

# Learner experiences of learning in lockdown

Wales

Abigail Lagou and Emily Jones

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4<sup>th</sup> Floor Arnhem House, 31 Waterloo Way, Leicester LE1 6LP

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[www.learningandwork.org.uk](http://www.learningandwork.org.uk)

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## About Learning and Work Institute

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We research what works, develop new ways of thinking and implement new approaches. Working with partners, we transform people's experiences of learning and employment. What we do benefits individuals, families, communities and the wider economy.

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## 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 basis<sup>1</sup>. 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 year<sup>2</sup>. 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 since the start of the pandemic. This explored learners' motivations for learning; 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 five adult learners in Wales. 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*

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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 five interviews that were conducted with adult learners in Wales. It describes their learning activities; their motivations for learning since the start of the pandemic; 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

All interviewees had completed their learning online and from home, and all the learning was related to gaining qualifications or skills for work. Some adults had started their learning before the first Coronavirus lockdown in March 2020, and others had started it afterwards.

Learning activities typically lasted for months or were ongoing, and most people were learning more than once a week. The majority of learning was delivered by institutions like colleges and universities, with just one individual saying that they had learned through a community organisation and Future Learn.

### Switch to online delivery

Interviewees who were learning prior to lockdown commonly mentioned that their learning activities were required to switch to online due to the restrictions. In contrast, those who started learning after lockdown were already aware that they would be taking their courses online. Platforms for online learning included Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and Google platform.

Where the learning activities switched to online, some interviewees noted that this had impacted their ability to learn effectively.

*'[Online learning has] changed the dynamics. Taking us out of a learning environment and now putting us in a non-learning environment and we're still meant to be learning. That change, in itself, has had effects, I feel.'*

However, one individual felt less impacted by the switch to online delivery because their access to learning materials stayed the same, and they received all the necessary equipment to be able to learn online, including a disability support package.

Some adults noted that the tutors sometimes experienced technical issues or struggled to adapt to teaching online, and in turn, this impacted their quality of learning.

*'... because [online learning] was new to everyone, because of that unfamiliarity ... as a tutor, they're not going to be able to deliver the exact same quality of learning as they would have previously.'*

## Prior experience of learning as an adult

Some interviewees had prior experience of learning as an adult, but for younger individuals, this was their first experience of learning since full-time education.

Most adults said that their previous learning had not influenced their decision to take up learning during lockdown. This is because their previous learning might have been face-to-face or had a different purpose to it. However, one interviewee explained that they had enjoyed their previous experience of learning and they have since wanted to continue learning.

*'[My previous experience of learning] was very good at that time... but I always had this feeling of studying, like an eagerness to study further.'*

Interviewees were also asked about any barriers that they might have had towards learning previously. Some said that they had previously rejected some learning opportunities due to childcare or work commitments.

## Motivations for learning in lockdown

In all cases, learners were planning to either gain qualifications or enhance their professional skills. When asked about their motivations towards learning during lockdown, interviewees often linked this to their potential employment opportunities.

*'I thought that I will use this opportunity to gain an English certificate, then I can secure a job.'*

For one individual, their learning was compulsory for their employer as they could not complete their usual work activities due to the Coronavirus restrictions.

Learners were also asked about their triggers for learning and why they had decided to take up learning at this time. Their reasons for this varied considerably, for instance, one individual had recently suffered a brain injury, and another was a refugee who was discussing their options with a work coach.

*'Basically, I still I am a refugee, I haven't got my full citizenship yet. When I came to this country... I was hoping that I will get a job very easily in here as I have over three years of experience in HR, but then I came in here and I start looking for job, I was very much unsuccessful, but when I started talking with Job Centre with my work coach when he encouraged me [to take up learning].'*

## Expected benefits of learning

Adults expected to gain many different benefits and outcomes from their learning activities. Most interviewees hoped that gaining qualifications or undertaking professional development activities would enhance their working life or lead to future employment opportunities.



Some adults also expected to gain more personal benefits, for example, being able to prove that they could achieve their outcomes, despite having faced barriers previously.

*'I will be able to demonstrate that suffering such a serious injury and then moving on from it is possible.'*

*'I decided to take up the English and maths learning for myself, because when I had my little boy at 15, I didn't have the grades that I needed to get.'*

Some learners said that they had already experienced their expected benefits of learning. One learner, who was completing online training courses for their current job in social care, said that they had applied their learning and skills at work.

## Challenges

The learners interviewed commonly experienced technical difficulties when accessing online provision. Some individuals struggled to use their online learning platform and its related applications, for example, not knowing how to access a lesson through their online calendar. Additionally, some learners did not have access to the internet or a laptop until they were provided with these things further into their courses. However, most adults said that their experiences with the technology improved as time went on.

*'I'm not as au fait with technology as maybe I should be... I'd never used these things before. Trying to figure out how to use it was very challenging.'*

*'I found [using Microsoft Teams] difficult in the beginning, but the more you do it the better you get at it.'*

Adults also mentioned other challenges such as living with a disability, recovering from a brain injury, and experiencing housing issues whilst being on their course.

Most interviewees were able to access support to address these challenges. Some learners had regular sessions of support, for example, weekly counselling sessions, whereas others explained that their tutors provided support when needed. A small number mentioned that their friends, family, or work colleagues had also helped them with the technology required for online learning.

*'The tutors would always be there when I needed them to be there, or they will change another lesson for me to join that lesson, so it was always like I had someone that I knew that I could speak to about all the problems I had.'*

*'One of my tutors had a lesson free, and she showed me step-by-step how to work Teams, and how to do Zoom and how to join my personal email to my other email so I get emails through both.'*

## Experiences of learning online

Some learners were already familiar with online learning or had previously developed their IT skills. These individuals explained that they felt confident in their ability to switch to online delivery and had found the experience relatively straightforward. However, those who were less familiar with online learning often said that they felt anxious or nervous before trying it.

*'[Before starting online learning] I had a lot of anxiety. More so in case I lost anything. If you're not really computer literate, you're afraid in case you're going to do something or you're going to lose something, and how to get it back.'*

*'I was a little bit nervous honestly because you know, this is technology. I was feeling that what happens if I [do] not get online properly and the teacher gets upset and... the students make fun out of me for not knowing how to get online and it was something I wasn't feeling comfortable about, because I haven't done it before.'*

## What learners liked about learning online

Some learners described online learning as **flexible, accessible, and convenient**. For instance, some liked that they could complete their learning from the comfort of their own homes, and that this **removed time that would usually be spent on travel**. Some also liked that they could **complete their learning at a time that suited them**, and this meant that they could continue to prioritise other commitments such as childcare. One individual mentioned that they could also join their lessons with their children present on the screen.

*'I prefer online learning than just going somewhere, it's easier. Better to be around home as well. It's definitely convenient.'*

In addition, some learners liked that they could **ask their tutor questions more discreetly** whilst learning online. They explained that, if the learning was face-to-face, they might have felt embarrassed to ask their questions or found it difficult to speak over other people.

Online learning also provided adults with an **opportunity to engage and interact with others** during a period where face-to-face socialising was otherwise limited. One individual especially liked that online learning meant that they could meet other people from all over the world.

Some interviewees also noted that, if their learning was face-to-face, then they would not have been able to learn how to use **different online applications**. These applications may also help them in the future, for instance, one individual who undertook a Level 3 in Teaching and Training mentioned that they are now able to plan and deliver lessons online.

## What learners didn't like about learning online

Some learners stated that online learning **reduces the opportunity for social interaction, as well as physical or practical activities**, which could be crucial to job roles in certain sectors. Individuals sometimes felt that they were unable to speak freely or informally with peers or tutors, and this could often take away from learning opportunities.

*'If I was in a class, there was definitely more conversation, more talking. And even the teacher was saying that if we were [face-to-face] ... I would have checked how you were doing ... or how many changes you can bring, or which parts have you done right or wrong.'*

Some learners mentioned that they also **struggled to ask questions quickly and easily to clarify their learning**. This was either because their peers were talking over each other or 'spamming' the chat box or because they could become complacent with muting themselves and turning their camera off throughout lessons.

*'Sometimes with online, you just turn off your video and you mute yourself and you can go and do the rest of your work that you want to do. So, you are not paying attention to any part of the lesson. But if you are face-to-face, you will pay more attention. You will concentrate more.'*

As mentioned above, some adults said that online learning had impacted their ability to learn effectively, since it **does not provide the same learning environment compared to face-to-face delivery**. Some also noted that online learning can involve a **lack of structure and routine**.

*'The main problem... is the environment. Our own individual environment that we either created or we are subject to... [Learning providers] can't control the environment of people's homes. Not being able to control the teaching environment will therefore impact on the teaching and the learning that can occur in it.'*

*'[Face-to-face provision is] a proper education system that you know what time you should be at class, what time your break is, what time you should come back home, what the tasks are.'*

## Supporting adults to learn online

Despite interviewees having a range of experiences while learning online, most said that they would encourage other adults to 'give it a go'. Interviewees made the following suggestions for supporting other adults to take up learning online:

- Adults should be supported to develop the appropriate level of IT skills, particularly in relation to using online learning platforms and different processes of submitting independent assignments. It was suggested that adults could familiarise themselves with the technology beforehand, and providers could supply a step-by-step handbook on how to use the relevant applications.

- Adults need help to access the necessary resources, for example, a working laptop and a secure internet connection.
- Highlighting the convenience of online learning, helping to overcome barriers such as a childcare, would be encouraging to other adults.
- Emphasising the advantages of learning during a pandemic may also inspire other adults, especially if they have to retrain.

### Future intentions to learn

All adults said that they would continue to learn in the future, and some already had learning activities lined up. While some adults wanted their future learning to take place online, others said that they would prefer this to be face-to-face.

The most common motivation for interviewees wanting to continue learning in the future related to their previously stated motivations; many reiterated that they wanted to enhance their working lives or secure future employment opportunities.

*'I plan to continue learning just to get to my future goals that I've always wanted to do.'*

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 said that they might struggle to find the time to take up further learning in the future, especially if they had other commitments such as childcare or full-time employment.

## 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 informal courses, working towards qualifications for professional development – some of which had commenced prior to the first lockdown in March 2020. Most interviewees accessed learning through universities or colleges.

While some 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 initially felt anxious and nervous about online learning, but their confidence grew over time, and they had positive experiences overall.

The benefits of online learning identified by interviewees included:

- Accessibility and convenience of online learning, which enabled them to learn from home and save time by not having to travel
- Flexibility to learn around other commitments, such as caring responsibilities
- Being able to ask tutors for help more discreetly than they would have been able to do in a classroom setting
- Connecting with a wider range of learners than they would have been able to otherwise, including internationally, at a time when face-to-face interaction was not possible or limited
- Having access and learning to use online applications.

Learning online, however, did come with some challenges too. These mainly related to technology, internet connectivity, and digital skills and confidence. Some learners missed the opportunity for social interaction with other learners and informal contact with their tutors. Some found online communication challenging, for example, management of online chat or being able to ask questions quickly. Others found it difficult to maintain focus and concentration during online sessions.

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 keep learners engaged and focused.
- Tutors should create opportunities for 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, using online chat, muting, whether cameras should be on etc.

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Registration No. 2603322 Registered Charity No. 1002775  
Registered office: 4th Floor Arnhem House, 31 Waterloo Way, Leicester LE1 6LP

