

Learner experiences of learning in lockdown

Northern Ireland

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December 2021

Published by National Learning and Work Institute

4th Floor Arnhem House, 31 Waterloo Way, Leicester LE1 6LP

Company registration no. 2603322 | Charity registration no. 1002775

www.learningandwork.org.uk

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About Learning and Work Institute

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Contents

Introduction	5
About the Adult Participation in Learning Survey	5
Research findings	7
About the learning	7
Switching to online delivery	7
Prior experience of learning as an adult	10
Motivations for learning in lockdown.....	10
Expected benefits of learning	11
Challenges	11
Experiences of learning online	12
What learners liked about learning online	12
What learners didn't like about learning online	13
Supporting adults to learn online	14
Future intentions to learn.....	15
Motivations	15
Barriers	15
Conclusion	16

Introduction

For the last 25 years, Learning and Work Institute (L&W) has been undertaking the Adult Participation in Learning Survey on an almost annual basis¹. The survey provides a unique overview of the level of participation in learning by adults, with a detailed breakdown of who participates and who does not.

In 2020, the survey explored people's experiences of learning since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the national lockdown introduced in March of that year². The survey showed that 43% of adults embraced the opportunity to learn through lockdown, significantly accelerating previous steady growth in online learning. Nine out of ten (90%) lockdown learners went online to do some or all of their learning; 44% said they did more learning online as a result of lockdown. And with institutions and workplaces closed or operating remotely, 55% of lockdown learners learned independently, with 24% learning through apps, websites and social media.

To complement the survey findings, L&W conducted qualitative research with learners who had accessed learning online or remotely during the Covid-19 lockdown. This explored learners' motivations for learning in lockdown; the benefits and outcomes they expected to gain from the learning; challenges of learning online; and suggestions for supporting other adults to take up learning online. The research was undertaken as part of our programme of work as the UK Coordinator for the European Agenda for Adult Learning 2020-21.

This report presents the findings from interviews conducted with 10 adult learners in Northern Ireland. Interviewees were recruited through the Adult Participation in Learning Survey and learning providers.

About the Adult Participation in Learning Survey

The Adult Participation in Learning survey deliberately adopts a broad definition of learning, including a wide range of formal, non-formal and informal learning, far beyond the limits of publicly offered educational opportunities for adults. Each year, a representative sample of approximately 5,000 adults aged 17 and over across the UK are provided with the following definition of learning and asked when they last took part, as well as how likely they are to take part in learning during the next three years:

'Learning can mean practising, studying, or reading about something. It can also mean being taught, instructed or coached. This is so you can develop skills, knowledge, abilities or understanding of something. Learning can also be called education or training. You can do it regularly (each day or month) or you can do it for a short period of time. It can be full-time or part-time, done at home, at work, or in another place like college. Learning does

¹ See <https://learningandwork.org.uk/what-we-do/lifelong-learning/adult-participation-in-learning-survey/>. Surveys were undertaken annually from 1996 except in three years: 1997, 1998 and 2016.

² Aldridge, F., Jones, E. and Southgate, D. (2020) [Learning Through Lockdown](#). Learning and Work Institute

not have to lead to a qualification. We are interested in any learning you have done, whether or not it was finished.'

The 2020 Adult Participation in Learning Survey explored people's experiences of learning since the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic and the national lockdown introduced in March 2020. This included why people chose to learn through lockdown, how they learnt, the barriers they experienced, and their intentions to continue learning in the future.

Prior to 2020, the survey had been conducted face to face. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the 2020 survey was conducted via telephone. The results of the survey are therefore not directly comparable with previous years.

Research findings

This chapter explores the findings from 10 interviews that were conducted with adult learners in Northern Ireland. It describes their learning activities; their motivations for learning in lockdown; the benefits and outcomes they expected to gain from the learning; their challenges of learning online; what they liked and disliked about online learning; their suggestions for supporting other adults to take up learning online; and their future intentions to learn.

About the learning

Most learners interviewed had completed their learning online, whilst only a couple of interviewees learned offline. Additionally, most interviewees completed their learning from home, however, one learner accessed some face-to-face learning. Most adults undertook more than one learning activity, and most of the learning led to qualifications. Some interviewees linked their learning to professional development, and some were learning for leisure or for their own personal development (for instance, language classes). Most adults had started their learning before the first Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020.

Learning activities typically lasted for months and some were described as ongoing activities. Nonetheless, there were a few instances where activities had only lasted for weeks or days. Within these timeframes, most individuals were learning at least once a week. Although much of the learning was provided by a community-based education centre, some learning activities were delivered by a wide range of providers. Examples that were given by interviewees included: their employer; a university; a college; and another provider offering free online courses. A couple of interviewees also learned independently through reading and DVD courses.

Some learners did not complete all their learning activities. Where these activities were linked to formal qualifications, it was the decision of the providers to end the course earlier than expected. This decision was made due to the impact that lockdown had on course progression. Where interviewees were learning for leisure, they decided not to complete some courses if they were deemed to be too advanced or uninteresting.

Switching to online delivery

Most learning activities that commenced prior to lockdown were required to switch to online delivery due to restrictions, however, one interviewee chose to complete their work independently instead of being involved in the online delivery of their course. Learning activities delivered by the community-based education centre were particularly impacted by the switch to online learning.

The most common online platform used for learning was Zoom. Some adults had positive experiences of using Zoom and any other technology that was required for their online learning. One interviewee explained that their experiences of online learning were dependent on the subject that was being studied, and they found bookkeeping to be especially difficult.

'It was quite complicated because you need to be working on paper when you're doing your bookkeeping, so your eyes are from the screen to the paper. Your eyes are getting lost.'

Another learner struggled with using the technology that was required for their online ICT course.

'It did make it more difficult because you're trying to teach yourself how to use these programmes and all of these different things on a computer, at home, by yourself [...] It was strange because that's the reason you were taking the class in the whole first place, because you didn't know how to do these things at home on your own.'

Having said this, one interviewee stated that they 'preferred' learning their ICT course online. It was argued that, because they could use the technology independently, they were better able to retain the information.

'I actually preferred it online because I think I learned more. Having to do it myself. Whereas in the classroom you're relying on your tutor [...] I retained the knowledge more, because I actually did it myself.'

One learner mentioned that, although they struggled with installing and using Zoom, they also felt that this had improved over time. Some learners didn't have access to a computer or a laptop in order to complete their online learning. This led to one individual borrowing a laptop from their employer, however, for one interviewee, online learning was not something that they wished to take part in. They had very positive experiences of learning prior to lockdown, but explained that these positive feelings had changed because of the switch to online learning.

'I absolutely loved every single minute of it. Then whenever the lockdown came in it was all the Zoom and on computer and video and what have you, because I don't have all them, I just felt lost then.'

When asked about the ways in which switching to online learning may have impacted on the quality of their learning, most interviewees stated that there was no noticeable impact. One learner said that the provision was at a 'high standard' for both face-to-face and online learning. Most interviewees claimed that similar activities and resources were used when comparing their face-to-face and online provision, and there was also very little impact on the timetabling of their sessions. One learner felt that the quality of learning increased due to the switch to online learning, because the tutor was able to provide more one-to-one support.

'I think you were actually given more one-to-one support because you're at home, and you have a specific problem, and you're contacting the tutor, and they would send you certain materials or certain steps to follow to complete a certain task. Whereas when you're in a class with nine other people but there's only one tutor, and then he's just trying to divide the time up amongst us all equally and move along at the same pace.'

Conversely, some learners had negative comments about the impact of online platforms on the quality of learning. These individuals often felt that online learning made it difficult to ask questions, discuss ideas, or get support from tutors and other learners.

'I like a classroom. I like to be sitting in a class, and then if you do have questions, the teacher is available to show you and stuff. Whereas, online, you're popping in and out. It can be a bit confusing.'

'I just think learning from a person in person, face-to-face, having a bit of banter, a bit of understanding each other, rather than just reading things off a laptop or a computer or a tablet, and just following online instructions and googling things, I just find that it's a better way to learn for me personally.'

'I just think it's a better environment being amongst everybody else, especially for Maths, because if you don't know it, then one of the girls or something would explain it better.'

'The problem when it's on Zoom is, you're just a listener, you can't participate, you're not someone who shares your ideas.'

One interviewee noted that, although it was difficult to discuss ideas effectively when the switch to online learning had first began, this improved over time through the increased use of small 'breakout rooms' on Zoom.

For one adult who was learning in order to become familiar with the English language and culture, online provision impacted their quality of learning because it involved less contact time with UK citizens and fewer opportunities to see the body language of the tutor and other learners. More specifically, the fact that other learners could choose to have their cameras and microphones off during Zoom classes was viewed as something that hindered their learning process.

Some learners also explained that face-to-face learning was more engaging than online learning because you could be 'productive' and 'kept on task'.

'I think when you're sitting in the house, you don't really pay as much attention [...] But, if you're in the class then you have to concentrate.'

'At times, I was sitting and waiting on everybody else, and I was getting a bit bored. [...] On Zoom, you're afraid to overtake people when they're asking questions [...] I sat back and just waited, rather than being a wee bit more productive.'

One interviewee related this point on engagement and productivity to the idea that online learning caused them to focus too much on exam preparation and gaining the qualification, rather than immersing themselves in the learning process. The qualification was seen to be 'the only thing you can get' from online learning.

Furthermore, one interviewee claimed that their teacher's unfamiliarity with online learning impacted on their own learning process and their motivation to learn.

‘Sometimes on online classes, we waste more than 20 or 30 minutes [...] just because teachers don’t know how to work, how to open the document, you know [...] it decreases the students’ motivation to listen to this kind of teacher [...] but in class, you don’t see this kind of lack of IT knowledge of the teacher.’

Therefore, despite any positives that adults associated with online learning, most of them argued that they preferred face-to-face provision overall.

Prior experience of learning as an adult

Most interviewees had prior experience of learning as an adult, and some had completed courses within the last 12 months.

When adults were asked whether their previous learning had influenced their decision to take up learning during lockdown, some interviewees explained that they have always enjoyed learning. Therefore, these learners did not make an explicit link between their previous learning and the learning that they completed during lockdown.

‘I think any kind of learning that people can do, they should do. Learning's a great thing.’

‘You've some people who like always to be doing something or learning something new, which I might class as.’

Individuals were also asked about any barriers that they might have had towards learning previously. Some said that they were previously uninterested in learning opportunities due to childcare, family commitments, or not ‘needing’ another qualification. One interviewee chose to finish a previous course earlier than expected because the provision was online.

Motivations for learning in lockdown

When asked about their motivations towards learning during lockdown, some interviewees were learning for leisure and because they had a personal interest in what they were learning about. Some adults also mentioned that learning was a way to keep themselves busy and keep their brains ‘active’ and ‘ticking over’. Others had taken part in professional development activities, either because they were compulsory, or in order to enhance their skills at work.

Some interviewees had more than one motivation for learning during lockdown. For instance, some were learning with a view to securing employment or progressing within their current role, however, these individuals also claimed that learning provided them with: an opportunity to socialise; a separate ‘headspace’ from caring responsibilities; a chance to update their skills or gain new skills; an opportunity for enjoyment and confidence building.

Learners were also asked about their triggers for learning and why they had decided to take up learning at this time. The lockdown was frequently mentioned by interviewees. For example, some individuals explained that lockdown had provided them with the space and

time to be able to take up extra opportunities within the courses that they were already doing.

‘You had more time and had the time to actually do things that would have been crowded out in normal life.’

‘I decided I had to do something because I live alone and I don’t have any family living anywhere nearby, so I had to do a lot of my own entertainment.’

Other learners argued that they were triggered to learn because lockdown had led to changes in their employment circumstances. For example, one interviewee could not work their usual full-time hours due to home schooling responsibilities, and therefore, they chose to complete training courses in order to ‘justify’ their hours to their employer.

Some individuals claimed that changes in their family circumstances meant that they could pursue learning, for instance, having fewer childcare responsibilities. One interviewee was triggered to learn due to retirement.

Expected benefits of learning

Adults expected to gain many different benefits and outcomes from their learning activities. Some interviewees wanted to learn more about a certain subject area, whilst others were learning for enjoyment purposes or because they wanted to keep their minds active. Some individuals hoped that undertaking learning activities would help them to build their confidence, and for one of these learners, they also hoped that it would lead to future employment opportunities.

‘After doing a course, I’m more knowledgeable about the course I was doing, I’m more confident doing these tasks and being asked to do them in future jobs.’

Most learners interviewed said that they have experienced their expected benefits of learning, nonetheless, some said that they could not socialise as much as they would have liked, due to the switch to online learning. Additionally, one learner felt as though they had not gained confidence in a particular subject area and might have benefited from learning more than once a week. Another interviewee claimed that they were not given the chance to demonstrate what they had learned, as there were no exams that took place at the end of their course.

‘I was actually very disappointed [...] I was really wanting to do the exams so, therefore, I would have proved to myself that I could have done that.’

Challenges

Some individuals did not experience any challenges whilst learning in lockdown’. However, other learners highlighted access to technology and the internet, as well as technical issues, particularly challenging. While some were able to resolve these, for example borrowing equipment, getting support from an IT adviser or their tutor, one interviewee said that they considered dropping out of their course.

'I know at one point I was just going to pack it in because I was having technical issues which I couldn't solve [...] I was going to just pack it in, because I was just, 'I'm going to wait until it's face-to-face learning again, because I just don't know enough about computers to be able to solve some of these problems'.'

While some learners had not been proactively offered support by their provider, those who were learning through a community-based education centre were very complimentary of the support that was available.

'I couldn't say any better of how supportive they were, for myself and I know for a lot of other people. They were so supportive, and they were basically there 24/7 for you.'

'Some people didn't have computers and all, and they were letting them use their computers down there [...] Or if you didn't know how to get on it and all, they were asking you to come in the day before to show you.'

Other challenges highlighted by learners included: feeling as though the content was 'too technical' on a couple of courses; practicing self-discipline and knowing when to 'close the laptop' at the end of the day; attempting to 'cram' learning around full-time employment.

Experiences of learning online

Most interviewees were unfamiliar with online learning before lockdown. Of these, some learners argued that they would never be open to trying online learning, and their age was often viewed as a barrier.

'Because of my age and stage, I'm not really one of these people whose really on top of everything in terms of modern communications.'

Some learners were 'apprehensive' about online learning prior to lockdown, and their concerns included being able to secure and stable internet connection and distractions at home while trying to learn.

'I just thought I'd rather be face-to-face, because then you're sitting in the kitchen, kids running in and out.'

Conversely, some learners who were unfamiliar with online learning before lockdown did not have any pre-empted feelings about it.

'I was just happy to give it a go and see what way it worked.'

What learners liked about learning online

Some interviewees described online learning as **accessible and convenient**, and they liked that they could complete online learning activities from the comfort of their own homes. In turn, some were positive about the fact that online learning removed the 'stress' that would usually be associated with travelling to and from their activities, for instance, having to sit through traffic or travel in bad weather conditions.

'It was good just to be able to be in your own home and still be able to continue your education.'

For a learner that did not own a car, and was unsure on how to take the bus, online learning was seen as a particularly useful mode of delivery.

Other learners liked the **flexibility** of online learning and claimed that this had allowed them to learn at their own pace. The flexibility of online learning was also related to the issue of time, as some individuals liked that they could **complete learning activities at a time that suited them**. For one learner, the flexibility of online learning was particularly useful because they could dedicate more time to childcare responsibilities.

'It's all at your own pace [...] that's the best about these courses, it's not timetabled, you hop in and out as you please.'

'It is a wee bit more flexible. You can do things at your leisure, and don't have to turn up all the time on a certain day.'

Moreover, some adults liked that online learning had provided them with 'company and support', or 'something to do', especially throughout lockdown.

'During Covid, there weren't a lot of positives, and it's one of the only positives I was able to take out of it. Being able to spend some time doing something proactive about something [...] gave me something to do in my spare time and helped me build on my qualifications and knowledge.'

'I enjoyed the communication too. In lockdown, you were isolated a bit. It was good to just to get on and see your classmates and have a few giggles.'

The fact that online learning provided a means of communicating with other people was particularly valuable for one interviewee who lived alone.

'It's the people as well, the comments, you get to know their names, and you're feeling you're building up a relationship [...] as someone who's on their own, you feel like that's the only communication I had this week.'

In addition, some interviewees mentioned that online learning suited their style of learning; they appreciated learning through watching videos or listening to somebody read out a passage of online text. One learner also highlighted the wide **variety of choice of learning activities** that were available through online platforms. They were able to select a diverse range of subjects to study in more detail through utilising Future Learn's services.

What learners didn't like about learning online

As mentioned above, most adults stated that they preferred face-to-face learning in comparison to online learning. More specifically, learners who had started courses that were intended to be delivered face to face **missed the opportunity for social interaction**.

'You can't engage with the other participants in the same way, even though we do have breakout rooms and things like that. It's just not the same as actually being in a room with people. I miss that interaction.'

'You're losing out on the contact of friends that you've made and just sitting round the table talking. It was a serious, big loss.'

Some adults, who were learning online in order to enhance their skills at work, claimed that they **struggled to network and make connections with other people** who worked in their industries.

'A lot about going to conferences is meeting other people, and talking about your work, getting ideas, and that connection you just don't get online. It's just very dry.'

One interviewee felt that online learning was not a suitable model of delivery for the use of active learning techniques, for example using whiteboards during group discussions, and this was seen as something that hindered the learning process.

One learner felt that, although the use of Zoom could be described as a suitable 'substitute' to face to face learning, it was not regarded as something that could 'take the place' of face-to-face learning. Similarly, another learner said that, while online learning was not the equivalent of face-to-face learning, 'it's a good thing that it prevents you from stopping learning'.

Supporting adults to learn online

Most interviewees said they would encourage other adults to have a go at online learning. They made the following suggestions for supporting other adults to take up learning online:

- Increased awareness and advertising of online learning opportunities specifically for adults.
- Adult learners and tutors need to be familiar with the technology for online learning, including access to equipment and a secure internet connection.
- Adults should be encouraged to explore the variety of options that are available for online learning, including activities that they find fun or interesting.
- Highlighting the flexibility of online learning, helping to overcome barriers such as travel.
- Making an 'e-tutor' available for adults who might need help or support with online learning, especially if they encounter any technical difficulties.
- Emphasising the benefits of learning that can be gained through online provision, such as keeping your brain active and enhancing skills.
- Financial support for learners if online courses are expensive, or highlighting affordable courses where these are available.

Future intentions to learn

For those who were taking part in ongoing learning activities, all interviewees intended to continue with these activities. Some also stated that they would be open to taking part in new opportunities for future learning, for leisure or to gain qualifications.

Learners who had completed their learning also claimed that they wanted to take part in new opportunities. Most were planning to undertake learning to achieve qualifications, and some learners were actively looking for courses or already had a course lined up.

The majority of learners said that they would prefer learning to be delivered face-to-face. However, one interviewee asserted that, although they would prefer face-to-face classes, their experience of online learning throughout lockdown made them believe that they would be more capable of doing an online class in the future. Another learner said that they would prefer to learn online in the future due to the flexibility that it provides.

Motivations

Interviewees wanted to continue learning in the future for various reasons. Some learners reiterated that they had enjoyed the learning that they had done throughout lockdown, and that this motivated them to continue.

‘I absolutely enjoyed it. Completely enjoyed it. Being an older adult, it is something that I want to continue with, definitely. You're never too old to learn and every day is a learning day.’

Some individuals said that they wanted to learn to progress within their current occupation or to gain new employment opportunities.

‘It opens new doors to different job sectors that you maybe wouldn't have considered before.’

Some interviewees claimed that they wanted to keep their minds ‘active’ by taking up future learning opportunities, and others stated that they generally enjoy the process of learning or that they are interested in a certain subject area.

‘I think I'll always want to learn something or be doing something.’

Barriers

Although all interviewees intended to take part in some sort of future learning, they were also asked if anything might prevent them from doing so. Some learners said that the cost of programmes can sometimes be prohibitive, and others were concerned about having the time to take up further learning in the future, especially when the intensity of Covid-19 goes down. Some learners also mentioned that online provision is a ‘drawback’ and would therefore stop them from learning in the future.

Conclusion

The aim of this small-scale qualitative research was to better understand adults' experiences of learning online or remotely during the Covid-19 lockdowns. Reflecting the restrictions in place, the learners interviewed mainly learnt online at home. They took part in a mix of formal and informal courses, for professional development as well as for leisure – most of which had commenced prior to the first lockdown in March 2020. Most accessed learning through community-based providers, and others had learnt through a university, college, employer or had had taken up learning independently.

While most of the adults interviewed had experience of learning as an adult prior to lockdown, learning online was new for some. These learners said they had been apprehensive about, and for some this was linked to their age and thinking learning online wasn't for them. Despite online learning becoming easier for some, the majority of learners stated a preference for face-to-face learning, even though they said there was no difference in the quality of delivery.

The benefits of online learning identified by interviewees included:

- Accessibility and convenience of online learning, which enabled them to learn from home and not have to travel
- Flexibility to learn around other commitments, such as caring responsibilities, and learn at their own pace
- Accessing a wider range of teachers than they would have been able to otherwise, including internationally
- Being able to access learning resources when they needed them.

Challenges with learning online mainly related to technology and internet connectivity, including access to equipment. Learners also missed social interaction with tutors and other learners, as well as concentration and distractions from learning at home.

The research findings highlight the following considerations for the delivery of online learning:

- Marketing of online courses need to help address adults' potential concerns about learning online, for example making it clear that courses are accessible to people without experience of learning online, including information on any technical support offered, using previous learners as role models.
- As a key source of learner support, tutors should have opportunities to develop their digital skills and confidence. This could also help to enhance the quality of course content and delivery.

- Tutors should make use of a variety of learning materials, including videos, reading, PowerPoint slides, quizzes etc to help keep learners engaged.
- Tutors should create opportunities for active participation and social interaction between learners, for example small discussion groups and/or time for informal discussion at the beginning or end of sessions.
- Tutors should consider how they provide support to give learners opportunities to ask questions and check their understanding. This could include, for example, providing one-to-one support and/or setting ground rules for whether/how learners can interrupt sessions with questions.

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