

EIS FELA student survey: Impact of COVID-19 and online learning

Summary

The survey opened in late March 2020, approximately two weeks after colleges ceased face to face teaching and shortly before the Spring Break, and ran until 3 May 2020. It was promoted by EIS FELA members and the National Union of Students, receiving 1831 responses from 15 colleges. There was a near 50:50 split between learners on HN level and non-advanced programmes and around 6% were part time students.

Just under 90% of learners indicated that they had broadband access with most others on mobile packages (as the survey started two weeks into lockdown it is likely that this underestimates the numbers with no internet access at all). Nearly all respondents had access to at least one internet-ready device at home, however only 58% had exclusive use of a device (excluding mobile phones).

The major issues affecting learners' ability to engage with education during the COVID-19 crisis were combinations of lack of access to equipment (not only ICT but specialist material required for their courses); caring responsibilities (particularly learners with dependent children); health (including mental health) and changes to their paid employment (including increased demands on key workers). SIMD analysis on a sub-sample of 1000 learners indicated that SIMD 1 learners were less likely to have broadband, less likely to have exclusive use of a device or access to any device other than a smartphone and were significantly more likely to have caring responsibilities than those in SIMD 8, 9 and 10 areas.

Learners' domestic circumstances

Around half of respondents (49%) reported that they lived with their parents. Of the remainder, 28% lived with dependent children and in just under half of these households the student reported that they were a lone parent.

Access to broadband and equipment

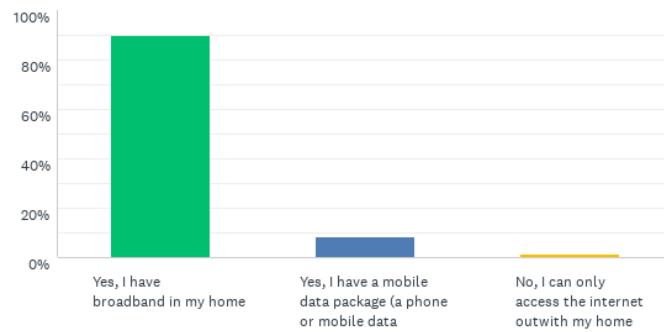
90% indicated that they had access to broadband internet at home. While this is broadly in line with 2018 ONS figures showing 93% internet access across the UK, as the survey was conducted at least two weeks into lockdown (and typically reached students via their college email addresses) this is likely to overestimate the total numbers with internet access.

A now-dated Citizens Advice Bureau study (2015) indicated a strong correlation between SIMD index and internet access, with those in poorer areas more likely to rely upon internet access at the library or via friends and family, options unavailable during lockdown (this survey indicated that 98% of households with an income of £40,000 or more had internet access).

Of our respondents, 1.5% indicated that they had no internet access at home and 8% relied on mobile internet packages. While rural students were under-represented in the

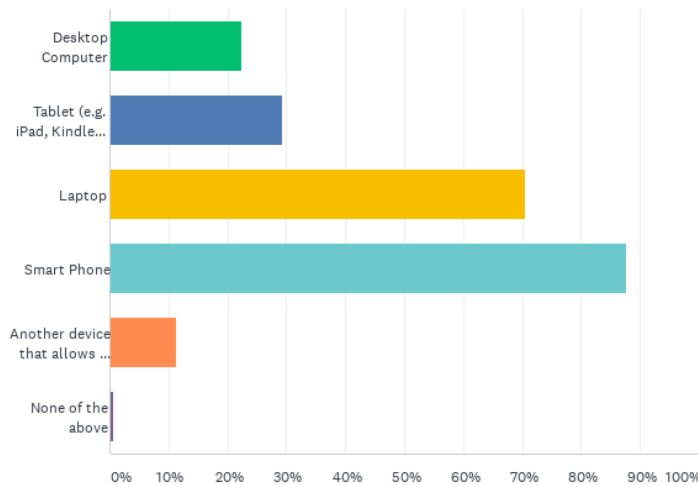
study, a number of respondents referred to slow or unreliable internet connectivity as a barrier to study.

Q3 Do you have access to the internet?

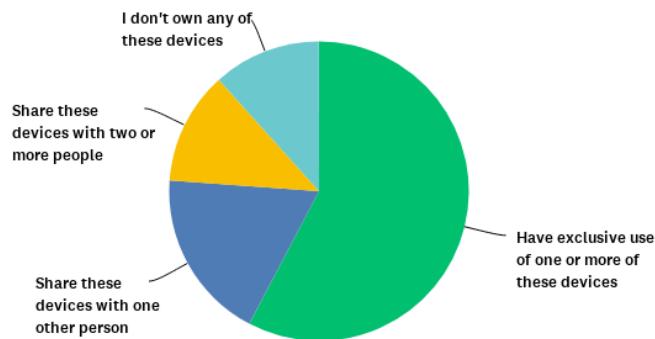


Nearly all respondents had access to at least one internet-ready device at home of which the most common was a smartphone (nearly 90%). However only 58% had exclusive use of a device (excluding phones).

Q4 Which of the following devices do you have access to at home? (tick as many as apply)



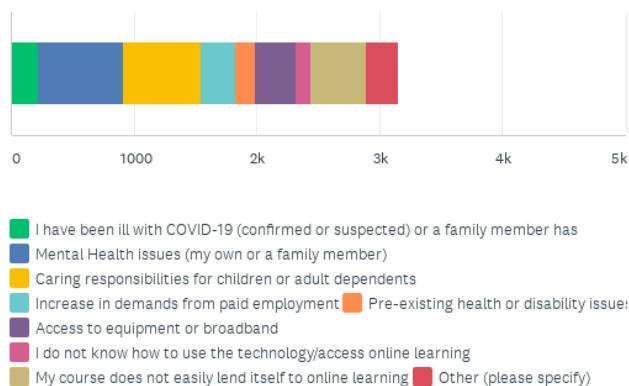
Q5 If you have access to a laptop, desktop computer or tablet, do you



This was higher for HN level learners (62%) than NC learners (56%) and was much lower for students with children (40%). This was cited as a particular barrier and source of stress for learners who are trying to support their children with home schooling.

Barriers to engagement:

Q7 Have any of these affected your ability to access and engage in learning since the COVID-19 crisis began? (tick as many as apply)



Most learners identified at least one barrier to engaging in learning during the pandemic; as can be seen above caring responsibilities and mental health issues were predominant concerns.

Q7 Have any of these affected your ability to access and engage in learning since the COVID-19 crisis began? (tick as many as apply)

A word cloud visualization showing various challenges faced by learners during the COVID-19 crisis. The words are colored blue and include: lost care college studying s emails children information stress Online learning health issues gave lost concentrate N feel find data need pay issues back hard family members going still working difficult household learning currently laptop make work internet None home time bad key worker lecturers struggle due course work help easy family home schooling course far house teaching access income online two Nothing job problems focus classes motivation now Sometimes best WiFi really cant support.

Caring responsibilities

Across all participants, 38% indicated that caring responsibilities were a barrier to their studies. Of those who lived with dependent children, this rose to nearly 90% and were the largest single factor affecting confidence in continued study, particularly for learners from the poorest households:

"It has been a train wreck for my studies. I have barely done any college work at all since this started. I care for my son and my disabled mother which leaves me no time for college work. Coming into college was the only time i had to do college work which wasn't easy... trying to do college work without wifi while caring for family and being locked inside 4 walls is proving impossible."

"I am a single parent with 3 dependents ranging from 12, 9 and 2, I am home-schooling my children while trying to do assessments for my HNC. I don't own a laptop or computer and access the internet on my phone which isn't the easiest to type word documents on, I have worked so hard and can't let this stop me from finishing my course, but not having broadband having to pay for data constantly whilst look after kids and try keep myself out the hospital is proving to be the biggest challenge yet, but I won't let Covid 19 stop me from passing."

Many learners cited the challenges of 'home-schooling' children and the need to prioritise their children's learning and wellbeing:

"My son has ASD, home-schooling him is way tougher than I thought, there is not just MY course load, there is also his."

"I have been struggling juggling life with 2 young kids and my son has autism because of his change in his routine life has been difficult. I honestly thought I could easily do online learning but when the kids finally go to sleep I am too tired to do much studying."

It is important to remember that it is not just students who are themselves parents who may have caring responsibilities at present:

"I have found it difficult with a full house, although not my children, I have 4 younger siblings ages between 2-12, I play a large part in their care as my mum is a key worker and my dad is the person who runs the house, shopping , cooking , getting my mum to work etc, so I try complete work when possible."

Paid employment

16% of learners indicated that they had faced increased demands from their paid employment as key workers, while a number indicated that loss of paid employment or other financial worries were affecting them.

"Learning from home is so difficult not having help or support to be able to ask your lecturer if it's all ok. Being your children's teacher, cleaner and chef throughout the day just stalls my work and is causing me major stress and anxiety that I'm falling behind when I was top of my class. Also I work as a healthcare support worker for NHS and they're requiring us to urgently help. I feel torn."

"Due to the Covid-19 situation I was unfortunately unable to work and earn an income [...] my college bursary alone is not a sufficient income for me. This has led to me needing to apply for full time jobs in business sectors which are still currently operating, however, going into a new job I don't believe I would have the same flexibility to study as I previously had before the outbreak and it has worried me on several occasions that I may need to choose between earning money and the rest of my education this year."

"A large drop in earnings means I will very much struggle financially. I have already missed my latest broadband payment which means I may be cut off if I can't find the money to pay."

"I am a key worker and lone parent. The stress and pressure of this alone is hard enough."

Access to equipment (including specialist resources)

20% of learners cited computer equipment or broadband as barriers – while most learners had equipment at home which could potentially be used for online study, shared access with others who were working or studying and slow, unreliable broadband were frequent issues:

"It is incredibly difficult to cover the material on our own ... without lecturer input. With libraries and the college shut I do not have access to a PC and trying to do the work on a phone is just not feasible."

"My laptop is broken and I can't get one anywhere and my phone doesn't let me get access to a lot of the work. I am struggling and starting to worry about falling behind after putting so much effort into my studies when college was open."

"Lecturers have been amazing [...] zoom meeting students and recording lessons etc. The problem is not with their lack of support, but my lack of computing equipment. This lockdown, although necessary is affecting the poorer students much more as we cannot purchase the equipment to enable us to continue studying. While allowed into

college, I would spend a few evenings using college resources to keep ahead of my studies.”

“My partner is still working and uses our laptop for his work, I am home schooling our child & caring for dependant family members. I am now out of work which has taken a toll on my mental health and I now have money worries. I am not sleeping at night and am struggling with home life.”

“I have access to internet but my signal is very bad in my house and I really struggle to actually complete work in the house it can take hours and sometimes just won’t submit anything due to the service being so slow.”

A number of learners expressed concerns about other equipment required for home study (27% indicating that their courses did not lend themselves easily to online learning), including the cost of purchasing specialist software, arts supplies and similar:

“Part of my class unit is using photoshop but due to unable to access this at home as I have a limited laptop (notebook) unable to purchase one due to approx. 6-8 weeks delivery times. Concerned about being able to complete this unit.”

“Arts courses should not be expected to carry out learning from home as normal, we do not have nearly as many supplies as we would at college and some of us cannot afford to get them. Not being in studio has completely hindered my learning, and I would have preferred evidence based marking based on what we’ve already done.”

“I am lucky as the HND Year 2 of Fitness, Health and Exercise was very front heavy on teaching. Now it is mostly report and essay writing. My practical training of clients in the gym, however, is impossible which has affected my GU.”

Health

13% of respondents indicated that they or a family member had been ill with COVID-19, either suspected or confirmed, while nearly 10% indicated that pre-existing physical illness or disability had impacted upon their ability to study from home. The most commonly cited barrier to engaging in study during lockdown, however, was mental health issues (own or a family member's), affecting 42% of respondents.

A number of respondents referred to low motivation for online learning, exacerbated by worries related to the pandemic and this is explored further in the next section:

“I have diagnosed anxiety and am on medication for this. I have felt this has gotten a lot worse since this situation with the uncertainty of if my exams will proceed and how they will proceed if so. I am struggling to retain information besides the fact I am keeping up with my revision due to the stress and worry that this could impact my grade if I do need to go on to do my exam. This has really taken a toll on my mental health.”

“I am very worried and paranoid. I keep having nightmares about my studies as I don’t own a laptop and I usually used my cousin’s laptop but I cannot see her due to the current situations. I feel overwhelmed.”

“My brain is literally messed from it [pandemic], worried about how I’m going to do this.”

“The stress, not being able to see family members and boredom is overwhelming and causes me to lose the will to do anything.”

“It’s very hard, on anxiety and mental state. Ensuring my parents and in-laws are safe and getting their shopping for them. Ensuring my children are engaging with their learning also. Trying to keep everyone’s mental state upbeat and not let them panic so much about what is happening globally. As a mother of four it’s pretty tough, I wish to be a role model to my children but I feel I’m failing at everything at the moment.

“COVID-19 has given me anxiety that I cannot medicate to due to asthma, I have been offered anti-depressants that for the first 2 weeks can make me feel suicidal. Please tell me how in this possible state of mind and my current state of mind without medication I can be expected to complete every single assignment and ensure that I am putting 100% into these, I don’t feel 100% is possible at this current time. Giving us a massive disadvantage with the course.”

Motivation, online learning and concerns over qualifications and future plans

A number of learners identified broader concerns around motivation (often linked to mental health issues) as lockdown continues:

“I’m finding it increasingly difficult to study at home. I really need to face to face learning which I know is not possible. I feel completely overwhelmed with my study and I’m struggling to cope with my children’s workload, my workload and keeping a 2 year old occupied in amongst it all. Motivation wise is at a complete low! I know it cannot be helped.”

“There seems to be a massive psychological block when trying to do work while stuck in the same environment all day every day. As a result of this, work takes longer to complete and I feel the quality of it slipping. I still want to continue learning as I am in my final year and want to make sure I am thoroughly prepared for entering the industry.”

“No motivation for study or assessments. It’s a strange time we live in and normal things like college work are distracted because of what’s going on. It can be easy to say “just do all your college work at home” but until you’re in the position you have no idea how different and difficult it is with a virus affecting a lot of people.”

“It is difficult to motivate myself to work when stuck at home constantly. I have asked my peers and they feel the same way: not having access to direct teaching definitely makes studying much more challenging.”

“Very hard to work from home, very demotivated, deflated and distracted.”

A number of learners found that online learning was a poor substitute for face to face and was exacerbating anxieties:

“Online learning material is OK but I need a human being's help with more specific questions and support.”

“There so much to do and it's so easy to get distracted and the course is hard it's good to have help having to wait on emails for help is a pain because time the lecturer gets back you may be doing something else.”

“Finding it extremely hard to get online for live chats. There just not enough time to fit in catch up with having to deal with all my children 24/7. I find online learning extremely difficult and need face to face learning. I now feel like all my hard work over the past year is now going to be for nothing because now I won't pass under these conditions.”

“I feel that having to be online constantly in class times is not always feasible, but if you are not online at these times you are made to feel like it may affect your chances of passing the course. I feel more flexibility should be offered to complete work, tasks and assignments. However, the support offered has been great.”

And those who were successfully engaging recognised that their peers were not all enjoying the same experience:

“I think my lectures have been fantastic at putting our course work online and making recording and/or video calls to make sure we know what to do. They have also been very supportive, making sure we are all okay and coping with COVID-19 circumstances, as well as the course work. I recognise that I am in the fortunate position that I do not have care responsibilities and/or a front line worker, therefore I am able to keep up with my course work.”

SIMD analysis

Further SIMD analysis was conducted using a sample of 1000 participants drawn from six colleges (Glasgow Kelvin College, West College Scotland, New College Lanarkshire, Edinburgh College, West Lothian College, South Lanarkshire College and Perth College UHI).

	SIMD 1 households (n= 251)	SIMD 8, 9 and 10 households (n = 152)
Broadband internet access	88%	95%
Access to a device other than a smartphone	84%	95%
Exclusive use of a device other than a smartphone	49%	63%

On average learners from SIMD 1 households expressed a confidence of 6.2/10 in continuing their studies, citing caring responsibilities (47%), mental health issues (37%) and access to equipment (22%) as the major barriers.

On average learners from SIMD 8, 9 and 10 households expressed a confidence of 6.6/10 in continuing their studies, with mental health (36%), concerns that the course did not lend itself to online learning (35%) or caring responsibilities (29%) the major barriers.

Overall confidence in continued study and concerns about the future

On average learners gave a score of 6.5/10 as to their confidence in being able to study under lockdown (1 being not able to study at all and 10 being fully confident). This was slightly higher for full time HN students (6.6) than full time non advanced (6.4). It was lower for students with children (5.7) and for those who did not have exclusive use of a device other than a smartphone (5.2).

A number of learners went on to express concerns about the lack of clarity about assessment procedures and unclear communication from their institutions:

"I think that the lecturers are doing a great job with adapting to the online learning, but it very difficult to get much work done through the day, people in my situation may only have a couple of hours pair night to get any course work done. I also feel slightly anxious about not getting this work done on time due to family life during the day. Trying my best to get what I can done just hope the college and lecturers know that. Thanks again for everything [College] is doing."

"I struggle learning online ... I have to use my mobile data for internet access this results in costly bills when trying to do college work also reception and connection as pretty poor causing more frustration. I would like to be told if we have to continue trying to study online or if I have to stop trying to doing work online as it will be a waste of time if not going to be looked at and considered when we are receiving our final grade for my HND."

"Added stress [of] still having to complete graded unit, and do closed book assessments online under timed questions etc without the same support from lecturers. Added pressure with young children being at home and not having childcare to have free time to study and do assessments etc. Also being a key worker added pressure to work more shifts and partner being furloughed trying to make up income college assessments online does not seem to be the priority it was before college closed and is adding so much more stress."

"I'm in my final year and I'm finding it hard to feel motivated to complete college work at the moment due to having no idea if it's necessary. I feel we are in limbo wondering if the work will be marked, if it will count towards our final grades or not and if we will still receive our full qualification at the end of this. It's a worrying time for everyone but it would help a lot to have more answers from the SQA regarding where we stand as personally for me with it being my final year, this decision may now have an impact on the job I had lined up for when I was due to graduate."

"No changes or consideration has been made to my course what so ever yet! Carry on as normal we have been told. I'm utterly disgusted but the Colleges attitude. Life is NOT normal just now. It is anything but. This was never intended to be a distance learning course."

"The impact of covid-19 on my studies has been very unsettling and I am extremely worried about progressing to university I am afraid the last 8 months have been for nothing."

"College is doing a fantastic job under the circumstances, however the ambiguity with graded unit exams is not helping our mental health."

"I feel SQA aren't coming to the best possible conclusion for people in college. For someone like me who studies beauty therapy I need both theory and practical, under the circumstances I won't be able to learn my new units in the third cycle but am being made to do the theory for them, even for a unit called work experience that we won't be going on. For people like me, it isn't business as usual."

"I feel like college students are being forgotten about as when people are speaking about students ie on TV they are referring to School students / University Students. I also feel like it's affecting our future career paths ie starting university and we've not been given a lot of information."

Sources:

Citizens Advice Bureau (2015) Internet Access in Glasgow's Deprived Areas
https://www.cas.org.uk/system/files/publications/internet_access_in_glasgow_2015_final_-_aug_15.pdf

ONS (2019) Internet Access – households and individuals, Great Britain: 2019
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/bulletins/internetaccesshouseholdsandindividuals/2019>

Link to the survey:

<https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/C8SGQHZ>