Adult learners online: students' experiences of learning online

Wendy M. Knightley
Institute of Continuing Education
University of Cambridge, UK

Throughout the world, policy-makers are demonstrating their commitment to widening participation in education by promoting alternative pathways to gaining academic qualifications. This paper reports a study which aimed to investigate the potential of online learning to overcome barriers to participating in education by socially disadvantaged adults, and to identify the factors that influenced such students' participation and successful completion of online learning courses. Seventy-nine adults taking online learning courses with the Open University in the United Kingdom participated in a telephone survey and 15 of these students were also interviewed.

Participants perceived themselves as having more easily accessed education because of the option of online learning and reported having benefited from the experience. However, online learning per

se should be offered as only one potential means of attracting and retaining adult students, and further exploration into its potential for widening participation is necessary.

Introduction

An issue for consideration by governments throughout the world is the promotion, extension and deepening of educational experiences for all members of society. This includes an emphasis on lifewide as well as lifelong learning (Clark 2005). Certain current debates in education centre on making education more accessible and more relevant throughout life (DfES 2005, Houghton 2006, Social Exclusion Unit 2005) and there is also a focus on including less advantaged, or socially excluded, adults in education. In particular, governments are keen to point out the personal, individual gains adults may accrue through upskilling, retraining and returning to education with broader economic and societal benefits (Clayton 1999, McFadden 1995). With these dual paybacks in mind, adults are being encouraged to return to education and gain academic qualifications (Appleby & Bathmaker 2006, Brine 2006, Thornton 2005). Creative solutions are being sought universally to attract and retain adult students, especially those who have traditionally been marginalised within education or disenfranchised (Manheimer 2002, Wylie 2005). It is suggested more equitable educational and employment outcomes for all may be achieved through the use of digital technologies (MCEETYA 2007a), and there is debate regarding the extent to which utilising information and communications technology (ICT), e-learning or online learning is one way of overcoming barriers to participating in education by adults, (DfES 2003, Lax 2001, Looi & Lim 2006, Martin & Williamson 2002, Simpson 2005). So who are these socially excluded adults that courses delivered online are intended to attract? What is meant by 'online learning'? And how do the students stand to gain?

This paper reports some preliminary research on these issues. It is not claimed that the findings from this small-scale study can be generalised to a wider population but they do give insights into the experiences of some students of studying online. The paper considers the issues of 'social exclusion' and online learning. It charts some preliminary research conducted in the United Kingdom (UK) into the impact on adults who have not recently taken part in education of participating in online learning, and focuses on those adult students who may be considered socially excluded. What are the motivations for such adults to take part in online learning? In what ways do they gain from learning online? The paper indicates participants' views about the appeal to them of learning online again in the future. It concludes by suggesting that these participants perceived themselves to have benefited from participating in online learning, but that online learning *per se* should be offered as only one potential means of attracting and retaining adult students, and further exploration is necessary. Firstly, then, who are the socially excluded?

Background

Social exclusion

Broadly speaking, individuals are said to be socially excluded if they are unable to participate in the basic economic and social activities of the society in which they live (Chakravarty & D'Ambrosio 2002). A similar but expanded conception is put forward by Warschauer (2003): social exclusion refers to 'the extent to which individuals, families and communities are able to fully participate in society and control their own destinies, taking into account a variety of factors related to economic resources, employment, health, housing, recreation, culture, and civic engagement' (p.8). Indicators of potential social exclusion might be financial difficulties, lack of basic necessities (IT skills, employment, autonomy in work), poor housing conditions, lack of consumer durables, poor health, limited social contact or perceived dissatisfaction (Haisken-DeNew 2002).

Crucially for this discussion, other important contributory factors to social exclusion are low educational attainment and non-participation in education (Alexandiou 2002).

E-learning, or online learning

E-learning and online learning are general terms covering a wide range of approaches. They can combine different elements, such as information and communication technology (ICT), interaction, learning resources, collaborative and informal learning, formal and informal learning, and support (AISR 2006, HEFCE 2005, Mason 1998, Zhang & Perris 2004). Although they are often used interchangeably, e-learning is generally conceived of as learning that is supported and delivered through the use of ICT, and online learning is learning that is delivered and supported through the internet (Clarke 2004).

The adoption of ICT in education is being seen throughout the world as a means of effectively educating students, and orienting and preparing them for employment (Fox 2002, MCEETYA 2007b, US Department of Education 2004). Research by Matas and Allan (2004) has also indicated the benefits to adult students of using online learning portfolios to develop generic skills, transferable to the workplace. Additionally, ICT is purported to appeal across the social spectrum and age range. For example, older adults in Australia are increasingly using the internet, buying computers and engaging in ICT lessons. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006), in 2004–05, 67% of Australian households had access to a computer at home and 56% had home internet access; this compares with 54% of households in Britain having a computer and 44% of households having internet access in 2002 (latest figures from National Statistics 2006). Promoting ICT-based courses may be a way of drawing in adults who missed out on education the first time round. Further, ICT can be egalitarian, in that it is more difficult to detect status cues in electronic messages (Sproull & Kiesler, 1992) and networked activity

may decrease the perceived power of the authority figure (Blair & Monsle 2003).

As well as purportedly widening and levelling access, ICT also provides a more flexible means of delivery (Gorard *et al.* 2003, MacKeogh 2001). The appeal of online learning and e-learning for institutions and policy-makers is that it frees learners from a rigid timetable of attendance at a college or other learning institution; it enables self-paced learning and is purported to be more cost effective (Gatta 2003). From a pedagogical perspective, knowledge relating to learning theories, instructional design principles and research into student learning in higher education has been applied to the use of online learning technologies (Siragusa & Dixon 2005). The online learning environment creates an opportunity for the use of interactive and collaborative models of learning (McDonald & Reushle 2000, Segrave 2004). The varied approach gives a rich, interactive learning environment; students are able to engage more fully with course content using different media and can interact with others in a way that makes learning more effective. On a more personal level, students may find learning and interacting online less intimidating than meeting other students and tutors face-to-face. People with disabilities, especially, may welcome the anonymity and lack of prejudice electronic communication allows (Debenham 2001, Tait 2000).

The research reported in this paper builds on previous studies into social exclusion and online learning (DfES 2004, Gorard *et al.* 2000, Heemskerk *et al.* 2005, Martin & Williamson 2002, Richardson & Le Grand 2002). It has a particular focus on the subjective experiences of studying online for a group of adults demonstrating indicators associated with social exclusion, studying with the Open University in the UK.

The present study

Objectives

This study aimed to investigate the potential of online learning to overcome barriers to participating in education by potentially disadvantaged adults; and to identify the factors that influenced such students' participation and successful completion of online learning courses. Open University UK students were a focus of this research because this institution offers 'second chance' higher education. Its open entry policy attracts adults from various social and educational backgrounds who frequently do not have the qualifications necessary to gain a place at a conventional university. In addition, the Open University is at the forefront of the appropriation of new technologies for its course delivery.

Sample

The opportunity sample was comprised of 79 volunteers from a large population of students whose Open University registration form showed that they had one or more of the indicators of potential social exclusion. For the purposes of this research, the focus was on:
- adults with low previous educational qualifications (PEQs, that is, fewer than 5 GCSEs)
- younger and older students (those aged under 25 years or over 45 years)
- those from ethnic minorities
- disabled adults
- adults on low incomes.

Tables I and II provide details of the sample used in this study.

Table I: Participants' age and gender

Age	Gender		
	Male	**Female**	**Total**
Under 25 years	7	13	20
25–44 years	24	21	45
45–60 years	12	1	13
Over 60 years	1	0	1
Total	**44**	**35**	**79**

Table II: Participants' previous educational qualifications and ethnicity

Ethnicity	Previous educational qualifications								
	Below	Up to 1	2–4	5+	1	2+	HNC or	HND or	Total
	GCSE	GCSE	GCSEs	GCSEs	A level	A levels	similar	similar	
Anglo-ethnic British	1	4	15	15	4	14	3	6	62
Black/Afro-Caribbean British	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	1	4
Asian	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Other	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	5
Undisclosed	2	0	2	0	0	1	1	1	7
Total	**5**	**4**	**18**	**16**	**4**	**18**	**4**	**10**	**79**

Notes:
GCSE = qualification taken at end of Year 11
A level = 'Advanced level' – qualification taken at end of Year 13
HNC = Higher National Certificate – vocational / technical qualification taken post A level
HNC = Higher National Diploma – higher level HNC, equivalent to first year undergraduate level

Table I shows that more than half of the sample was aged 25–44 years; these students demonstrated other indicators associated with social exclusion (for example, having low PEQ, ethnic minority). The data in Table II indicate that the sample was overwhelmingly white British but that a third of the sample (n=27) had low PEQs.

The sample was taking a range of undergraduate level courses at the Open University (such as *You, your computer and the net* and *Understanding health and social care*) where all or nearly all the resources and teaching were delivered online. Students generally already had access to a personal computer at home or in the workplace. Some disabled students had been provided with a personal computer or specialist equipment following assessment by the Open University. The majority of participants had not studied formally for a number of years. The students were invited to take part in a telephone survey and then a follow-up face-to-face interview.

Seventy nine students volunteered to participate in the telephone survey. Of these 79, 15 (twelve men and three women) took part in the face-to-face interviews. These interviewees ranged in age from 19 years to 62 years. Only three participants in this subset had a non-white ethnic background, and five students were disabled. Seven students had up to five GCSEs or equivalent (had been educated up to Year 11), while the remaining ten students had at least one A level (attended school to Year 13).

Seven students were working full-time; the others were either retired, unable to work due to disability or were looking for a job. Only one student had applied to the Open University's Financial Assistance Fund – taken as an indicator of low income.

Participating in this study was a unique opportunity for adults to give their views about a particular learning experience.

Methodology

Based on previous research (Chisholm *et al.* 2004, DfEE 2000),
an interview schedule was devised to address the research aims. A
pilot study involving 11 students in telephone interviews had been
conducted. The interview items related to previous experiences of
conventional and online learning, level of experience and competence
with computers, reasons for returning to learning at this time, future
hopes and aspirations regarding learning, and the level of support
students expected to receive for their studies (Sargant & Aldridge
2002). Examples of questions were:

> What made you decide to return to learning at this time?

> What made you decide to do an online course in particular?

> For how long before starting the course had you been using a
> personal computer?

> Who do you expect will give you the most encouragement to
> complete your course?

Linking this study to previous investigations of social exclusion (for
example, DfES 2004, Gorard *et al.* 2000), participants were also
asked about involvement in their local and the wider communities.
For example:

> Do you have someone you could call on for help in the home if
> you were ill?

> Did you vote in the recent General Election?

> Do you belong to a sports, social or other club in your
> neighbourhood?

This pilot process led to the refinement of the initial interview
schedule for the main study. The survey comprised 48 questions
and generated quantitative data. The 79 students were telephoned
towards the beginning of their Open University course (February/
March). These pre-test data provide baselines against which the

post-test data, gathered at the end of the students' first year of study (November), will be compared.

The face-to-face interviews built on the telephone interview broad questions, and probed more deeply into the experience of learning online. A semi-structured interview approach was adopted, intending to allow participants to expand on the research issues particularly salient to them. Examples of the open-ended questions were:

> How are you finding online learning / using ICT in your learning?
>
> What do you understand now by the term 'online learning'?
>
> What is the biggest advantage for you of online learning?
>
> Have there been any drawbacks for you of online learning?

The intention was to give these students the chance to talk at greater length about the initial attraction of learning online, about related issues and in what ways they felt they had gained from this mode of learning.

Results

Why choose to learn online?

As might be expected, there was a range of motivations for these students returning to learning. Table III shows participants' reasons for studying.

Table III: Participants' reason for studying

Reason for studying	Number of participants	Percentage
Towards a specific degree	18	22.8
To increase knowledge in a particular field	17	21.5
Career change	14	17.7
Improve employment prospects	12	15.2
Towards getting a degree	7	8.9
To increase knowledge generally	6	7.6
To complete a degree	1	1.3
None of these/other	4	5.1
Total	**79**	**100.0**

The most popular reason given in the telephone interview (n=18, 23%) was to gain a specific degree, followed by students wanting to increase their knowledge in a particular field (n=17, 21%). Other than this drive for gaining a qualification, students were motivated to return to learning for economic reasons. Fourteen students (18%) thought studying might help towards a career change and twelve students (15%) considered it would improve their employment prospects.

Participants chose the Open University, rather than another institution, due to a variety of grounds, as Table IV indicates.

Table IV: Participants' reasons for choosing to study with the Open University

Reason for choosing the Open University	Number of participants	Percentage
Flexible, part-time study – fits with other commitments	36	45.6
Recommended by friends/relatives	15	19.0
Childcare/domestic responsibilities – fits in	8	10.1
Financial – could afford to pay	5	6.3
Disabled, OU seemed appropriate	1	1.3
No need for previous qualifications	1	1.3
None of these/other	13	16.5
Total	**79**	**100.0**

The Open University was the institution of choice because of the type of studying – part-time, distance learning with high quality resources and support – it offered. Thirty-six students (46%) liked the flexible, part-time mode of studying and thought it would fit in with other work and domestic commitments. A further eight students (10%) particularly mentioned the potential to dovetail Open University study with childcare or other caring responsibilities.

Understandings, choices and values

But what of the especial type of *online* studying? What were students' views on this? First of all, students were asked what they understood by the term 'online learning'. It has already been indicated that this is a phrase open to interpretation, and can encompass a broad range of approaches. Students had a varied but shallow understanding of what online learning is. Seventeen students (21%) did not have an understanding of what online learning is, and three students (4%) thought it was no different to traditional forms of learning.

However, 36 (46%) thought online learning provided a more convenient way of accessing information and people, through the use of technology. Computer conferencing was especially mentioned as a useful means of communicating with others and exchanging information. Other students (n=11, 14%) thought online learning meant learning, developing and using computing skills. Students were informed what online learning in this context meant.

When asked why they chose *online* learning, participants again gave a variety of reasons. These are shown in Table V.

Table V: Participants' reasons for choosing online learning

Reason for choosing online learning	Number of participants	Percentage
Not specifically chosen – chose subject and it came as online	45	57.0
Wanted to increase IT competency	18	22.8
Flexibility	5	6.3
Can study at home	4	5.1
None of these/other	7	8.9
Total	79	100.0

More than half of the 79 respondents in the telephone survey (n=45, 57%) stated that they had not specifically chosen to study online. Their interest was in studying a particular subject or topic. Very few had considered the different media of delivery; the course for their chosen subject 'just happened to be' delivered online. Nine respondents cited 'flexibility' and 'can study at home' as attracting them to online learning; these, however, are benefits also attributed to *distance* learning and not unique characteristics of learning *online*.

Nevertheless, given the option of studying in the traditional distance-learning way, that is, using mainly print-based rather than electronic

materials, 42 students (53%) would choose to study online. Only nine students (11%) stated they would definitely prefer off-line learning, while 28 students (35%) were undecided which they might prefer.

Equally, just over half the students (n=44, 56%) placed value on online learning. Seventeen students (22%) thought learning in this way was 'very important' for achieving their goals and another 27 students (34%) thought it would be an 'important' experience. Twenty-eight students (35%) considered participating in online learning would help them 'a little' in the future.

What is doing online learning like?

Students were asked in the telephone interviews whether they had previously taken part in any online learning, and how they had got on with it. Just 16 students (20%) reported having previously taken any online learning courses. However, all these students had had positive experiences, with nine students (11%) reporting they had got on 'very well' with it.

The face-to-face interviews gave the opportunity for these issues to be probed further. Students were able to expand on their understanding of online learning, their reasons for choosing to study in this way and to reassess the value of this form of learning. Some comments from early interviews (May/June) are included here, but responses from all 15 interviewees are explored more fully elsewhere. The focus of the face-to-face interviews was more especially on how they found online learning with the Open University.

> I am pleased with myself. [I am getting on] much better than I thought.

> I was overwhelmed at first but now I'm getting on really well. I'm addicted to it already! I log on to the conference every evening.

> It's really motivating to do the activities [on the CD-Rom]. I can see what I've already covered. I'm surprised at my own organisational skills!

> It is easy and a bit more practical and more exciting than sat [sic] there just writing.

Students were able to talk in general terms about their levels of enjoyment of the course. However, they were less able to give subjective accounts of how it felt to be engaged with ICT in their learning. Perhaps this can be attributed to both the students' inexperience of the style of learning and also the novelty of reflecting upon and articulating what it *feels like* to learn in this way. As students new to higher education, to the Open University and to online learning, the task of describing the *process* of learning in this way is perhaps a tough one.

Perceived gains and benefits of learning online

Accessibility, flexibility, convenience
Students were asked what the advantages of studying online were. Students liked not having to attend college but enjoyed creating their own study space at home. In the telephone interview before they started their course, 26 students (33%) considered that the biggest advantage of studying online would be the accessibility to information and course materials. A further 26 students thought the best part of online learning was its flexibility. This was borne out in the early face-to-face interviews, after the students had had four months' experience of learning online.

> I like the flexibility, the ease of access. I like the autonomy.

> My friend is doing a course at the local college and she has these enormous textbooks to cart about. Everything here is so easy to get to.

Students appreciated the facility to access course materials and information. However, this accessibility is not so different from that afforded by the traditional print-based medium of distance learning. So what is novel with regard to accessibility about the *online* aspect?

The most appreciated aspect of online learning was its perceived potential to overcome barriers of time and space. Using ICT, students could look at or engage with the course content at a time most suitable for them.

> I can go to work and today I can have half an hour lunch break and I'll have a read at the website, that's great, that I can access it from anywhere without having to carry the book about.

For some disabled students, for whom sitting for lengthy periods in front of the computer was uncomfortable or especially tiring, this meant being able to study in short bursts and access information perhaps during the night.

> The advantages are because I am home... with it being online it is ideal because I have got all my stuff around me and with other people I have got the support as well. [The CD-Roms] are all easy and the links are so easy so there is no problem at all... Because of spells in hospital ...I missed a chunk out of the course so I am able to double back on it.

> [Studying at college] would have meant leaving my home to go over there and I didn't want to do that...this way, it all comes to me and I can get to it easily on my computer.

Aside from using the internet and CD-Roms, a unique aspect of online learning was the opportunity to 'talk' to or communicate easily with other students. The Open University (UK) uses a conferencing system called First Class, and students particularly valued this facility.

Conferencing
Students reported in the telephone interviews that being able to interact with others via the Internet was another advantage of online learning. Students welcomed the opportunities for interactive and collaborative learning with their peers.

> It's nice to get online and chat to someone about the same work.

> I've posted on the conference already and I'm pleased with the responses from the other students.

> Some students in the conferences are already talking about [the first assignment]. I've not yet started so that's a bit of a worry – but also an incentive to get going.

For some disabled participants, the 'facelessness' or anonymity offered by the online conferences and discussions was welcomed. As the student was unseen, there was a feeling of being accepted by others on the basis of their contributions, rather than being judged by their disability.

> It's easier to ask things, as you're not face-to-face, the personal computer is a shield.

The development of and participation in online learning communities enabled the creation of a 'student identity'. This encouraged a sense of belonging and loyalty that helped students to see their courses through to completion.

> Online conferencing makes you feel closer to the other students. I feel I am bonding with the other students already.

Students, then, felt they gained through the particular types of accessibility, flexibility and convenience offered by learning online. The facility to participate in online conferences and discussions enabled students to feel less isolated and more part of the learning community. Through online collaboration and interaction they were able to develop a sense of identity as a learner, and to participate in and receive support from their peers and tutor. This ability to interact with others in online learning is a fundamental element promoting successful study, which is often missing from more traditional forms of distance learning.

Discussion

It should be borne in mind that social class and race are important variables affecting participation in education; it is not merely access to technology that has an impact. Despite the respondents in this study being a self-selected, opportunity sample who had already overcome the hurdles in order to return to education, the comments and feedback provide some insights into the potential of online learning to extend learning across the social spectrum.

Although participants' primary reasons for choosing their course had not been the online mode of delivery *per se*, all acknowledged both the importance of developing and using ICT skills and the advantages of learning in the rich, multi-media environment provided by online learning (Peng *et al.* 2006). Learning online transcended geographical, physical, visual and temporal barriers to accessing education, and reduced socio-physical discrimination (Debenham 2001). The students in this research recognised that the online delivery of courses had enabled them to access education more easily and flexibly than traditional, print-based, distance learning courses. This supports the long-identified benefit of the multi-media approach within online learning (Palmer 1995). Participants' reports of involvement in the online conferences and discussions substantiate McDonald and Reushle's (2000) view regarding the interactive and collaborative learning opportunities afforded by online learning. Indications were that taking part in online learning had enhanced participants' academic performance, identity as a learner and possibly their economic potential.

Even the limited experience of online learning observed in this preliminary investigation appears to have empowered these participants in some way. In many cases, embarking on online learning seems to have reduced students' sense of isolation, partly through their participation in online conferences but also through a feeling of inclusion and involvement with the wider Open University

undergraduate community. Increased general self-assurance engendered by their achievements within an ICT-rich milieu appears to be enabling students to play a greater part in their learning communities, and this may lead to greater confidence to participate in wider communities. This might have a knock-on effect, helping to diminish social exclusion. However, the difficulty in teasing out the potential of *online* learning from that of *learning* in general needs to be acknowledged, and it may be that it was from the latter that participants derived benefit.

Nonetheless, many students reported that their positive experiences of learning had undone previous negative experiences of education. However, students were pragmatic and strategic in their choices, prioritising the content or subject of their next course over the medium of delivery. A course was chosen because it offered the most direct route to achieving their goal, not because it involved online learning per se. Increasingly, however, potential students are not given a choice regarding the medium of course delivery. As the market-driven educational context intensifies, using technology in learning is not an option. Indeed, it is now a specification of all Open University courses that students have access to computing facilities.

Students come to the Open University and to online learning with a variety of experiences, expertise and expectations, both of higher education and of ICT. Clearly, these factors impact on their approach, enjoyment and achievements in a novel learning environment. Online learning is promoted as being at the cutting edge of education, and the development and use of ICT skills are held up as crucial for economic and employment advancement. Despite this emphasis on ICT, students remain driven to return to learning by a thirst for knowledge on a particular topic, rather than by a curiosity to experience a different way of learning. The appeal of online learning for these participants remained more the acquisition of knowledge than the development of ICT skills. Generally, these participants

could see benefit from taking their course, and learning online, in terms of both personal and academic gain. Students appreciated the flexibility and convenience of being able to access course content using a variety of media, at times that suited them individually, and the contact with other students that the Internet gave them.

Conclusion

Students displaying one or more of the variables that are associated with social exclusion were asked in a telephone survey and in face-to-face interviews about their experiences with and the benefits of online learning with the Open University (UK). This paper has reported responses to the telephone survey and included comments from the earlier face-to-face interviews. The respondents provided a snapshot of how online learning may help overcome some barriers to accessing education. These students reported gains in terms of both personal and academic achievement and satisfaction through engaging with learning using ICT. However, institutions need to remember who it is they are providing courses for and what it is that motivates adults to return to education. Online learning is signposted as one way towards achieving personal, academic or economic goals, but it must be borne in mind that a large percentage of households – in Australia 44% (ABS 2006) and in Britain 56% (National Statistics 2006) – do not have internet access and online courses may be presenting a barrier of a different kind to would-be learners (Gorard & Selywn 2003, Selwyn 2003, Warschauer 2003). Further exploration is needed of students' motivations, aspirations and experiences in relation to online learning, so that provision and support can be more appropriately tailored to their needs, and the potential of this means of course delivery can be further exploited for all concerned.

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About the author

Dr Wendy Knightley *is Research Officer at the Institute of Continuing Education at the University of Cambridge, United Kingdom. Her research interests include adults' subjective interpretations of their experiences of learning; the impact of learning on adults' self-concept; online learning; and the wider benefits of learning. She is also an Associate Lecturer (psychology) for the Open University.*

Correspondence address

University of Cambridge, Institute of Continuing Education, Madingley Hall, Madingley, Cambridge CB23 8AQ, United Kingdom
Tel: +44 (0)1954 280274   Fax: +44(0)1954 280200
Email: wmk22@cam.ac.uk