



What makes a successful online learner?

Findings of the Digital Student Online learners' expectations and experiences of the digital environment

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“What makes a successful online learner? Findings of the Digital Student Online learners’ expectations and experiences of the digital environment.”

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1. Background

This study into **online learners** (<https://digitalstudent.jiscinvolve.org/wp/online-learners>) is part of a wider project Investigating students' expectations and experiences of the digital environment:

- » Higher Education (HE) study (http://ji.sc/Digital_Student_Expectations)
- » Further Education (FE) study (http://ji.sc/Digital_Students_Expectations_FE)
- » Skills study (http://ji.sc/Digital_Student_Skills)
- » Pilot of a digital student experience tracker tool (http://bit.ly/Digital_Student_Tracker)

This study links closely to the previous work as online learning cuts across sectors. For this study, online learning is defined as:

- » Exclusively online courses
- » Courses which are delivered largely online, or have online elements to support a variety of access and attendance needs
- » Online learning which replaces some face-to-face lecturing time in courses that are otherwise delivered traditionally

It is our assumption that most learners in post-compulsory settings will experience some online component to their learning and that as they move into lifelong learning/professional development, this component will form a larger proportion of study time. Online learners are not, then, a distinct group of learners: they are post-compulsory learners in particular situations with particular preferences and needs.

This work is timely as many providers are expanding their online learning activities:

- » HE especially CPD/postgraduate courses
- » FE especially as an online element of all taught courses (**FELTAG** <http://feltag.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/FELTAG-REPORT-FINAL.pdf>)

» Specialist professional and work-based learning This work also links with Jisc **Scaling up online learning project** (<https://www.jisc.ac.uk/rd/projects/scaling-up-online-learning>) which produced a series of **guides and checklists** (<https://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/scaling-up-online-learning>) to assess institutional readiness, strengths and weaknesses. These resources help institutions to consider choices around curriculum design and assessment, technology approaches and student and staff support mechanisms.



"I don't label myself "online learner". I'm a learner (always), who happens to make use of online resources as a principal source of materials. I'm just as happy with books, off-line digital media, with face-to-face, and so on. It just happens that online is now very convenient. Importantly I think, online learning is not special - it's learning that happens to use online resources".

Quote from OLsuccess Week discussion board

2. Activities

2a. Literature review and analysis

Due to the extensive research literature on online and distance learning, our searches were limited to papers published after 2012, although some key papers before that date were included. Studies that involved learners through large-scale surveys and/or detailed qualitative work were prioritised. Studies that focused on the learning experience, rather than teaching, course design, or organisational issues were included in the review and were collated in an **open online library** (http://ji.sc/Zotero_Groups) (over 260) and **bibliography** (http://ji.sc/Online_Learner_Bibliography). These included:

- » Factors influencing the outcomes of online learning using measures such learners' engagement, progression, satisfaction, successful completion and credits/grades achieved comparative literature which contrasts online and offline learning activities or experiences or contrasts differently designed online learning components
- » Case study evidence conducted from the perspective of teachers and online learning designers and evaluation studies of specific online courses or interventions
- » Qualitative and mixed-method research studies which provide a focused theoretically informed and rich picture of online learners' experiences from a variety of perspectives
- » Feedback from learners - surveys carried out by researchers, online learning providers, and some national bodies

2b. Scoping the study

We identified several **key research questions** (http://ji.sc/Key_Research_Questions) in consultation with an expert advisory group and mapped our literature review findings to these.

As the study progressed, we decided to focus on a series of questions around What makes for a successful online learner? By focusing on the learner, rather than the learning experience, we intended to look at what learners can transpose across situations rather than what they learn and use in one context only. However, we need to acknowledge that the (feeling of) success, as defined by the learner, might be short-term or long-term, and might be assessed differently eg via end-of-course satisfaction questionnaire, vs. longitudinal study of changed life chances.

The questions identified were:

1. What are successful online learners like?
2. What do successful online learners do?
3. How do successful online learners feel about learning online?
4. What differences among online learners are significant to their success?
5. How can providers and teachers/facilitators support online learners' success?

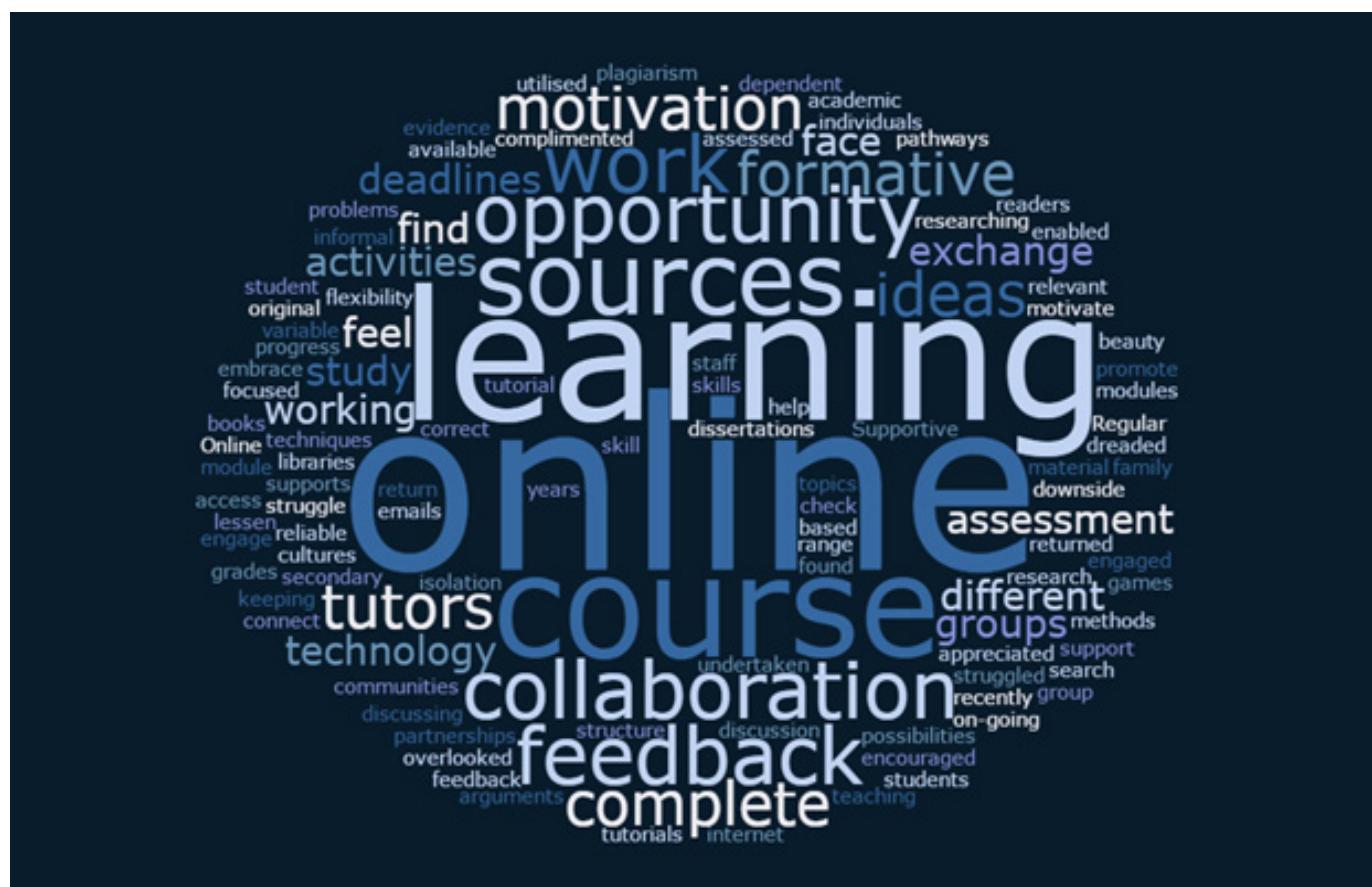
2c. Validation of findings

Throughout the study we validated our findings with different groups:

- » Input from an expert advisory group covering all sectors and including student representatives
 - » Input from online learners from around the world through an Online Learning Success Week #OLsuccess **#OLsuccess discussion forum** (http://ji.sc/Online_Learning_Success); #OLsuccess Twitter hashtag storify (<https://storify.com/loumcgill/olsuccess>);

overview (summary) (http://ji.sc/OL_Success_Week_Report) (pdf); Analysis of #OLSucces questionnaire (http://ji.sc/OL_Survey_Report) (pdf)

- » Input from wider practitioner groups through established meetings such as the **Jisc Student Experience Experts meeting** (http://ji.sc/OL_Expert_Meeting) in June 2016, and a **Special #LTHechat on Twitter** (http://ji.sc/LTHE_Chat) 13th July 2016 - What do we know about the experiences of online learners?



Word cloud generated from the #OLsuccess Week Discussion Forum

3. Findings - What makes for a successful online learner?

A key aspect influencing all of the questions about what makes a successful learner is where responsibility lies for their success and who defines what success means. There is a strong narrative of learner responsibility running throughout this study. In a positive sense, this is empowering, especially for already-independent learners, to whom online learning can offer flexibility and personal control. In a negative sense, there may be an abdication of responsibility by providers, especially towards less independent and well-resourced learners.

For this study, we defined online learners as any learners who happen to access learning opportunity and resources via digital networks. This is a population almost as large and certainly as diverse as 'all learners'. During our conversations with practitioners during **OLsuccess week** (http://ji.sc/OL_Success_Week_Report) and the **LTHEchat on Twitter** (http://ji.sc/LTHE_Chat) several people questioned if the same things affected the success of face to face learners too.



Still from an animated video used to promote #OLsuccess Week <https://youtu.be/C3kNQ8m6mGY>

We wanted to look at how student experiences of ('success with') online learning are influenced by different factors. What is the impact of the different personal resources they bring - educational experiences, learning and digital 'capital', personae and aspirations? Readiness to learn online is a well-established concept with a variety of metrics. Whether our frame of reference is personal resources, dispositions, capabilities or 'readiness to learn', we do need to note the diversity of online learners and the fact that differences among them are likely to determine their experience and success more than the one thing - the online context - that they have in common.

Learners bring a range of attributes that impact on their success online:

- » Previous experience
- » Motivations and aspirations
- » Self-efficacy (belief in their ability to succeed)
- » Study habits
- » Gender/cultural/socio-economic/disability factors
- » Beliefs about (online) learning

3a. What are successful online learners like?

- » Experienced, already successful learners (especially online!)
- » Motivated, resilient and persistent (emotionally robust)
- » Autonomous, self-efficacious, self-regulating
- » Curious and inquiring
- » Well prepared and well organised
- » Digitally capable (ICT proficient) - necessary but not sufficient
- » Trusting - willing to share to learn
- » (At least 10%) likely to have a disability
- » Many international students so often learning in other than their first language



"There are some things that I think are vital; it's the taking note of the advantages that online gives, (e.g. ability to have asynchronous activities as well as synchronous ones); and to avoid as much as possible trying to replicate face to face teaching model (which isn't without its own flaws). But, ultimately, we're all different. What suits me, today, mayn't suit you tomorrow."



'The ability to study when I have time, fit the online courses into my busy schedule (work, family, voluntary work...) is probably the greatest advantage.'

'I also enjoy the interaction with the course leader during the webinar. The last but not least I would like to mention is knowing you are studying with people from all over the world. It is truly international. This type of education does not discriminate. It is all inclusive, regardless of race, nationality, disability.'

'Mainly I like it because I don't feel pressured to be with other people, which I struggle with due to my autism. Being in an environment with noise and distractions makes learning difficult whereas learning at home I can create the best atmosphere for me.'

3b. What do successful online learners do?

- » Engage in appropriate learning in the first place! (freedom, choice, motive: signposting, advice)
- » Set goals, make and monitor plans
- » View and review a wide range of course-related content
- » Be proactive in information finding, help-seeking, initiating communications
- » Manage time and attention
- » Focus on own motivations and progress
- » Integrate personal with course technologies and media
- » Interact, collaborate and share with other learners (however, for some learners individual focus is more successful - with collaboration particularly contributing to disengagement and possibly failure)

3c. How do successful online learners feel about learning online?

- » Successful online learners enjoy learning - even when it is challenging (fun, motive, curious, self-development)
- » Successful online learners experience empathy and care - even in situations of low social/emotional presence (implied from research)
- » Successful online learners manage complex feelings about working with others (implied from research)
- » Successful learners manage anxiety and frustration eg with technology (implied from research)



'Sometimes you can do it completely, utterly alone, just you, your brain and the material.'

'Being in an environment with noise and distractions makes learning difficult whereas learning at home I can create the best atmosphere for me.'

'If you do find it difficult to have a voice - start small and work up to more as your confidence grows.'

'I was able to fit this learning in around my job and also around my family life. This often meant working late at night on the online activities, but this enabled me to complete the course and meet the tight deadlines. Having the flexibility that online learning offers was something I really appreciated.'



'Surely the beauty of the internet and technology is its ability to connect individuals and communities, and to promote the exchange of ideas between different cultures and age groups, so I do feel that online learning has a way to go to truly embrace the possibilities.'

3d. What differences among online learners are significant to their success?

- » Self-efficacy, self-regulation, etc. (disposition or repertoire?)
- » Educational background, experience and capital: previous success
- » ICT confidence and capability
- » Other demands on time, especially older adult learners
- » Access needs and challenges › Linguistic needs and challenges
- » Mode of participation
- » (To some extent) subject and level of study
- » (In a few studies) age, gender, cultural background, ethnicity, employment status, socio-economic status

3e. How can providers and teachers/facilitators support online learners' success?

- » Teach responsively, confidently, with consideration to learners' different: motivations, interests, learning histories and resources
- » Prepare online learners to study online - norms, practices, expectations, good study habits, functional access
- » Enable learners to use their own devices, services and skills
- » Support access to rich and diverse learning content
- » Provide a digital environment that is accessible, social and personalisable: open (for some learners); secure (for others)
- » Address the barriers to success we have identified for specific groups of learners



'researching topics for end of course dissertations has been very much my high point in online study'

'I like to get useful feedback when I'm learning. It does make me feel that I'm doing well if I can test my knowledge. It's similar to playing online games - I like to aim for the next level and get some kind of reward. It keeps me motivated.'



'Supportive tutors are also key to keeping me engaged and focused. Regular catch ups with tutors, or emails to check on progress really help me to keep my motivation.'

"What helps me in learning online is the ability to set my own projects and goals, to have access to a wide range of resources and a group of peers to support me. What doesn't help me is a course structure or timed-delimited focus."

4. Highlights

The literature review noted some dominant themes in the research including self-regulated learning, self-efficacy, and readiness to learn online. It also highlighted affective issues especially learners' social presence, sense of community and collaboration.

Large-scale questionnaires featured strongly with an increasing use of analytics and system data. There were also many rich, detailed, often longitudinal studies of small numbers of learners.

A significant challenge in this area is a lack of consensus on key issues such as collaboration; intrinsic dispositions vs. educational 'capital'; retention, particularly in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs); the role of induction; open vs. structured environments. It is difficult to reconcile or assign relative value to the different approaches.

We have to be very cautious in making any general statements about online learners and online learning even if large data sets show 'significant' findings in one direction, due to several factors:

- » Online learners are highly diverse, and the contexts of their learning will vary widely at different stages of their lives
- » Differences among learners may be more significant than similarities of 'online' setting
- » Extensive, varied and contradictory literature
- » Providers taking different approaches, devising specific measuring scales, and being protective of their own research
- » Research 'tribes' focusing on different issues, speaking specific languages

4a. Learner motivation

The relationship of motivation to success is a complex one, especially as learners are likely to define their own 'motivations' and 'successes' through the same lens. Some studies suggest that the precise nature of learner motivation has an impact. Learners who are highly motivated by evidence of completion/success are more likely to gain completion certificates. Learners who are highly motivated by challenges in their work role are more likely to translate course-related learning into their work. Learners who are motivated by interest in the subject are more likely to engage with content and conversations not directly relevant to assessment tasks. Consistently, level and type of motivation are the most significant factors in predicting online learning success.

4b. 'Readiness to learn online' and responsibility for success

Research into readiness for online learning tends to ask learners to self-assess in five dimensions: self-directed learning, motivation for learning, computer/Internet self-efficacy, learner control, and online communication self-efficacy. All of these are correlated with success in online learning, but it should be noted that these change for individual learners over time and for different kinds of online learning. Some of these dimensions may develop as learners progress through online learning.

There is evidence of online learning providers using their own, unverified and unvalidated, measures of 'readiness to learn online' at the start of courses of study. This may be useful for independent adult learners with clear motivations, who

can use such measures as part of their existing strategies of self-reflection and self-regulation. However, it is unclear how they help learners who self-assess as less 'ready' to learn online, and there must be a concern where these measures are not used to direct learners to further guidance and support, but rather to assert their own responsibility for success or failure.

Overall, there is limited evidence that 'motivation' and 'readiness to learn' factors are being used in practice to differentiate and appropriately support learners with different needs. It remains contentious whether these factors are persistent properties of the individual, or resources that can be differently deployed in different contexts, and built on with experience. It is also unclear how distinct the different contributory factors are, and how much value the different measures used add to the general observation that some individuals are generally more successful online learners than others. Research is ongoing into how interventions such as early, positive experiences in the online environment, or positive prompts throughout learning activities, may impact on learners' perceptions of their own efficacy and their motivations to persist and succeed.

4c. Emotional responses

This study highlights online learners' emotional responses as having a significant impact on success particularly around the concept of 'enjoyment'. In our collation of large-scale studies around satisfaction in online learning, we find that satisfaction correlates well with success, and that student-related factors include: curiosity, interest, desire, (orientation on) self-improvement, freedom to learn, choice, control, and fun. Conversely, negative emotions such as boredom, frustration and anger hamper success and evidence suggests that online learners who can develop an emotional 'robustness' are more likely to be successful.

Some aspects of online learning, such as having a sense of belonging, relationship building and trust strongly influence learner emotions. Interacting with others can be a source of both enjoyment and stress, but the issue of collaboration

raises complex challenges for learners around timing, shared assignments, lack of team member involvement, lack of intimacy and communication. It is also worth noting that collaboration for some students is highly challenging due to disabilities and may even elicit refusal on some tasks.

There are questions around how providers can influence these highly individual factors that are so critical to online learning success. Providers should focus on those features of the online learning environment and experience that support learners to become more confident, motivated, autonomous, and reflective, though these remain complex issues. Appropriately timed and structured activities, assessments, and feedback are clearly critical, with learners in general moving from a dependence on structure, security and feedback to becoming self-regulating in less structured, more open settings. Supportive and responsive teaching is vital for less self-efficacious learners. Learners differ in how much support and learning gain they experience through interacting with other learners, and alternatives should be available. Inexperienced learners can be prepared for online learning through early, well-structured and supported activities with emotionally rich, positive feedback. Academic, pastoral, and technical support mechanisms help learners to be more successful as they progress through different kinds of online learning.

All of the Digital Student studies have articulated the importance of engaging in regular, meaningful dialogue with learners at a time when it is tempting for institutions to rely on technological mechanisms to track activities and performance. It is a significant challenge for institutions to capture the diverse voices and respond to expressed needs of all online learners, but if technology enhanced learning is to be truly flexible, inclusive and effective, listening to those voices is critical.

5. Recommendations

5a. Recommendations for Jisc

1. Adapt the digital student experience tracker tool for online learners
2. Encourage and gather online learner journey stories to illustrate some of the different contexts and ways that students experience learning online learning (including informal/formal, blended/fully online, open/closed)
3. The online survey carried out during #OLsuccess week included only a small sample of online learners during a week-long period. Despite this, **the suggestive findings** could be explored further with a wider and larger population of online learners, with the addition of a couple of extra questions.

5b. Recommendations for online learners

From the literature review and our own limited consultation activities, the following advice could help learners be more successful:

1. Focus on your reasons for learning and review your progress and goals regularly - motivation is the most reliable predictor of online learning success
2. Consider whether online learning is right for you. Successful online learners tend to appreciate flexibility, independence, the opportunity to pursue their interests and discover their preferred resources and the chance to connect with other learners online. Successful online learners tend to be able to deal with motivating themselves, managing their own time, dealing with isolation (or being good at feeling supported through online connections), and sorting out their own technology issues
3. Before you sign up, make sure that you have a thorough understanding of what is expected of you at all stages of the course. Use the available course information and ask if unsure about what you will be expected to do. This might include what kinds of prior learning

experiences you have, what technologies you may need to use, what kinds of assessment is offered, how much you will be expected to collaborate or communicate with others. Make sure you can comply with all of the course requirements. Find out if the course is flexible enough for your specific needs

4. Consider if you need a support network. Friends, family and work colleagues can provide useful help in terms of academic, technical or moral support. Let people know what you are doing and how this may affect your interactions or availability for other activities
5. If you have specific needs, ask in advance how the course provider can help to support your learning. They may need to provide alternative forms of content, be more flexible with timing of tasks, allow use of assistive technologies, or be flexible with assignment activities
6. Make sure that you have access to the appropriate technologies that you will need. Consider how you will access course content. You may prefer to work online or may need to download content and work offline in a different space
7. Think about your learning 'space/s'. Try to make sure you have a learning environment that suits you. Think about where you will do your learning. Do you need to make changes to your home environment to create a learning space that works for you?
8. Make a timetable and plan your tasks. Be realistic about what you can complete. Time management is an issue for many online learners
9. Try to be a 'reflective learner'. At different stages of the course consider if your approaches are working for you. Are you taking notes, are you getting useful feedback, is your time management effective, are you learning in the way you expected to?

10. Be prepared to seek help if you need it from tutors, other learners, or your own support network. Delaying this could mean you fall behind and find it difficult to recover
11. Consider using any mechanisms provided to create a social presence, such as a place to make a personal profile. This can help you feel connected and may prevent isolation. If the course provider does not offer this facility, consider using social media to develop a profile. This is particularly helpful if you are learning for professional or work reasons, as it can allow you to begin developing an online presence and network
12. Take advantage of any means to provide feedback to your course providers, such as surveys, feedback forms or online discussion opportunities. This can help them to identify and address any specific problems with course design or support levels. It can also help them improve the course and the experience for other online learners in the future

A key recommendation is that institutions use the **Scaling up Online Learning guides and checklists** (jisc.ac.uk/guides/scaling-up-online-learning) to assess institutional readiness, strengths and weaknesses. These resources help institutions to consider choices around curriculum design and assessment, technology approaches and student and staff support mechanisms

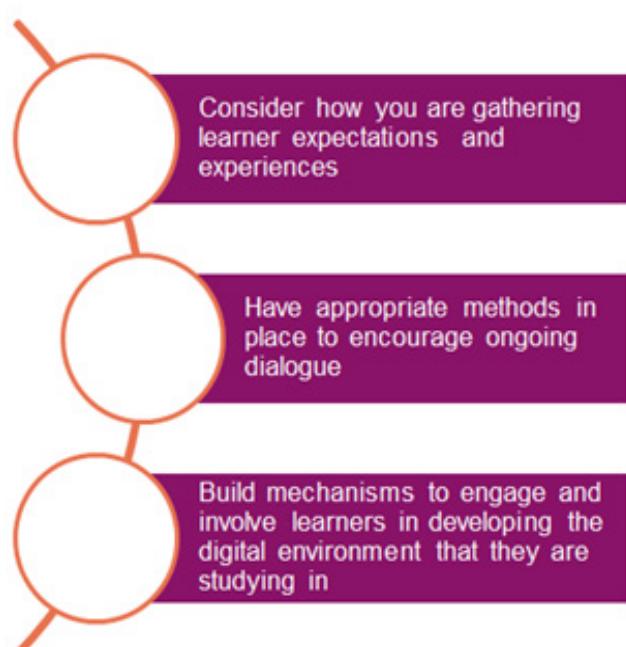
5c. Recommendations for institutions

5ci. Recommendations from previous Digital Student Studies

- » HE Digital Student Study **recommendations** (http://ji.sc/Student_Study_Recommendation)
- » **Final report** (http://ji.sc/Digital_Student_Final_Report) of the FE Digital Study
- » Digital Student Skills Sector **Final Project Report** (http://ji.sc/Digital_Student_Final_Project_Report)

Key messages from these studies about the importance of engaging learners:

- » Consider how you are gathering learner expectations and experiences
- » Have appropriate methods in place to encourage ongoing dialogue with learners
- » Build mechanisms to engage and involve learners in developing the digital environment that they are studying in



5cii. Specific Recommendations

1. Choose and purposely redesign the course or activity for online learning
2. Carry out longitudinal audits of learners and staff to identify trends and responses to institutional approaches as they develop
 - a. Balance mechanisms to audit learner experiences - using learner analytics and qualitative mechanisms
 - b. Beware of over auditing - survey fatigue for staff and learners
 - c. Establish mechanisms to have regular ongoing informal and formal conversations
3. Enable and support staff to take advantage of the potential that online learning offers
 - a. Engage staff and employers in a constructive dialogue with learners to define expectations of technology use
 - b. Support staff to be innovative in curriculum design, technology use and student support
 - c. Reward staff for teaching innovation and establish champions of online learning approaches to cascade through the institution
 - d. Consider ways to assess, enhance and support digital literacy and wellbeing of staff
 - e. Encourage staff to use the **Jisc online learning readiness tool** (onlineready.jisc.ac.uk) either individually, in teams or as part of their CPD
4. Enable and support learners to take advantage of the opportunities that online learning offers
 - a. Consider learners' different motivations, interests, learning histories
 - b. Consider how to find out and/or ensure that learners are ready (or able) to learn effectively online - learners may need help with induction, orientation and preparation
 - c. Consider ways to assess, enhance and support digital literacy and wellbeing of online learners
5. Offer clear guidance to students and potential students around the benefits of learning online, what the online aspects of the course entails, and ways to be successful
6. Consider ways to engage online learners in conversations and activities with staff and other learners
7. Consider whether to make campus-based services accessible to distributed online learners (such as electronic library services, careers support, disability services)
8. Find out if learners have specific needs such as help with access, problems with collaborative activities, specific technology needs, cultural requirements
9. Encourage learners to be part of a constructive dialogue to define expectations of online learning
- i. Support access to rich and diverse learning content
- j. Provide a digital environment that is secure, accessible, social and personalisable
5. Help online learners to develop a sense of belonging to the institution and a learning community
 - a. Consider offering student support mechanisms for a range of areas - not just academic support (such as careers, socialising opportunities, etc.)
 - b. Involve the alumni office to connect with and build relationships with students
 - c. Offer alumni opportunities to engage in online activities - as peer support, advisors
6. Enable online learners to create/develop/express a sense of identity
 - a. Allow learners to create profiles, personalised interfaces, social networking features (liking, following, etc.)
 - b. Provide bounded spaces for the rehearsal of emergent identities

5ciii. What institutions can do to create and support successful online learning opportunities

Many providers are expanding or scaling up online learning opportunities, either as part of professional and vocational courses, as an online element to established courses or even as a fully online course.

We have developed a series of **guides and checklists** (jisc.ac.uk/guides/scaling-up-online-learning) to help institutions assess their readiness for scaling up online learning, and to consider the strengths and weaknesses of existing online provision. These resources help providers to consider choices around curriculum design and assessment, technology approaches and student and staff support mechanisms. Institutions should aim to:

1. Develop a clear Institutional rationale for online provision **link to Planning and decisions making part of Scaling up online learning guide** (http://ji.sc/Planning_And_Decision_Making)
2. Adopt an institution-wide approach to ensure that operational and administrative mechanisms support staff and learners appropriately **link to checklists** (http://ji.sc/Scaling_Up_Online_Learning) (word docx) and **link to Administrative and operational issues part of Scaling up online learning guide** (http://ji.sc/Administrative_And_Organisational_Issues)
3. Encourage staff to use the **Jisc online learning readiness tool** (<https://onlineready.jisc.ac.uk/>) either individually, in teams or as part of their continuing professional development (CPD)
4. Consider what kinds of data you will collect (such as personal data of staff and students, learning analytics, demographic data, attendance tracking, etc._ and how you might use this **link to information and data management part of the Scaling up online learning guides** (http://ji.sc/Information_And_Data_Management)
5. Consider how you will involve learners, employers, alumni and other external voices in an ongoing dialogue about online learning course development and support **link to managing relationships part of the scaling up online learning guides** (http://ji.sc/Managing_Relationships) and **link to developing successful student-staff partnerships guide** (http://ji.sc/Student_Staf_Partnerships)
6. Enable staff to consider different pedagogical approaches and to design/re-design appropriate curriculum and assessments with attention to time and timing, study setting and any preparation that students may need **link to curriculum design part of the Scaling up online learning guides** (http://ji.sc/Design_And_Pedagogic_Models)
7. Support innovative approaches to adopting and supporting technologies **link to technology and tools for online learning part of the Scaling up online learning guides** (http://ji.sc/Technology_And_Tools)
8. Create safe online spaces for learners to develop trust, establish learning communities and develop a sense of belonging to the institution which will support effective interaction with tutors, other learners, or external participants (such as employers, alumni, open students) **link to supporting online students part of the Scaling up online learning guides** (http://ji.sc/Supporting_Online_Students)

9. Consider a range of support mechanisms (technical and digital literacy, pastoral and digital wellbeing, learning, careers) **link to supporting online students part of the Scaling up online learning guides (http://ji.sc/Supporting_Online_Students)** and **link to supporting learners with different needs part of the Scaling up online learning guides (http://ji.sc/Supporting_Learners_With_Different_Needs)**

5d. Recommendations for further research

Following the literature review and consultation, we have identified several aspects that merit further investigation, but that we were unable to consider in depth within the scope and resource of this study.

5di. Research about types of online learners

1. Experiences of international students online, and students using English not as a first language
2. Experiences of disabled learners and learners with long-term health issues online - the benefits and drawbacks
3. Experiences of learners with socio-economic, digital, and/or educational disadvantages, and the relationship among these apparently different forms of disadvantage (this could also include refugees and migrants)

5dii. Research on issues affecting online learners

1. 'Readiness to learn online':
 - a. Lack of conceptual clarity around this term. (Does the term have any predictive value or is it merely descriptive? What are its components, in terms of attributes, competences, attitudes, etc.? How large is the overlap with 'readiness to learn' generally i.e. what are the specifically 'online' elements of the concept?)
 - b. Lack of operational clarity (Synthesis reviews identify no reliable, valid or consistent measure. Preponderance of measures devised and used by single providers)

- c. Ethical issues (Is the term being used to further understanding and better support online learners, or to mitigate the liability of providers?)
- 2. 'Self-efficacy' and 'self-regulation' to describe attributes of effective learners, including effective online learners.
 - a. Valuable and widely used terms, but also somewhat lacking in clarity, at least to those not involved in the relevant research and thinking
 - b. The assumption is that these are not fixed qualities but resources or strategies that can be developed with practice, or experiences that can change learners' self-perceptions
 - c. We need greater understanding of how best to support learners and what kinds of positive experience are most powerful in developing self-efficacy and self regulation
 - d. Again we need to understand whether there are specific online components of self-efficacy/self-regulation in learning, or whether they manifest differently in online settings, or whether their importance is different in online settings, and how
- 3. Tension between independence/flexibility in online learning, and sociality
 - a. In terms of individual preference, which must be acknowledged, but also in design terms - flexibility/independence has to be traded off against sociality within a course design due to the logistics of participating with others online e.g. timing and pacing of study
 - b. Meeting learners' different needs in this regard may have high costs - higher even than (e.g.) providing media in different formats, particularly as this may impact on assessment activities

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- 4. Over-riding importance of motivation and persistence in determining learners' engagement and experience, as well as their success in online settings
 - 5. Strong influence of affective issues in motivation and persistence - and therefore in learners' engagement, experience and success
 - 6. Diversity and increasing diversification of the experience of 'learning online', given that most post-compulsory learners undertake learning online in some circumstances and at some points in their learning journeys
 - a. Online learners who identify as such are typically learners opting to undertake courses or learning experiences wholly online
 - b. From our limited consultation these seem to be older learners whose priorities are professional or personal development
 - c. We therefore need more evidence about the experiences of learners in mainstream FE and HE settings who are required to undertake elements of their learning online
 - d. We also need more evidence about the experiences of learners taking online courses for qualifications who have few or no existing qualifications. These are the learners for whom the promise of online learning is greatest, but who seem at the moment to be undertaking it in low numbers

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