed)
- **66%** – enabled to access online systems and services from anywhere (30% neutral, 4% disagreed)
- **66%** – communicated effectively online eg email, messaging, notifications (29% neutral, 5% disagreed)
- **59%** – provided a good online environment for collaboration (36% neutral, 6% disagreed). Just over a third of learners gave a neutral response. All responses here are slightly higher than the national 2019/20 survey findings although, of course, this will not be a direct comparison as different organisations will have participated.



The learning environment

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

- **49%** – reliable (42% neutral, 9% disagreed)
- **48%** – well designed (44% neutral, 8% disagreed)
- **53%** – easy to navigate (38% neutral, 9% disagreed)
- **69%** – safe and secure (28% neutral, 3% disagreed)

The percentages who gave a neutral response are higher than is desirable at a time when online learning is so important to continuity of learning, especially for those who are unable to be on campus.

Involving learners in decisions about online learning

- **50%** agreed they were given the chance to be involved in decisions about online learning (39% neutral, 11% disagreed)

This is a large positive increase compared to data from previous years. The intense focus on providing a good learning experience throughout the pandemic and the efforts that colleges have made in listening and responding to learner needs and concerns is clearly having an impact.

Learner quote:

“I like having resources I can access at any time and go over at my own pace as often as I need to.”

Theme three: technology in your learning

Theme three explores how technology has been used in learning, the overall quality of online and digital learning and the materials used to support this, as well as the range of learning activities.



Overall quality of online and digital learning

Learners were positive about the quality of online and digital learning on their course overall. 68% of all respondents rated it as being either 'best imaginable', 'excellent' or 'good'.

- 4% – best imaginable
- 21% – excellent
- 43% – good
- 24% – average
- 5% – poor
- 2% – awful
- 2% – worst imaginable

Quality of online learning materials

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

- 58% – well designed (37% neutral, 5% disagreed)
- 41% – engaging and motivating (46% neutral, 13% disagreed)
- 52% – at the right level and pace (40% neutral, 7% disagreed)

The numbers of learners who agreed with these statements is positive although less than half of learners agreed that the online learning materials were engaging and motivating.

Learner quote:

“The feedback from teachers has been good. If there was an issue or you didn't understand anything they'd go back over it to ensure you know exactly what you're doing.”

Range of learning activities

The percentages of learners who said they had carried out the following online learning activities **in the last two weeks** prior to taking part in the survey were (could tick more than one):

- 66% – accessed other course materials eg notes, assignments
- 63% – live lecture/teaching session
- 59% – submitted coursework
- 56% – online research tasks
- 49% – received feedback on their work
- 44% – interacted with quizzes/games/tests
- 37% – online discussion with lecturer
- 30% – accessed recorded lecture/teaching session
- 23% – worked on a group project eg shared report
- 11% – virtual lab, practical or field work

Two thirds of learners had accessed course materials and notes. Substantial numbers had also submitted coursework, taken part in live online lectures/teaching sessions and conducted online research tasks. Collaborative and engaging activities have been less well used, yet this is an aspect of learning that the qualitative data shows that learners value. Less than a quarter had worked on group projects – practice that is routine in many industries and valued by employers.

Given the likelihood of additional anxieties for learners getting to grips with online learning, the fact that less than 50% said they received feedback on their work (formative and/or summative) is a concern. Colleges and practitioners need to recognise the importance of timely feedback. This is even more critical when learners are not receiving the usual visual clues that they would when experiencing face to face learning.

Theme four: your digital skills

How well supported do learners feel in getting to grips with online learning? Theme four looks at the guidance and opportunities learners are offered to develop their digital skills and whether they feel these are enough to help them achieve the learning expectations placed upon them.



Overall support for online learning

Learners were positive about the support they received for online learning on their course overall and the mean average score was 'good'. 71% of respondents rated it as being either 'best imaginable', 'excellent' or 'good'.

- 6% – best imaginable
- 24% – excellent
- 41% – good
- 22% – average
- 5% – poor
- 1% – awful
- 1% – worst imaginable

Support and guidance

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

- 63% – support for learning online/away from campus (32% neutral, 5% disagreed)
- 54% – guidance about the digital skills needed for their course (39% neutral, 7% disagreed)
- 43% – an assessment of their digital skills and training needs (44% neutral, 13% disagreed)

The numbers who agreed are a positive indication of progress; comparatively few disagreed. The exception is that less than half of learners agreed they received an assessment of their digital skills and training needs. These support and guidance requirements are especially important right now. Activities to engage learners in reviewing and reflecting on their digital skills can take place prior to starting their course to help them make the adjustment from using technology generally to actively using it to advance their learning.

Developing learners' digital skills

The percentages of learners who said they were offered support or training to develop digital capabilities were (could tick more than one):

- 61% – learning online
- 46% – tracking your progress and achievements
- 41% – behaving safely and respectfully online
- 37% – basic IT skills
- 35% – keeping personal data safe
- 32% – protecting your privacy in online spaces
- 29% – avoiding plagiarism
- 19% – specialist software for your course
- 15% – information and data literacy

The number of learners who have been offered support for online learning is high. At a time when more learners are learning online it is vital that they know how to behave safely and respectfully online, how to keep their personal data safe and to protect their privacy in online environments.

Learner quote:

"I have gained new technical skills and improved my virtual communication and time management skills."



Confidence in aspects of learning online

The percentages of learners who agreed with questions set specifically in the context of the current pandemic situation were:

- **58%** – the learning expectations placed on learners had been reasonable (33% neutral, 9% disagreed)
- **60%** – could access all the college support services they needed online (33% neutral, 7% disagreed)
- **49%** – the concerns of learners and their representatives were being heard (43% neutral, 9% disagreed)

It has been a tough year for both learners and staff as they have had to respond rapidly to changes so perhaps the high levels of neutral responses are unsurprising, particularly when over half of the respondents were new students who may still be acclimatising to new approaches to learning at this stage of the academic year. The percentages of learners who disagreed are all low. Approximately half of learners agreed that their concerns were being heard – a good starting point from which to build.

Where do learners go for help with online learning? (could tick more than one)

- **71%** – lecturers/tutors
- **36%** – friends and family
- **27%** – online videos and resources
- **21%** – don't need help
- **14%** – IT/e-learning staff
- **8%** – library staff
- **4%** – other learners on your course

As in recent years, learners turn first for support to their lecturers and tutors. The percentages of learners who called on friends and family this year is higher than in recent years – possibly because, if studying off campus, they were a more accessible source of support. Online videos and resources are their third most likely option. Ensure signposting for support from IT/e-learning and learning resources teams is clear, particularly for new learners who may be unfamiliar with the breadth of support available to them. Lower levels of interaction with peers for help with online learning this year may be due to not yet having formed strong learning bonds with fellow learners – something that use of shared channels and collaborative online group work may help to develop.



Listening to learner voices

Learners were asked to say what they thought were the most positive and negative aspects of online learning, how they felt the quality of online and digital learning could be improved 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 **2,959** free text responses to this question. Learners liked:

- **Lecture recordings** which is interesting as lecture recordings have not traditionally been so available/used
- The **comfort** and **convenience** of studying at **home** and **feeling safe** there
- **Interactivity** and opportunities to engage in group work with classmates
- Feeling more **in control of own learning** with improved independent study, research and time management skills
- Easy and convenient **access to learning resources, materials and information**
- Learners appreciated the **support** from their **lecturers**, their **responsiveness** in answering questions and in giving **timely feedback**

The most negative aspects of online learning

There were **2,958** free text responses to this question. The most negative aspects that learners disliked were:

- Online learning can be **difficult** and **hard**
- Not having **access to appropriate technologies** (laptops, printers)
- **Technical issues** – connectivity, wifi, bandwidth
- **Learning experience and design** – lectures can be unengaging making it hard to concentrate, particularly when long and not interactive
- **Study environment** – not all learners like learning from home
- **Wellbeing and mental health** - long sessions are tiring and can cause loss of concentration, screen fatigue, sore eyes and headaches. Some cite mental health issues from being online

Improving the quality of online and digital learning and helping learners to learn effectively online

Learners were asked what one thing their organisations should do to improve the quality of online and digital learning (**2,342** free text responses) and what one thing their organisation should do to help learners learn effectively online (**1,769** free text responses). Learners wanted colleges to:

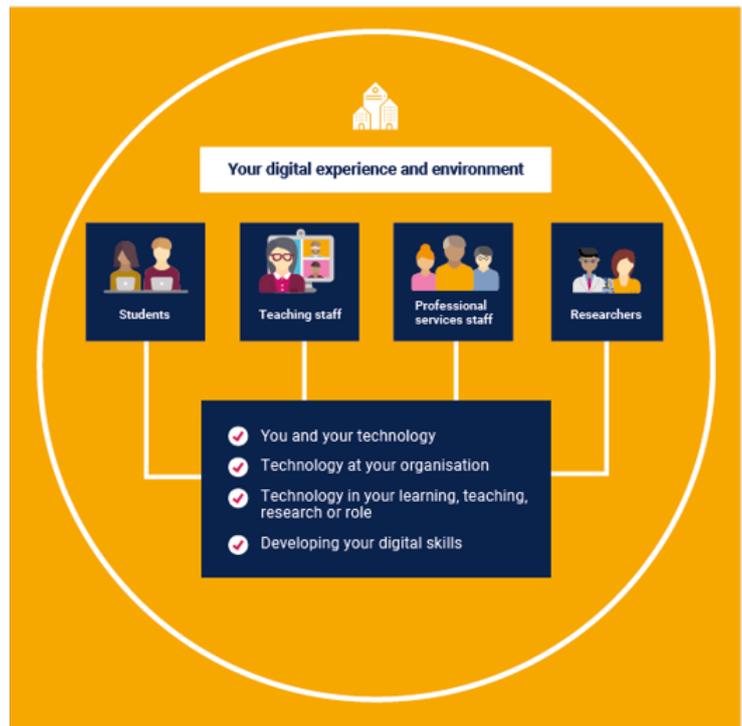
- **Get the basics right** – this includes **wifi** (on campus and elsewhere), reliable **hardware** and **software**, clear **navigation** to learning content, **timetabling** and session **scheduling**, **audio** and **lighting**
- Make learning sessions **more interactive** (eg quizzes, games, tests, small group tasks, Q&A sessions)
- **Record lessons** and make them available soon after delivery to aid personal learning preferences, revision and catch up
- **Train** and **support lecturers** to use online tools effectively in a pedagogically sound and inclusive way
- Think about the **pace of delivery** (too fast/too slow) and consider **shorter** bursts with **regular breaks**
- Create opportunities to talk to/**ask questions** of lecturers and fellow learners and give **timely individual** and **group support**
- Improve **communication** – **reminders** of when sessions were going to start, when **assignments were due**, an accessible list of frequently asked questions (**FAQs**)
- Offer **timely feedback** on formative and summative assessment activities

Get involved

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

Our 2021 digital experience insights survey for learners is open until 30 April 2021 – it's not too late to take part. 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 FE and skills strategy 2020-2023

Drafted in response to sector needs, our strategy helps guide FE providers' digital evolution for the three years and beyond. [Find out more and read the strategy](#)

Shaping the digital future of FE and skills

This initiative focuses on realising the potential of technology to benefit the further education sector now and into the future. Driven jointly with the Association of Colleges (AoC), the project brings together college leaders, teachers, learners, sector bodies and edtech experts and includes examples to inspire good practice. [Explore the work to shape the digital future of FE and skills](#)

Let's work together to transform your digital experience

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