

# **Learners Experiences of E-learning Synthesis Report: Explaining Learner Differences**

Prepared by the Support and Synthesis team: Rhona Sharpe, Helen Beetham, Greg Benfield, Eta DeCicco, Ellen Lessner

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## **Executive Summary**

This report synthesizes the findings from the seven projects funded under the second phase of the JISC Learner Experience of E-learning programme. The purpose of this programme of work has been to further our understanding of how learners experience learning with technology and to make recommendations on how best to support learners through their learning journey. In total, these projects involved 186 learners, from further and higher education and work based learning contexts, in some form of sustained engagement with the projects over an extended period.

The programme aimed to gather rich descriptions of learners' uses of technology and to understand their technology use in a holistic way. Each project adopted a mixed method approach, employing a variety of data collection techniques, primarily interviews, diaries, and surveys. The techniques developed by the projects to engage learners in a productive dialogue and record keeping elicited thick descriptions of use and the attitudes and beliefs operating behind their actions. Innovative techniques pioneered in this programme include interview plus, where learners refer to and explain a piece of work they have produced or are working on, email interviewing, video diaries, interview technology card sort and participant generated tips and strategies.

It was found that nearly all students have access to a great deal of technology, not just that provided by their institution, but also their own laptops and mobile phones. The learner-centred research methods adopted here show that the concept of e-learning as course related technology provided by an institution provides only a narrow perspective of the technology use of learners today. Rather, learners are immersed in a technology rich environment and make use of the technology available to them in a wide range of ways.

While some learners feel disadvantaged by a lack of functional access to technology or the skills to use it properly, others are making deliberate choices to adopt sophisticated technology-mediated learning strategies and ultimately, finding and using a range of tools in personalized, creative ways to support their study. Worthy of note are the sheer number of different devices and resources accessed daily by the most technically adept students and the extent of the role of peers in providing technical, practical and emotional support, mediated through personal technologies.

Learners clearly articulated their expectations of institutions to enable them to use technologies in the ways described above. They have high expectations of institutions to provide robust, reliable and accessible technology. For some, such as

learners with disabilities, access to electronic materials, which can be personalized, is an essential requirement for them to participate in learning. Frequently where technology use addressed a functional need, its use was at its most sophisticated. For this reason some disabled learners stand out as agile adopters of technology who understand the affordances of the technologies they choose.

However, beyond these expectations of service provision, and despite using technology extensively in their social and leisure lives, most learners do not have clear ideas of how courses could be using technology in educational and innovative ways. In the main, learners rely to a great extent on their institutions, course pedagogies and tutors for guidance and direction.

The programme also examined how learners' relationship with technology changes over time, starting with the expectations and attitudes of new arrivals. There is evidence of development of information skills, learning skills and organizational skills. Learners lead complex, time pressured lives and they need to develop organization skills to help them manage the multiple demands of study with home, family and employment. This was a recurrent theme in the projects concerned with times of transition. We saw also that context is important in explaining learner differences. Learners are clear that most of their technology use for learning is defined by their courses and tutors. The powerful influence of context means that teachers and their institutions need to take the lead in supporting learners' developing digital literacies. There is a related need for staff development so tutors can be confident models and knowledgeable guides.

Experience of the projects has been distilled into a rich online resource for evaluating learners' experiences, including a set of methods recipe cards and staff development/workshop materials. Guides and tools for analysing qualitative data have been produced, along with resources on recruitment and retention of participants and gaining informed consent, especially in cases where audio/video data is being collected and may be used for dissemination purposes. More details of these, key messages, staff development materials and summaries of the project findings are on the [Learner Experiences of e-learning website](#)