

Virtual Community Education Learner Focus Group and Learner Survey

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Introduction

The first Virtual Community Education Learner Focus Group was held via Zoom on Friday, 12th June 2020. Six learners, who had been engaging in community education with various providers across the country participated in the discussion. Over the course of the hour-long discussion, learners were asked to reflect on their experiences of continuing their community education courses during the current COVID-19 crisis. Learners were also invited to fill out an optional survey detailing their learning experiences. The survey completed was open to all learners participating in community education across the country during the COVID-19 restrictions, not just those who attended the focus group. A total of 66 learners from a variety of community education courses across the country filled out the survey. Both the focus group and Learner Survey findings are contained in information presented below.

Executive Summary

- Tutors were engaging with learners through a variety of platforms, with text message and WhatsApp being the most popular, followed by email and video chat
- Learners feel well supported by tutors in the move to emergency remote learning
- Many learners still don't have access to appropriate technology to complete their coursework, and a majority of learners do not have access to a personal laptop or PC
- Learners continue to experience WiFi issues, which make assessment particularly challenging
- Learners identified a range of barriers to learning at home, such as ergonomic challenges and home caring responsibilities
- Learners highlighted a range of benefits to emergency remote learning including increased flexibility, not having to travel, and getting to sample different courses
- Learners described a range of health and wellbeing benefits to engaging in their courses during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Learners highlighted a need for wraparound supports because of the mental health challenges which have been exacerbated by COVID-19

- Learners would like to return to the physical classroom (or take a blended-learning approach) as soon as it is possible to do so
- The majority of learners would continue with digital learning next year if COVID-19 restrictions remain in place or are reintroduced
- Learners would like more support with remote learning next year
- Learners would like to see more investment in community education

Methodology

Promotion and dissemination

Information about the first Community Education Virtual Focus Group event and the AONTAS learner survey was circulated through a number of platforms. All members of the Community Education Network were informed of the event through an email that was sent out by CEN Co-ordinator, Suzanne Kyle, on 5th June 2020. The focus group was also publicised through the AONTAS weekly Member Webinar on 3rd June and 10th June. Finally, 16 individual community education providers received emails and a number of follow up calls to discuss the focus group event. Almost all of these providers confirmed that they would circulate the information to learners.

A number of the providers who were contacted had also been actively gathering learner feedback on their experience of learning during COVID-19. These members include Dublin Adult Learning Centre (DALC) and Longford Women’s Link (LWL). Findings from these surveys are referenced in this report, as they link to findings gathered from this learner voice input.

Target groups and limitations

In their “Community Education Programme Operational Guidelines (2012)”^[1], The Department of Education and Skills outlines a number of target groups for community education, notably learners who consistently experience “acute barriers to participation in adult learning”. This includes, but is not limited to, “adults with low or no formal qualifications or low literacy levels”, “one parent families”, “Travellers”, “Migrants/refugees/asylum seekers”, “people with a disability”, “the homeless”, and “substance misusers”. These groups are strongly represented in community education programmes run by both statutory and non-statutory providers of community education. Yet, one of the

[1]“Department of Education and Skills Community Education Programme Operational Guidelines (2012)” <https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/Further-Education-and-Training/Adult-Literacy/Community-Education-Operational-Guidelines-to-VECs.pdf>

great limitations of this research, is that many of these learner cohorts were not able to participate due to their inability to take part in the focus group via Zoom or on SurveyMonkey. When contacted in relation to this focus group event, a number of community education providers noted that learners were not able to engage due to childcare responsibilities, lack of familiarity with the Zoom platform, and lack of appropriate devices. Lack of appropriate devices was noted in particular by community education groups who work specifically with learners from the Traveller and Roma communities. The same barriers to participation applied in relation to engagement with the learner survey, which was disseminated through an online link via SurveyMonkey. A number of community education providers noted that learners may have limited or no access to IT devices. The option of printed surveys was offered but none have been requested.

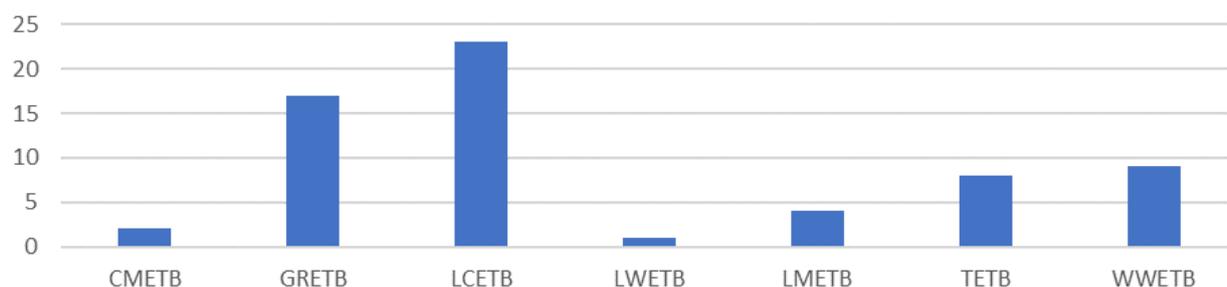
The survey was also widely circulated by Education and Training Boards, and 64 of the 66 respondents indicated that their course was associated with an ETB. As such, survey results will be most reflective of learner experience in community education courses (part-)funded and/or provided by local ETBs.

To indicate their involvement in a community education course, learners were required to type “community education” into an open response box under Q.2: “Course or Programme Title (eg PLC, Community Education, VTOS, etc)”. This most likely resulted in a number of community education learners opting to include the specific name of their course (ie “childcare”) instead of “community education”, meaning that it was not possible to determine whether their course was run by a community education provider; as such, some community education responses may not have been included.

Participant Profile

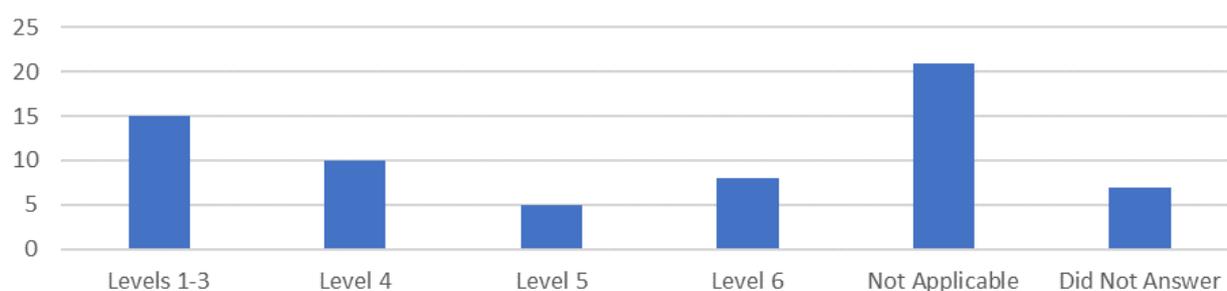
The six learners who participated in the Virtual Community Education Learner Focus Group came from 5 differing community education providers from four different counties in Ireland. The survey, which had 66 responses, represented learners from 7 different Education and Training Boards. The breakdown of community education learners by Education and Training Board is as follows:

Learners Represented by Education and Training Board



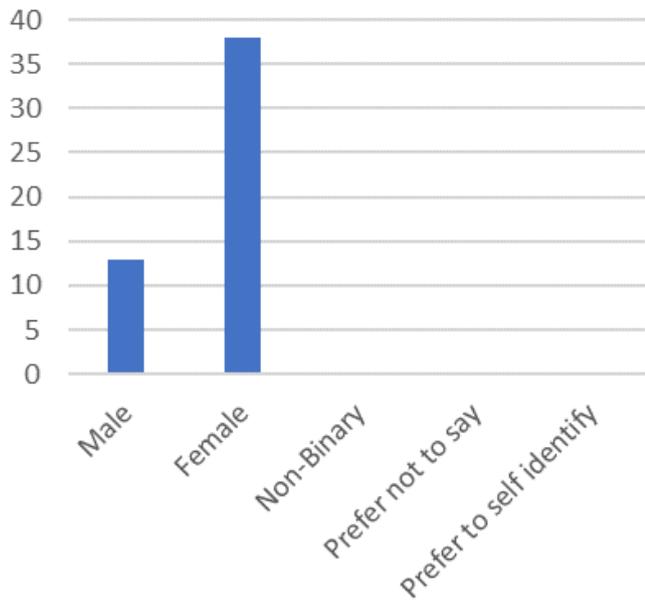
Of the 66 survey respondents engaging in community education, 38 stated they were completing an accredited course, and 21 stated that they were completing a non-accredited course. The breakdown of community education learners by Level according to National Framework of Qualifications is as follows:

Learner Representation by Level

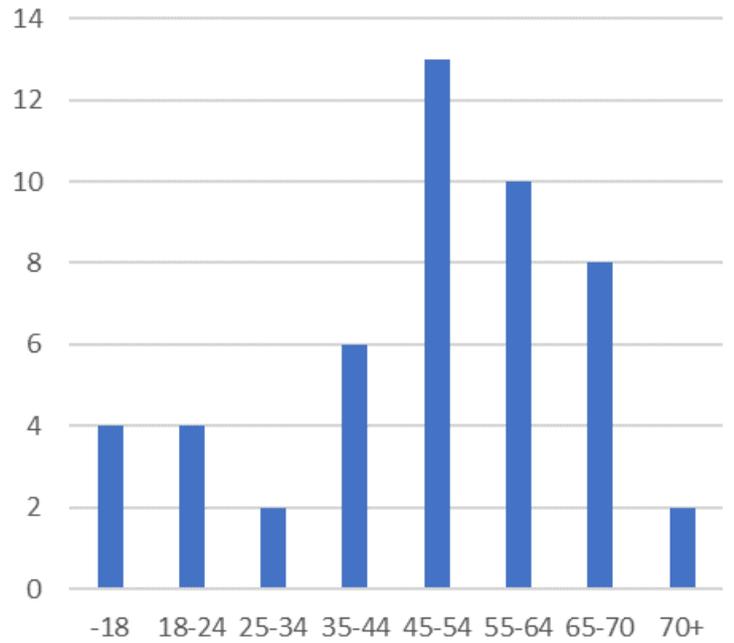


At the conclusion of the survey, learners were also asked to voluntarily respond to demographic questions. The purpose was to determine if the survey had reached a diverse and representative body of learners. As you will see from the tables featured below, learners engaging in community education were most commonly aged 45-54 (30%) with a considerable number of learners also aged 55-64 (20%). More women (75%) than men (25%) completed the survey. 39% of learners were born outside Ireland, 32% identified as having a disability, 18% were lone parents, and 14% were living in Direct Provision.

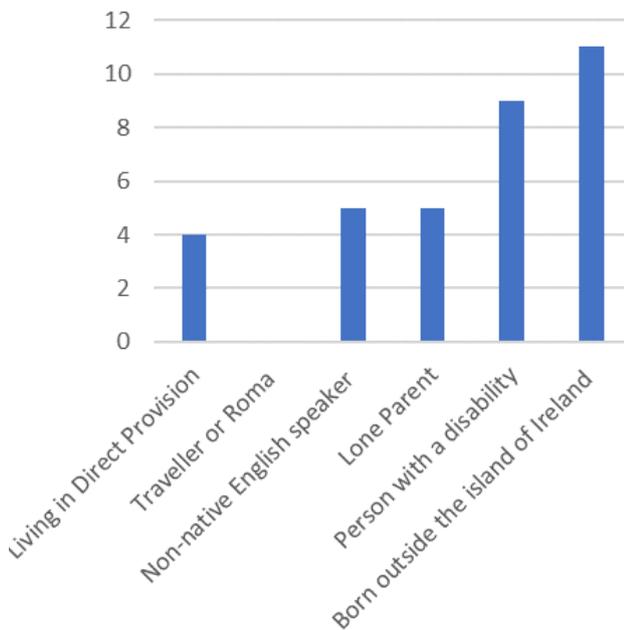
Learner Representation by Gender



Learner Representation by Age



Learner Representation by Group



Findings

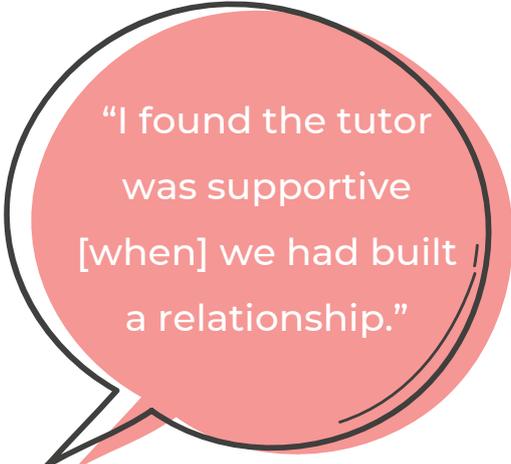
Learners continue to engage with their courses during COVID-19 restrictions

Forty-six of the 66 learners (74%) who completed the survey were continuing to engage in learning in spite of disruptions posed by COVID-19. Those who were not able to continue noted that their course had ended or that there was a practical element to the programme that meant it could not continue as before. Tutors were engaging with learners through a variety of platforms, with text message and WhatsApp (42) being the most popular, followed by email (41) and video chat (31). Many learners were also receiving support through phone calls (26). As one learner noted, “staff keep an eye on you and know if you need to talk. If I have a problem now, I either ring them or talk to my key worker when he rings me on Mondays or Fridays”.

Learners feel supported by their tutors and connected to their community education providers

The majority of learners answered either “strongly agree” (40) or “agree” (18) in response to the statement “I am happy with the level of engagement my centre/tutor has provided during COVID-19”, with only 4 learners selecting “neutral” or “disagree”. This was supported by the discussion in the focus group meeting where learners noted that tutors and providers had been in regular contact during the COVID-19 pandemic through email, Blackboard, Zoom, and in some cases regular telephone conversations. All learners in the group felt supported in their transition to emergency remote learning. One learner who had been receiving support by phone noted that these check-ins were sometimes “long conversations, could be 30 minutes or more, when I’m troubled”. As a learner with a disability, this participant noted the value of having “someone you can talk to”, adding “I feel more supported than ever”.

Other learners in the group noted a distinction between tutors with whom they had established a strong connection, through face-to-face learning, and those they had first connected with online during the pandemic: “I found the tutor was supportive [when] we had built a relationship”, they noted. Learners were also cognizant of the challenges that this new



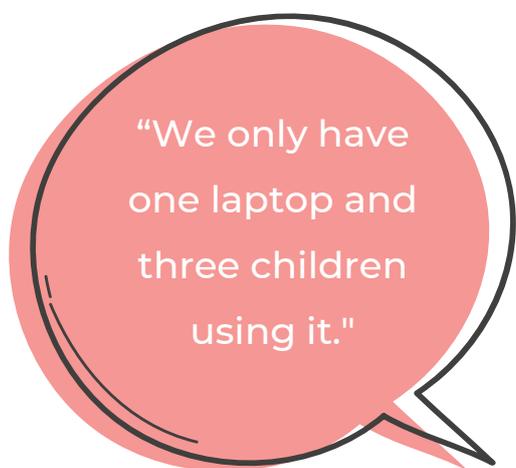
“I found the tutor was supportive [when] we had built a relationship.”

learning environment had created for staff and commented on the fact that their tutors were having to work longer hours.

Learners lack appropriate technology and face WiFi issues

While learners sought to embrace the new online learning environment, many faced challenges. One learner described the transition as “very off-putting”, commenting: “I’m not very computer literate and initially it scared me as it was so new”. Learners spoke of issues with navigating new platforms and noted that some of their tutors had also struggled to use these platforms at the outset.

WiFi coverage and access to devices came through in learner discussions, with one learner describing his/her struggle to complete work on an iPad which s/he found “hard to use”. Eight community education learners taking part in the survey indicated that they still do not “have access to a laptop or computer” to complete their work at home. Among community education learners taking their course through an Education and Training Board, 33% had been offered a computer or laptop by the Education and Training Board, while the remainder had not. Only 17 learners (32%) were using a “personal laptop (used only by you)” to complete their coursework, while 10 (20%) used a “shared laptop (used by other members of the household)”. The largest number of learners, 18 learners, were using “a mobile phone with internet to complete their work”, while only 2 indicated that their work was posted back to them when it is complete. These results are similar to the results from Dublin Adult Learning Centre where their learner survey indicated that 14% of learners engaging with their courses do not have access to a “smart device”, and 35% stated that they were not able to use a laptop.



WiFi reliability was an issue for 38% of learners who completed the survey. For some, all of these challenges were present at the same time, as one learner noted: “we only have one laptop and three children using it. The internet access is unreliable at times”. These issues also emerged in the survey conducted by Longford Women’s Link, in which only 47% of respondents had access to “reliable broadband” with 29% having access to broadband they did not

consider reliable. The remainder were using mobile data, and 3 learners reported that they had poor coverage. This again was similar to findings at the Dublin Adult Learning Centre where 13% of learners did not have access to broadband or WiFi.

Such technical issues were a source of stress for a number of the learners in the focus group, particularly in relation to assessment. One learner described their experience of an online exam, which “freaked the whole group out”. Here stress relating to technical issues and new approaches to assessment were compounded by other competing responsibilities: “you have children still out in the front garden ... I was so nervous, what if my laptop died, what if we had a WiFi issue, all that is in the background”.

Learners noted a range of benefits to online learning

Most learners in the focus group had not engaged in online learning prior to the onset of COVID-19, and a number of learners spoke about positive aspects of learning online. For those who had not been familiar with online learning platforms, the closure of their education facility had provided an “opportunity” for “getting to know online a bit better”, and was a “stepping stone” to their increasing digital literacy. Learners spoke about the ways in which online learning had allowed for increased participation and noted that a “lot of the online stuff is free”.

One learner discussed their experience of online learning as a person with a disability. Learning online was seen to “save hassle by cutting out travel” and classes were felt to be “80% of the quality of when I was there in person”. This learner had been taking classes with a focus on mental health and wellbeing, and noted that their meditation class could be done “in solitude a lot better than with people in a class”. Moreover, this learner felt that Zoom “helped to create a sense of calm where people take their turn” to speak. The online learning space was described as new and exciting, free from the hang-ups that had resulted from initial schooling. This learner was also involved in delivering classes. “You need lived experience and you need to listen”, s/he noted, describing the ways in which community education had provided a crucial space for personal development and a space to share their experience.



Learners also cited a range of other benefits including, “not having to travel in bad weather” and “getting a taster of courses in different counties”. A number of learners indicated that courses had “become more accessible, especially for those living in rural areas dependent on public transport and [for] those with reduced mobility”. Learners enjoyed “having time to research” and increased “flexibility to learn when you want”.

In the focus group discussions, learners expressed some ambivalence about the online learning space: “it’s got its positives and its negatives. You don’t have to leave your house but I also like the opportunity to meet people”. This was echoed by another member of the group who added, “I would prefer to be out meeting people.” This sentiment was supported by survey findings where 30% of community education learners overall were not able to respond positively to the statement “I enjoy learning from home”.

Learners miss the social interaction of face-to-face learning

Maintaining a strong connection with classmates emerged as a challenge, with 34 respondents selecting “strongly agree” (19) or “agree” (15) to the statement “I still am in regular contact with my classmates”, and 27 remaining “neutral” (18), or selecting “disagree” (6) or “strongly disagree” (3). The struggle to maintain a social element is reflected in the focus group findings, where learners reported on the “antisocial” dimension of remote learning and spoke of how they missed face-to-face interaction in the classroom; in the survey 71% of respondents from community education also indicated that “collaborative or peer learning [was] part of their course” (20 selecting “strongly agree” and 20 “agree”). Notably, 48 learners (78%) “would prefer to return to my classroom as it was prior to COVID-19”. In line with this, one learner noted “I miss my classmates”, with another highlighting, “I feel important elements are missing when all interaction is online”. Survey results from Dublin Adult Learning Centre reflect this sentiment even more forcibly, with 93% of respondents indicating that they “would like to return to class in September”.

In response to what they missed most about learning in the classroom, learners stated that they missed the social aspect of learning most, “people, getting out of the house, [a] cup of tea and chat”; “the chance to discuss ideas with my fellow students and the social interaction throughout the day” and connecting “with others in my local community”.

Similarly, 47% of learners responding to the Longford Women’s Link survey, identified the fact that they were not able to attend LWL in person as a key challenge, with 18% of learners experiencing a sense of “isolation”.

Physical workspace remains a challenge for learners

While some learners noted positive aspects to working from home, such as not having to travel, many explained that this change had also brought a number of notable challenges. Learners shared their workspace and devices with children and other family members. The survey indicated that learners completed their courses in a variety of environments, with the kitchen table (18) and at a desk (15) being the most popular (66%), while 14 stated that they were completing their work on a sofa (6) or in a bed (8). Two of the learners who indicated that they were completing their coursework from “bed” were learners in Direct Provision. The same number of learners in Direct Provision were not able to complete their course work at home without distraction.

Learning in the home also posed a range of “ergonomic challenges”, and the group pointed out a number of “physical health challenges”. One learner described how they “had to leave work because of disc problems”, adding “I don’t have a proper desk at the moment”. As summarised by one learner, “you need to be comfortable to stay alert”.

Concentration was noted as an issue, and learners missed the social aspects of face-to-face learning; as one learner explained, since the pandemic began “you’re too much in your own room; it’s antisocial”. This was supported by survey findings where 32% of learners stated they were not able to complete their course work without distraction at home, while 13 respondents indicated that they had “childcare or home caring responsibilities” that they had to “juggle” with their learning. As one “lone parent” respondent noted “it’s challenging with having family commitments”. Mixed responses were recorded to statements on daily structure and motivation, with 24 learners indicating that they did not struggle to find motivation, and 34 remaining “neutral” or selecting “disagree” to the statement “I struggle with a lack of structure to my day”. Notably, 4 learners who indicated that they had a disability struggled with a lack of structure.



Community education plays an important role in promoting mental health and wellbeing

Concerns around mental health and wellbeing had increased as a result of COVID-19. In the survey, one learner with a disability noted that they had been

impacted by health concerns relating to the crisis that had prevented them from learning. Overall, 10 learners stated that their mental health was suffering as a result of the crisis and 6 had experienced bereavement. Learners also felt that the COVID-19 pandemic had altered their original goals in learning, with 12 learners responding positively to the statement “there have been significant changes to the educational goals (eg learning outcomes) of my course/module”.

Learners felt community education played a vital role in addressing these issues and pointed to a wide range of benefits of engaging with community education broadly, particularly during the lockdown. As one learner noted, “I would have been lost over the summer without my classes”. Another learner described how “for about two weeks it was a miserable experience but now [the course] it’s taking up my time, I have a feeling of purpose and accomplishment that online learning gives me”. Engaging in learning had been pivotal, with learners finding themselves beginning “to forget about COVID-19” and, with something else to focus on, becoming “less obsessed with the daily figures”.

Speaking about their experience of “recovery education”, one learner noted that wraparound supports are now “more necessary” than ever “because of the mental health challenges”, which have been exacerbated by “ill-health and fears around COVID-19” as well as “loss of employment” and “restrictions”. As summarised by this learner, such personal challenges can “run you into the ground”. Community



education was discussed as a counter-weight to these challenges, with an important range of health, wellbeing and economic outcomes.

Learner experience of assessment remains mixed

While assessment did not feature as a major topic in focus group discussions, survey response to assessment remained mixed with 10 learners selecting “neutral” to the statement “I feel confident in my ability to complete the alternative assessments in place” and 1 learner selecting “disagree”. In response to the statement “I was informed about any alternative assessment arrangements in a timely manner” 10 learners were “neutral”, with 1 learner selecting “strongly disagree”. 65% (20) felt the assessments in place were “fair”.

Learners are weighing up the risks associated with returning to face-to-face learning

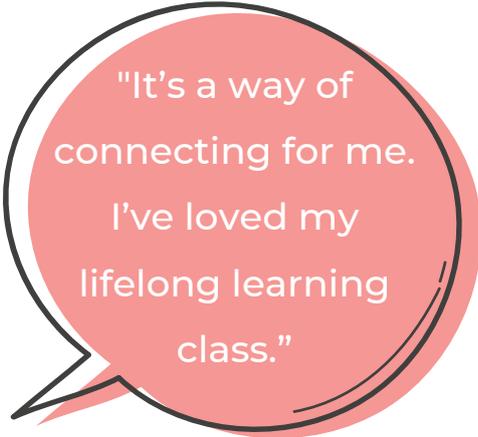
Survey results indicate that community education learners remain largely well-informed about their progression options, with 82 % indicating that they were clear on progression options (25 selecting “strongly agree” and 25 “agree”), while 11 remained “neutral” or selected “disagree” to the statement “I am clear on my progression options after completing my course”. Thirty-two learners felt “supported to progress after my course if completed” (26 selecting “strongly agree” and 26 “agree”), but 9 learners were “neutral”.

Despite the awareness of progression options, learners remained undecided on whether they would progress or take another course if community education facilities reopen in the Autumn. Most members of the group suggested that they would like to continue with “blended learning”, which gave them some flexibility, while noting that face-to-face interaction was still preferable.

Learners, particularly the older learners in the focus group, felt a sense of achievement in how they had “embraced” online learning and developed new skills in this area. Yet learners felt that the experience of face-to-face learning in their community education centre could not be replaced. As one learner commented, “for me it’s a stepping stone to a classroom setting because I loved the connection in the classroom with likeminded people. It’s a way of connecting for me. I’ve loved my lifelong learning class”. This was echoed by another member of the group who noted: “it passes the time for me but to do this long term, it’s not the same”.

When asked about the risks of returning to the physical learning space, some learners noted a hesitancy, particularly for at-risk groups such as elderly learners. As highlighted by one learner, “there’s a lot of older people in my class. One woman who is over 70 hasn’t gone outside but she has no WhatsApp. I’d be nervous if anyone was coughing”. Other learners felt that they

could be prepared to return “with regards to safety if things were handled with the necessary precautions”, noting, “it’s comforting to know guidelines are in place”. For learners who were not at-risk, the benefits of learning in the physical classroom were felt to outweigh the risks associated with returning in the Autumn.



"It's a way of connecting for me. I've loved my lifelong learning class."

Many learners would progress if courses remain online

While learners noted that they would like things to return to “normal”, 47 learners (78%) selected either “strongly agree” (17) or “agree” (30) to the statement “I would continue digital learning next year if COVID-19 restrictions remain in place or are reintroduced”. Forty-two learners (74%) selected either “strongly agree” (16) or “agree” (28) to the statement “my digital lessons are engaging and effective”, with 29 (47%) opting for “agree”, and a further 26% remaining “neutral” (14) or selecting “disagree” (1) for this statement. Most tutors were felt to have the necessary digital skills required to teach online, however 2 learners selected “strongly disagree” in response to the statement “My tutor has strong enough digital skills to effectively teach online”. 65% (37) of learners were not using a digital platform (such as Moodle or Blackboard) in their course. Many learners also indicated that they felt that they lacked some of the necessary information on how to effectively engage with new platforms. While 63% of learners either “strongly agree[d]” (11) or “agree[d]” (25) to the statement “I have been provided information on how to use the digital learning platforms used by my course”, 38% selected either “neutral” (14), “disagree” (6) “strongly disagree” (1). In general, learners felt they had “enough digital skills to engage effectively in digital learning”, with 72% of learners selecting “strongly agree” (13) or “agree” (29) in response to this statement. It should be noted, however, that the learners participating in this survey all completed it online; as such these responses do not reflect the experience of the many who did not have access to a device or the necessary digital skills to complete it.

Learners would like to see more investment in community education

Notably, learners engaging in community education were aware of the challenges facing the sector in terms of sustainable funding. One learner stated that they worried about “cutbacks”, noting: “when you start charging people there’s a drop-off in the take-up” of courses. Learners felt strongly that community education played a vital role in their lives and that courses, and additional supports provided through community education, should be widely promoted and readily available.



“When you start charging people there's a drop-off in the take-up.”

Learners would like more support with remote learning next year

When giving recommendations on how to make remote learning a more attractive prospect for the next academic year, learners' responses referenced "assistance with technology", "grants for technology – tablets or iPads for example" and "taster programmes to allow gentle introduction to online learning". Another learner noted "this was all very new for us, but our IT Teacher was very good to support us and get us up and running". Emphasising, once again, the need for face-to-face interaction, learners also recommended "safe distance meetup[s]".

Conclusion

Learners who participated in both the survey and Virtual Community Education Learner Focus Group highlighted a range of challenges in migrating to emergency remote learning during COVID-19. Challenges were wide-ranging, and affected learners from different groups in different ways. However broadly speaking some of the main challenges were lack of appropriate technology, WiFi issues, ergonomic challenges encountered in working from home, and caring responsibilities in the home. As noted in the limitations section, many of the learners impacted by these issues were unable to take part in this research for this very reason.

On the whole, learners who took part expressed a desire to return to the classroom as it was prior to COVID-19, noting that they missed their classmates and the social dimension, which was integral to learning in their community education courses. Yet learners were also eager to highlight the ways in which their courses, which had migrated online, were continuing to have a positive impact on their mental health and wellbeing as the crisis unfolded. As one learner noted, "I would have been lost over the summer without my classes". Learners also felt well supported by their tutors, who were described as going above and beyond to ensure learners could continue with their courses. Learners sought to "embrace" online learning, and described a range of unexpected positive outcomes, such as getting to sample a wide range of online courses (without geographic limitations) as well as increased digital literacy. In the main learners felt that they would continue with learning if COVID-19 restrictions remain in place or are reintroduced, but most learners indicated that face-to-face interaction was a central part of their learning experience and was still preferable in a community education context.



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