

Scope

This guide:

- outlines the JISC Learner Experiences of e-Learning studies
- highlights what learners are saying about their use of their own and institutionally provided technology to support their learning
- synthesises the main findings about learners' technology use from the studies
- makes institution-level recommendations for supporting technology use

Who this guide is for

This guide is for senior managers in the post-16 education sector, with particular relevance to those in higher education. It may also be of interest to e-learning researchers, and teaching and support staff involved with e-learning applications.

Background

The JISC e-Learning Programme has funded a number of projects with a focus on understanding the learner's perspective on the role of technology in learning, to inform the effective development and use of learning environments, tools and services. The studies include:

- **Learner Scoping study.** This literature review investigated learners' experiences of e-learning and their needs and expectations for the future, and made recommendations for subsequent studies of learners' experiences of e-learning across the post-16 education sector (Sharpe et al., 2005)
- **The Learner Experience of e-Learning (LEX) study.** This study explored the learner's perspective on e-learning by gathering rich data from 55 learner participants from across the post-16 education sector (Creanor et al., 2006)

- **Student Experiences of Technologies (LXP) study.** Conducted in association with four Higher Education Academy subject centres, this study focused on learners' experiences of using technologies for learning, with an emphasis on investigating differences between subject disciplines (Conole et al., 2006)
- **The learner's voice.** Five video case studies from across the post-16 sector illustrate learners' feelings and beliefs about technology and the role it plays in their lives and their learning (JISC, 2006)

Outcomes of these and subsequent projects in Phase 2 of the JISC Learner Experiences of e-Learning theme are being used to inform the development of the next generation of learning tools and services funded through the e-Learning Programme.

Themes and recommendations

Distributed access

The studies indicate that learners make far greater use of their own personal technologies and devices and of public websites and services than of those provided by their institutions. Learners expect their devices and services to be accessible and usable both within and outside campus confines. Increasingly they expect and require access to learning resources and experiences via web services that are not device specific.

Despite the increasing penetration of broadband and computer access nationally, there remains a digital divide. Though fewer learners may be affected than previously, if programmes come to rely on online information and communication services, the impact of poor access and skills will be correspondingly more severe.

Recommendations

Institutions should:

- develop strategies that respond to the rapid development of cheap personal handheld devices which

Recommendations for managers in post-16 institutions (HE)

Guide 1

enable users to access and repurpose content and to interact and communicate for educational purposes

- ensure all current and prospective learners have access to the necessary technologies to enjoy the full range of learning opportunities the institution normally provides

Virtual Learning Environments

Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) are a feature of the learning experience in higher education and increasingly also in further education and adult and community learning. However, their full capacities are still under-utilised. VLEs are predominantly used for administration and to provide learners with resources.

Learners appreciate improved access to course notes and learning materials. However, they frequently express dislike of the inconsistency they find in VLE use across their programmes, for example in the nature and location of materials, or varieties of communication. Some categories of disabled learners, slow readers and those with organisational difficulties are likely to be particularly affected by this.

Recommendations

Institutions should:

- develop consistency in how content is managed and delivered to learners from within VLEs
- establish clear communication protocols and minimum standards of use for the range of institutionally supported communication modes, especially email, the VLE, instant messaging and mobile phones
- promote active learning methods that go beyond a 'filing cabinet' use of VLEs

Information searching, retrieval and evaluation

The Learner Experiences of e-Learning studies suggest that Google™ and Wikipedia® are the preferred information retrieval tools for many students.

Learners frequently use search tools to find and retrieve learning materials from other universities. While most students appreciate that information found on the Web can be unreliable, they still see library resources as much harder to use than internet search engines and

free online encyclopaedias. Some students develop sophisticated and effective information search and evaluation methods, but many do not.

Recommendations

Institutions should:

- provide learners with better support for information searching and evaluation, and library tutorials
- work to improve the usability of their information and library systems
- rethink the worth of the course content they produce with a view to rationalising its production in a world where there is access to a vast amount of free content
- develop methods and tools, such as repositories, to aggregate and approve content

Despite the increasing penetration of broadband and computer access nationally there remains a digital divide

Curriculum design in a technology-rich world

Learners value face-to-face contact as well as online flexibility. To achieve an appropriate blend of these two aspects of the learning experience requires a shift from online content delivery to active, contributory learning designs. The learner experiences studies show that learners share their work informally using both face-to-face contact and online communities. The impact on the learning experience of the emergent world of social software and virtual communities is unknown, and these technologies are largely untapped as educational resources.

Learners constantly make decisions about which technologies to use. The most important criteria are perceived relevance, cost and time involved. Effective educational selection and use from the range of available technologies should take these factors into account.

Although learners are immersed in their own private communication technologies, the studies show they find institutional technologies, such as online discussion

forums, problematic. These are far less widely used than other forms of communication, particularly those perceived by learners as being under their ownership and control.

Studies show that assessment drives the use of formal, institutionally provided technologies – learners participate if they see a direct benefit to their grades. Studies are starting to show learning benefits from more frequent formative feedback, such as can be offered using computer-aided assessment (see Sharpe et al., 2006 for review).

Recommendations

Institutions should:

- investigate how to take advantage within their curricula of the unprecedented levels of interactivity that are central to modern learners' learning environments
- provide staff development in designing for blended learning
- investigate how to capitalise on social software for enhancing the learner experience
- provide staff training and development in designing and managing effective communication/collaboration activities
- provide learners with training and support in appropriate methods of academic cooperation and how to avoid plagiarism
- align assessment tools and methods with learning tools and methods
- use assessment as a lever for driving institutional e-learning strategies and developments

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Research and evaluation

The purpose of eliciting and highlighting learners' experiences of e-learning is to improve the experience for future learners. When institutions evaluate the impact of e-learning initiatives, they should consider the following recommendations.

Recommendations

- Evaluations should compare learners' actual and expected/intended uses of technology – for example, by exploring the 'underworld' of digital communication among learners who use technology in ways which are not explicitly sanctioned by the institution – and explore the extent to which learners integrate and personalise their technology use
- Purposive sampling can be an effective way of addressing specific institutional questions involving learners, tutors and course developers
- Longitudinal and ethnographic studies can be used to investigate the learner experience of technologies in a holistic way

Further information

Outcomes from the Learner Experiences of e-Learning theme www.jisc.ac.uk/elp_learneroutcomes

References

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