

The new online learning generation

Report of a survey of NEC's changing student profile

2019/2020

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About National Extension College

A pioneer of distance learning, the [National Extension College](#) (NEC) exists to transform lives through education. Founded in 1963 by Michael Young and Brian Jackson as a forerunner to the [Open University](#) (OU), NEC is a long-standing independent educational charity and part of the Open School Trust.

For over 55 years NEC has offered educational opportunities and second-chance learning to people for whom attending regular classes at school or college would not be possible, helping thousands of learners to achieve their goals. NEC courses range from GCSEs and A levels to childcare and management qualifications. They combine personal tutor support with flexibility to provide an ideal solution for thousands of learners every year.

NEC also works in partnership with other organisations, as a trusted partner of schools, colleges, the armed forces, the prison service, trainers, companies and the public sector, to provide high-quality materials and learning programmes.

Foreword

A report of a survey is a snapshot of a moment in time and researchers who devise surveys know that the results depend on who chooses to respond from the sample and also on the questions selected and how they are worded. Of course large samples and good response rates give a level of confidence in the validity of the results and in analysing this survey, we were careful to check how our respondents matched the student body as a whole (we found that both women and older students were more likely to respond).

However, this survey is not an isolated one, it is a survey of a distinct community of learners who have been at the heart of NEC's work since it was set up in 1963. These are the people who fall between the gaps of the state school and further education provision. They are people who left school without the necessary qualifications they need to progress and to change their pathway. They are also people who because of work, family or other circumstances are not able to attend regular classes at a school or college.

NEC knows these students well and we are full of admiration for their motivation, resilience and achievements. As you will see from the survey results, the majority of these students are planning to continue their education by going on to university, further education, professional courses or apprenticeships. They are not well off financially but they are paying for their own fees. They have all chosen to study online through distance learning which makes them a distinct group, but also they are trailblazers for the way learning will be delivered in the future.

There is an unfortunate view that distance learning is marginal and even possibly second best to face-to-face provision. This is reflected in the lack of funding, advice and guidance available for students who chose to learn online and also the lack of provision for these students to get assessed for GCSE, A level and vocational qualifications. NEC has always campaigned to remove the barriers and provide better resources for students, especially those who have to enter the public exam system as private candidates. We know the practical difficulties and the high costs are a significant factor in the decline in the numbers of mature and part time students.

By good fortune the second part of our survey took place in the summer of 2020 after the call to 'stay at home and save lives'. As soon as the impact of COVID-19 resulted in the closure of schools, colleges, adult education centres, and community education, there was an increase in demand for online courses. This was amplified by the take up of Zoom classes, online shopping and banking and even medical consultations. 'Home' has a different meaning for everyone now; as well as the place you live and sleep, it is also the place you work, teach your children, engage in your own learning, shop and socialise remotely. Although we hope that the pandemic will leave us and that life will get back to normal, we believe that increasingly students of all ages will embrace learning from home, which is why NEC students are trailblazers.

We would like to thank all the students who took time to respond to these surveys, we hope that you can see your views represented in it.

We also thank our very capable and hard working researchers Rea Duxbury and Charlotte Jones.

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Introducing the 2019/2020 student survey

When Michael Young set up the NEC in 1963, he wrote:

As technological change speeds up, most people are going to have to alter their jobs and their training during their lifetime. This they will only be able to do if the educational system keeps pace, and it will only do so if, besides other reforms, the needs of the home student are fully met.

In 2020, we asked this question in our student survey:

Do you now view online learning differently as a result of the pandemic?

Responses included:

- Yes, it has never seemed more important or useful.
- As a disabled person, lack of distance opportunities has been frustrating – especially to be told that it's just 'not possible' to do so much by distance. Turns out, it is.

The need to give people the opportunities to change their careers, along with the education and training to do so flexibly, has been recognised ever since Pitmans started their shorthand correspondence courses in 1837. Both the NEC and the OU were set up in the 1960s, yet over 50 years later there is still an element of surprise when the importance of flexible provision is shown to be a vital ingredient to achieving lifelong learning.

Adult learners are a resilient group of students, facing and overcoming more barriers than the majority of learners encounter, in order to combine their learning with work, family responsibilities and life. These are features of adult learning that have remained largely unchanged throughout the years.

For many, returning to learning as an adult is taking a leap of faith. The longer individuals are out of study, the less likely they are to return. As such, learning as an adult requires an abundance of motivation and often overcoming self-doubt, especially when previous experiences of learning have been negative. The aspirations of adult learners are varied, a point that often gets overlooked when the future and funding of adult learning is discussed. While a large proportion of adult learners return to study in order to gain a qualification that will enable them to progress to higher education, achieve promotion in their current job or change career, other motivations are less career orientated but still equally valid. Taking a course in a subject that one has always had a passion for, or keeping active in retirement, has positive outcomes for both for the individual and for society as a whole.

Students who engage in learning continue to report the positive impact it has made in their lives. However, the availability of adult learning opportunities continues to be narrow. The first and most significant reason is due to a sustained lack of funding. The sector continues to be overlooked in favour of funding for younger age groups and the little funding that individuals are able to access in order to study is more than limited. Even when funding is available, the ability of adult students to get access to assessment, especially for national qualifications like GCSE and A level, is a major barrier.

The effects of this are stark, with vast swathes of the United Kingdom being left behind. Adult learning tends to be concentrated in the south and low-and middle-income earners find study harder to access. Furthermore, those with higher level qualifications are also more likely to return to study, demonstrating starkly that those who would most benefit from learning are the least likely to access it. Finally, and of great significance, is access in terms of disability. Students with disabilities are more likely to engage in distance learning for several reasons, such as negative experiences at school and the need for flexibility when working around their condition. Underfunding has the largest impact on the most marginalised within society – those who are disabled, low-income and regionally ‘left behind’.

Special attention needs to be given to adult education and lifelong learning more broadly. Lifelong learning affects every individual in the country. With longer life expectancies and the spectre of more widespread automation, individuals need to upskill and are likely to change careers several times throughout their lifetime. This has been made more urgent by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to significant job losses and an economic downturn.

Now, more than ever, is the time to invest in lifelong learning.

Summary of key findings

- NEC students are getting younger, with 50% under the age of 24, although there continues to be significant representation from NEC’s traditional 25–45 age groups. This growth in 18–24 year olds is also reflected in OU degree applications.
- Gender remains constant at around 50/50 (male/female) in those who declare gender.
- Ability to study flexibly and from home is **very important** for NEC students.
- Over 30% have previous experience of studying at a distance, with over 60% new to distance learning.
- Over 66% plan to go on to further education (FE), apprenticeships or higher education (HE), with NEC being an essential part of the journey for career changers and mature students. Out of the 66%, over 35% are aiming to go on to higher education.
- 25% declare a disability or health condition, a significant feature of distance learning as students don’t have to leave the home environment.
- 97% are self-financing, but the majority of students willing to tell us about their financial situation are not well off and earn £15–26K.
- Students rate the **quality of the course materials** and the **quality of tutorial support** as being the most important features for their satisfaction with a course.

Methodology

This report is based on the analysis of two surveys conducted by NEC.

The first survey was composed of multiple-choice questions, designed to collect *quantitative* data for analysis and comparison of:

- developments that have taken place since 2016 (the last NEC student survey was conducted in 2015)
- how the results reflect the wider context of the lifelong learning sector.

Survey responses were recorded prior to the pandemic.

A second, follow-up survey was sent to those who indicated they would be happy to provide more in-depth responses on the initial multiple-choice survey. This survey was designed to collect *qualitative* data about NEC students, to be used in marketing and communications with external organisations and individuals, and aimed at highlighting the importance of online distance learning. The second survey responses were recorded during the pandemic.

We have also drawn on earlier NEC student surveys, especially the one carried out in 2015, to get longitudinal perspectives. For the wider framework of age and gender, we have used the data we have for all students rather than the data from the responses to the surveys. This was more reliable as the survey responses proved more likely to come from female students and older age groups.

The scope of this report is limited, but provides insights from the NEC adult student body, seeking to draw out similarities and differences in the context of the national adult learning sector. It is important to highlight that the 2019/20 survey was not sent to NEC students who were under 18 or to students serving custodial sentences. This will have had an impact on the information about gender because men are overrepresented in the criminal justice system.¹

For details of data collection, including reasons for not including under-18s or prisoners, please refer to the [Appendix: data collection](#).

¹ Ministry of Justice (2017) *Statistics on Women and the Criminal Justice System 2017*, accessed 6 January 2021 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/759770/women-criminal-justice-system-2017..pdf, p. 3

Survey findings

Overview

It is worth noting at the start that NEC learners form a distinct group of students because they have already taken the decision to take a distance learning course and they generally are self-financing. However, as the survey results show, they have a lot in common with adult learners in general.

The age of the NEC student body is trending downwards, with younger learners making up a larger proportion than in previous years, a trend that may continue in years to come. The increase in parents opting to educate their children at home has contributed to the highest proportion of learners studying with NEC being in the under-18 age category. This age group was not included in the survey, but we do have a lot of data on the under-18s which we will include in this report where it is relevant. For example, nearly a quarter of under-18s identified as having either a mental or physical disability, suggesting that mainstream schooling is becoming increasingly problematic for these individuals, with homeschooling serving as an alternative.

Student story: GCSE success for home educated student with partially impaired vision

Mohammed is a sixteen-year-old student from Huddersfield, West Yorkshire. Mohammed attended a local secondary school until Year 10, but he did not feel that he was reaching his full potential there. Mohammed is registered as having partially impaired vision and his school was unable to cater to his unique learning needs. Instead, he was unfairly placed in the lowest learning sets. Mohammed and his family knew that he could achieve great results if his special educational needs were adequately understood and addressed, so they took the big step to withdraw Mohammed from his school and enrol for GCSEs with NEC to let Mohammed flourish.

[Read more of Mohammed's story on our website](#)

A levels are the most popular group of courses studied and progression to higher education is a key goal of both adult students and under-18s studying through distance learning. Yet the surveys have also revealed the importance of learning for non-work orientated purposes, such as to learn something new in retirement. This is as integral to an individual's wellbeing as studying in order to continue education or change career.

Although learning for its own sake is valued for the sense of purpose and self-worth, this report also found that there are distinct groups of individuals who are not being reached by NEC. There are big gaps in participation in terms of: location, affordability, ethnicity and pre-existing qualifications, meaning that NEC and the adult education sector in general has work to do in these areas to increase the numbers of individuals from 'left behind' backgrounds.

It is clear from our research that students are more likely to choose to study through distance learning if they have done so previously. Moreover, individuals are less likely to return to study the longer they have been out of learning. As such, it is important that intervention is early, and that long periods of time do not elapse between learning.

For survey respondents, the two Rs – recommendation and reputation – were of critical importance when deciding between learning providers. We believe that the need for adult learners to assess quality and integrity can also be extended to the lifelong learning sector more widely. It has been noted in the recommendations of many reports on adult learning that there is virtually no national independent advice and guidance available. Lifelong learning needs to be established as a flagship policy that is embraced by the government. Distance learning also needs to be valued as a credible alternative to face-to-face study – not just as an option only available to the already qualified or those who fall within a high-income bracket. NEC believes that this could best be achieved through a learning entitlement which a learner could use at any stage in their life.

The robustness of online distance learning has been demonstrated throughout the recent COVID-19 pandemic where schools, colleges and universities have all had to switch almost overnight to teaching students remotely. Students studying with NEC and other distance learning providers such as the OU have reported adjusting to the COVID-19 pandemic better than peers within mainstream education. This is not surprising, as these students had an advantage already studying online prior to the pandemic with organisations that were experienced in online teaching. They were used to having self-motivation for study, working from home and learning flexibly to fit study into their routine.

Adult education has been overlooked for some time and that is especially the case when it comes to online distance learning. However, now more than ever, an opportunity has been provided by the pandemic to change this and focus resources and funding on online adult education.

Results and analysis

One of the questions we asked ourselves when designing the student survey was whether the students who responded to the survey were different in any way from our mainstream students. Fortunately, we have good records of every student, so we could see from the responses that while the gender of NEC students is almost evenly split (51.4% female and 45.7% male)² the respondents to the survey were 65.5% female.³ This was also true of our 2015 student survey where 51% of our students at that time were male, but only 26% of the respondents were male.

² In this year's survey, the category of non-binary was added, alongside the traditional male/female binary. Currently NEC students are only able to select from the traditional binary, or 'a prefer not to say' option, so expanding the gender categories available for students is something to be established going forward.

³ Historically, distance learning has been particularly attractive to women in the 25–34 and 35–44 age categories due to its flexibility with home responsibilities. As the home/work balance of women's lives has changed rapidly over the course of half a century, so too has the profile of the distance learner.

Age: the changing NEC learner

The NEC sample in terms of age is slightly different to the wider adult learning landscape, although it is still in line with the 2019 Adult Participation in Learning Survey trend that ‘as age increases the participation rate drops substantially’.⁴ The biggest drop rate for NEC students is after 45–54. But, whereas in earlier student surveys the greatest participation was in the 25–34 and 35–44 age groups, this has now changed and the 18–24 age group is the most significant at nearly 23% of all students. When under-18s are considered, it is clear that NEC students are getting younger with just over half the students now under 24. This means that the most significant development from 2016 in regards to demographic has been the age of NEC learners.

Based on the 2018/19 enrolment sample, the majority of NEC students are under 18, making up 28.8% of all learners. As previously stated, under 18-year olds were not surveyed in 2019/20 nor in 2015 due to safeguarding and parental permissions. As under-18s make up the largest percentage of learners with NEC, it is therefore imperative that this group is discussed.

In 2015, the category of under-18s was not investigated, suggesting that the increase in home education was only just beginning, and therefore was not a significant enough standalone category for inquiry. What was noted, however, was that ‘NEC learners are getting younger’. This trend has continued in line with government figures on home education. In 2018, an estimated 0.7% of the school population in England was registered as home educated,⁵ but as registration is voluntary, the figure is likely to be higher. In the same year, the government stated that the number of home-educated children ‘poses a significant policy challenge, given that [the] estimated total is now well over 0.5% of the relevant age group – and moreover, appears to be increasing by over 20% per annum’.⁶

Student story: Exploring the importance of lifelong learning

John has been a student with NEC for over three decades and is an amazing example of the fulfilment gained from embracing lifelong learning. He is currently studying our courses in Creative Writing and a Taste of Counselling.

[Read more of John's story on our website.](#)

The pandemic has transformed this landscape. According to figures by the Office for National Statistics, 87% of parents said a child in their household had been homeschooled due to the coronavirus between May and June 2020.⁷ Children returned to school in September 2020 and

⁴ Smith, R, Egglestone, C, Jones, E, and Aldridge, F (2019) *Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2019*, accessed 6 January 2021

learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Adult-Participation-in-Learning-Survey-2019.pdf, p. 12

⁵ Foster, D, and Danechi, S (2019) *Home Education in England*, accessed 6 January 2021

<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN05108/SN05108.pdf>, p. 16

⁶ Ibid, p. 19

⁷ Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2020) *Coronavirus and Homeschooling in Great Britain: April to June 2020*, accessed 6 January 2021

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/articles/coronavirusandhomeschoolinggreatbritain/apriltojune2020/pdf>, p. 5

schools were kept open during the second lockdown in November 2020, but at the time of publishing this survey (January 2021) schools continue to go through periods of closure, suggesting that home schooling is highly likely to continue for some time. This is without taking into consideration disparities in online schooling during lockdown phases – disparities that some parents (who have the means to do so) may seek to rectify by additional learning outside of school hours. Online distance learning is one such means to do this, and NEC has experienced an increase in enrolments since March 2020.

In line with the increase that NEC has seen with younger learners, 18–24-year olds make up a significant proportion of NEC learners and also made up the majority of survey respondents. This so-called Boomerang Generation is distinct for the high rates of individuals moving back in with their parents after study or for economic reasons. This social change has had an impact on NEC, as individuals in this age group return to study to be able to participate in an increasingly competitive job market in a time of economic downturn. A similar increase in degree applications by 18–24 year olds has been reported by the OU.

How did you first hear about NEC?

Given that, as noted earlier, there is no central source of advice and guidance for adults who want to find out what is available if they wish to study at a distance, it is important to take note of how students find out about NEC. In earlier years, NEC used traditional direct marketing techniques of prospectuses, brochures and fliers, that were mailed out to libraries, careers services, schools and colleges. Individual students who enquired would be sent a prospectus and an enrolment form. This has changed rapidly, with websites replacing printed prospectuses, libraries disappearing and ceasing to be the first point of contact for adults returning to study, with search engines becoming the preferred way of researching what is available.

NEC has adapted to these changes by investing in its website and other marketing tools, and now mostly reaches students through digital advertising and social media.

A large proportion (63.5%) of students in the quantitative survey stated that they had first heard about NEC through a search engine. This result is to be expected. What is more statistically significant is that the next most popular way students first heard about NEC was through recommendations by a friend or family member, at 10.9%. This supports NEC's belief that it has forged a reputation for the highest quality learning over more than 55 years.

The next most popular mediums in order of importance were: another distance learning provider, recommendation by a careers adviser/educational professional, the [OU, Student Room](#) and a local college. This supports two propositions. The first is that NEC's online presence is significant in gaining new and returning students, with the [Guide to Courses](#) being less relevant to individuals discovering NEC in the digital age. The second is that recommendation is also invaluable. Strong relationships with external organisations such as the OU, alongside recommendations from NEC students and educational professionals, is essential.

Previous distance learning experience

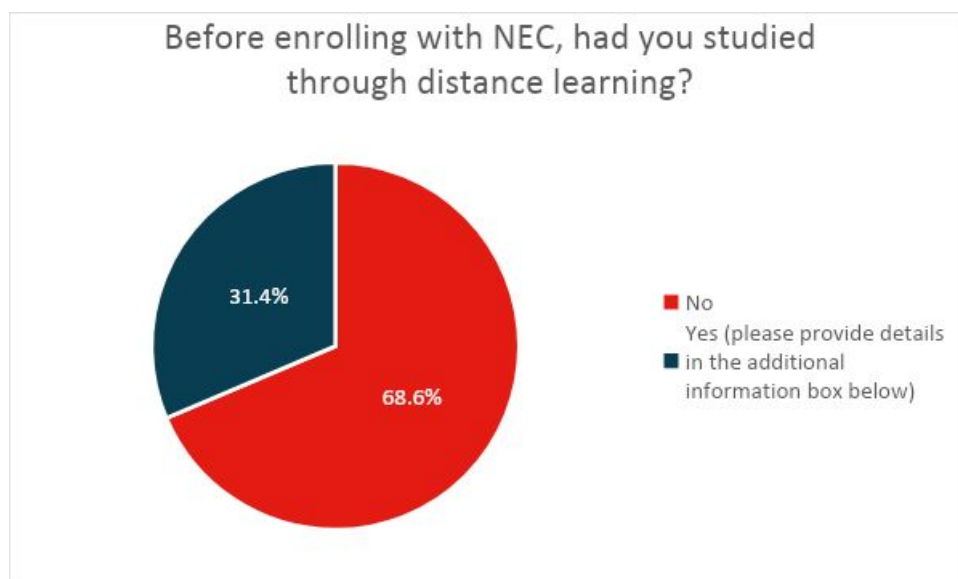


Table 1

Table 1 shows NEC students' previous distance learning experience. A significant proportion (31.4%) of quantitative survey respondents had studied through distance learning previously before enrolling with NEC. Of those students who responded 'yes' and provided additional information, several students cited the OU as the institution where they had undertaken distance learning. Previous study with NEC, as well as other distance learning providers, was also frequently cited.

But for nearly 70% of students, distance learning was a new way of learning and NEC must take into account the extra support with specific skills needed to feel confident and comfortable with studying at a distance.

What motivated you to begin to study?

Analysing motivations for study requires a more in-depth response and this analysis is from the qualitative survey.

As expected, motivations cited were varied, but fall into these broad categories: interest in the subject and personal development, improving existing results, obtaining the necessary qualifications to study at university, career development or change, and improving language skills. These varied responses are reflective of the wider learning landscape.⁸

⁸ Smith, R, Egglestone, C, Jones, E, and Aldridge, F (2019) *Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2019*, accessed 6 January 2021
learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Adult-Participation-in-Learning-Survey-2019.pdf

Student story: A level Biology with NEC to dream degree at university

Lily developed her passion for conservation and ecology while working in Sri Lanka as a wildlife photographer, and volunteering with beavers. However, to gain a place on her dream university course, Lily needed a science A level. After successfully completing A level Biology with NEC in 2019, Lily is now studying at the University of Suffolk.

[Read more of Lily's story on our website](#)

As highlighted in the 2019 Adult Participation in Learning Survey: 'This diversity in motivation highlights the importance of ensuring access to both work-related and non-work related opportunities relevant to the interests and aspirations of a broad range of adults.'⁹

Transformative effect and benefits of learning

My grandson was so excited and enthralled by his own school art history course, and introduced me to so many videos, films, etc., about renaissance and modern art, that *I was inspired to learn more for myself.*

I've never stopped studying. After university, I did two further degrees with the Open University, followed by a number of short courses with the OU, before deciding to take some science courses that I didn't have an opportunity to study at school.

As a distraction from looking after my parents with Alzheimer's.

Therefore, funding for adult learning should not serve the end of economic gain alone, such as only directing funding to areas where there is a skills shortage. The pursuit of learning for non-work related opportunities often has economic benefits as a side effect, because a fulfilled population is more economically productive and enjoys better health.

Parents have also expressed an interest in studying to benefit their children, acting as role models and gaining confidence in helping their children with school work. This has been particularly important during the pandemic where parents are finding themselves taking a more hands-on approach to their children's education.

⁹ Ibid, p. 24

Planned destinations

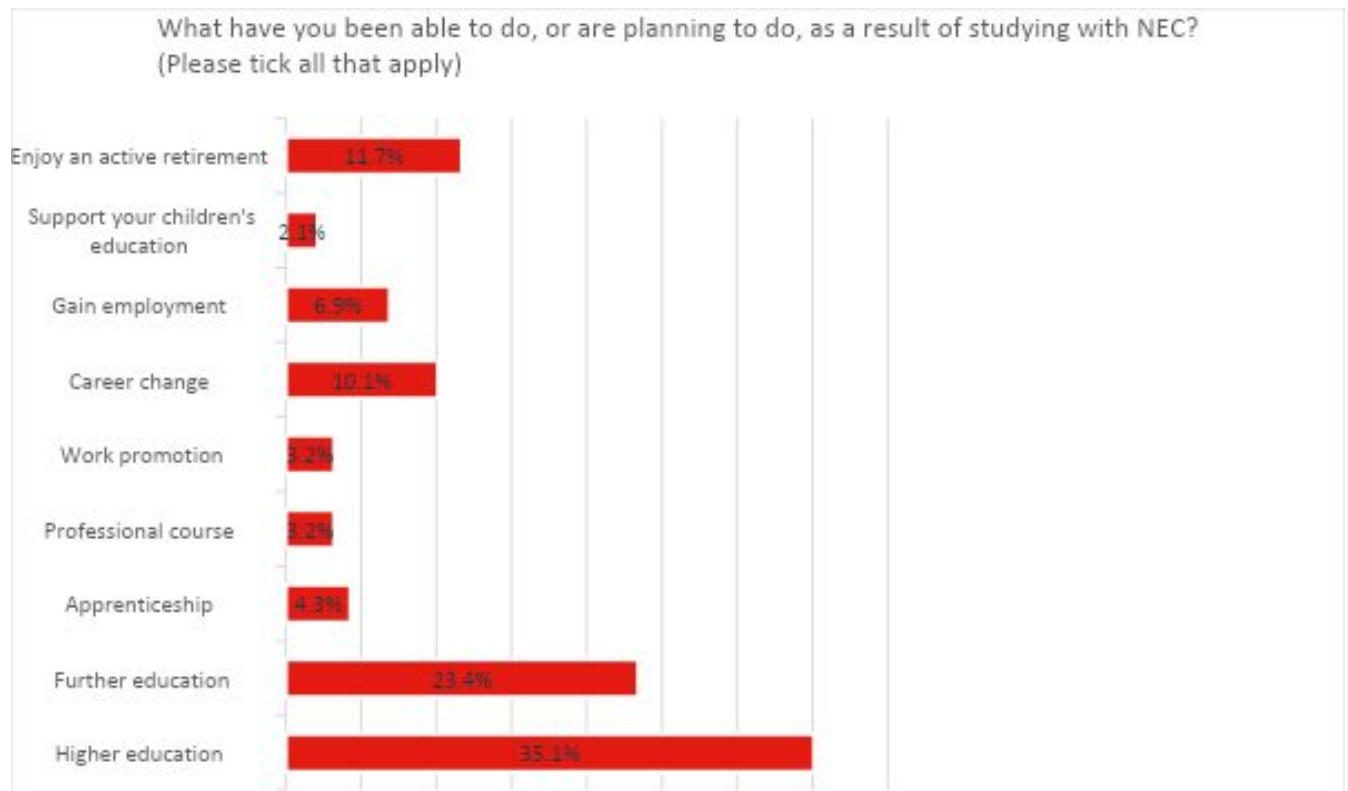


Table 2

Table 2 shows the planned destinations of students completing the quantitative survey. They were asked: 'What have you been able to do, or are planning to do, as a result of studying with NEC? (Please tick all that apply).'

The largest proportion of students at 35.1% stated that they intended to go on to higher education. This represents another longitudinal change, where the highest enrolling group of courses has changed from GCSEs to A levels. We think that this reflects the large increase in students progressing from school or sixth form onto a degree, and requiring A levels in order to do so. It also reflects the increasing professionalism and high-entry qualifications needed for some professions like nursing and social work.

The desire to pursue higher education was further demonstrated by responses in the qualitative survey, where students detailed the courses and universities where they hoped to study.

University aspirations

I've had an offer to study at the University of Edinburgh to study social anthropology.

I have received offers to study at the University of Cambridge and the University of York and am now waiting to see if I meet these offers.

It is helping me with further learning with the Open University.

Up to 66% of respondents intend to further their education and learning after they complete study with NEC – the combined total of those who selected higher education, further education, a professional course or an apprenticeship (which often incorporate a formal learning element). This is reflective of the wider learning landscape, where 'current participation remains a strong predictor of future learning'.¹⁰ As such, NEC fulfils its mission by equipping students with the qualifications necessary to enable them to move on to the next stages of their learning and development.

Student story: Top grades in GCSEs for mature student with NEC lead to Open University degree

Belinda studied GCSEs in astronomy and maths with NEC as a mature student, and achieved top grades of 9 in both. She started a Natural Sciences degree with the OU in October 2020.

[Read more of Belinda's story on our website](#)

Location

In line with the 2019 Adult Participation in Learning Survey,¹¹ the largest proportion of NEC respondents live in the south east of England, with 35.2% of respondents selecting that they live in the south east of England or Greater London.

Those who identified as living outside of the UK come from across the globe – from Belgium and Russia to Myanmar and Namibia.

Finance

Students were asked whether they received financial assistance. This is significant as the biggest barrier to learning is situational, which includes 'cost/money/can't afford it'.¹²

Only 3.8% of students stated that they received funding, which reflects the stark lack of funding available to adult learners. This is something that is not highlighted enough in the 2019 Adult Participation in Learning Survey, but is acute across the sector. Of the few respondents who did

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 6

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid, p. 34

receive financial assistance, funding came from parents, employers, the school, local authority or external providers such as the Unison Learning Fund. Two responses highlighted the distinctiveness of NEC in terms of financial accessibility. One respondent noted that they could afford to enrol in their course due to the 'pay monthly' option, while another commented: 'I was selected to receive an NEC bursary towards my course fees in June 2019'.

As a majority of respondents did not wish to disclose their household income, analysis is limited. Of the data that is available, 40% of respondents stated that their household income was up to or between £15,000 and £25,999, which is below the median UK salary for one individual.¹³

Pre-existing qualifications

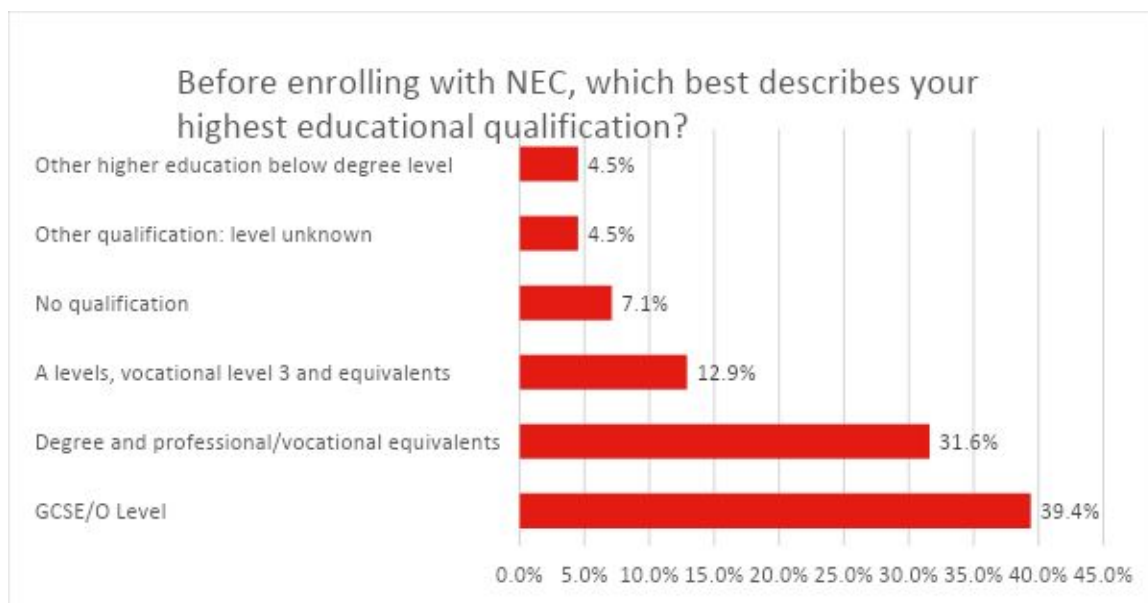


Table 3

Table 3 shows pre-existing qualifications. A majority of respondents, at 34.2%, stated that they had GCSE/O level **grade A*C or 9-5 (5 or more) or vocational level 2 and equivalents**. Surprisingly, this was closely followed by a degree or professional/vocational equivalents at 31.6%. This demonstrates that NEC, the wider adult learning sector and the government have significant work to do to attract those with no formal qualifications and those with **four or fewer GCSE/O levels at grade 9-4** back to study. Learning is not reaching those who would benefit from it the most.

¹³ Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2020) *Average Household Income, UK: Financial Year Ending 2020 (provisional)*, accessed 7 January 2021
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/bulletins/householddisposableincomeandinequality/financialyearending2020provisional/pdf>

Student story: Studying A level History of Art as a teacher to deepen knowledge and grow confidence

Daisy has completed a BA, MA and PGCE in the creative arts at the University of Bristol. Daisy noticed, during the course of her PGCE, that she was less confident in art history, but was very interested in finding out more and developing her knowledge.

Daisy hopes that completing the A level [History of Art] course will strengthen her teaching skills in art history and theory, which will help her own students improve their writing and contextual analysis of art. Daisy will also be an inspiration for her school students, promoting art history as an option for higher education.

[Read more of Daisy's story on our website.](#)

Overview

The 2019 Adult Participation in Learning Survey found that 'learners in higher social grades, those with more years of initial education, and those aged 55–64 are most likely to have engaged in online learning'.¹⁴ The NEC quantitative survey did not use social grade per se, but measured household income instead. The majority of respondents stated that they belonged to the lowest income bracket, the next highest percentage of respondents belonged to the highest income bracket, with few respondents identifying as middle-income earners. Furthermore, a large percentage of NEC respondents also have more years of initial education with a surprising number, 31.6%, possessing degrees. NEC survey respondents only diverged from the findings on the final point, as 55–64 year olds made up a small percentage of those engaging with online learning through NEC.

Why students chose NEC

The analysis below relates to the quantitative survey.

Studying with NEC

Students were asked: 'What factors were important to you when choosing a learning provider?' As can be seen in the word cloud below (Figure 1), the most popular reasons were the provider having a good reputation and providing support through a tutor.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 6



WordItOut

Figure 1

Deciding to study online

Students were asked: 'How important were the following to you when deciding to study online?' They ranked the following factors: affordability, flexibility, being able to study at home, ease of access and learning style.

For a majority of respondents, being able to study at home was the most important factor, with 54.7% of students rating home study as 'extremely important'. As the coronavirus pandemic has compelled many students who were not online distance learners to study at home, being able to access an education at home has only increased in importance. As discussed above, 31.4% of respondents had already studied through distance learning, suggesting that they were well equipped to adjust to online study. This is also reflected in participants' responses to whether or not they believed the pandemic had impacted on their study.

Features students value about online learning

Students were also asked to assess how a range of factors were important to them when choosing a learning provider. This returned some interesting results. The quality of tutor support and feedback was ranked as the most important to students, with 62% of respondents ranking it as 'extremely important'. This was narrowly followed by quality of course materials at 60.7%.

This substantiates why recommendations from friends and family and external organisations/advisers are the most popular ways students hear about NEC apart from search engines. Evaluating the quality of tutor support and feedback and the quality of course materials, especially the former, can be difficult to assess before enrolment.

Disabilities and health conditions

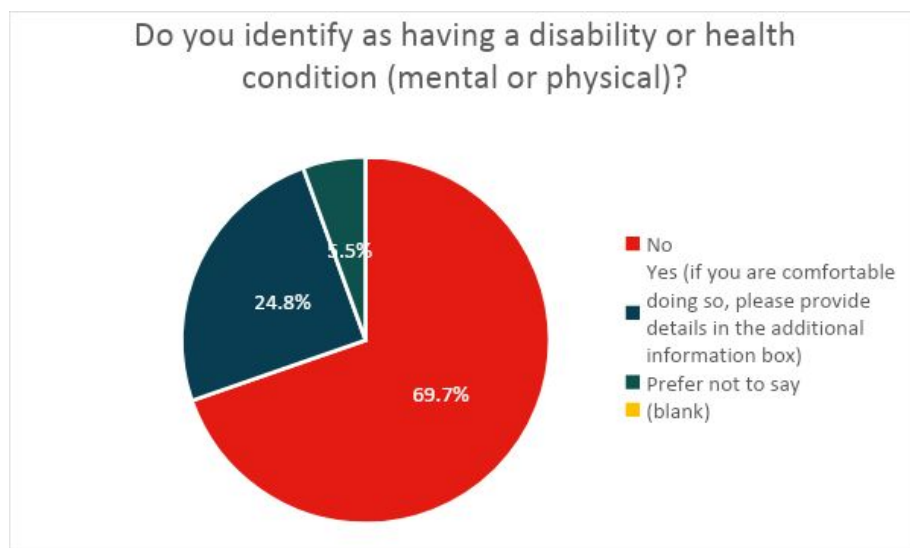


Table 4

Table 4 shows that nearly a quarter of respondents identified as having a disability or health condition. Of these respondents, 50% identified as having a mental health condition, 31.8% a physical health condition and 18.2% a combination of both (Table 5).

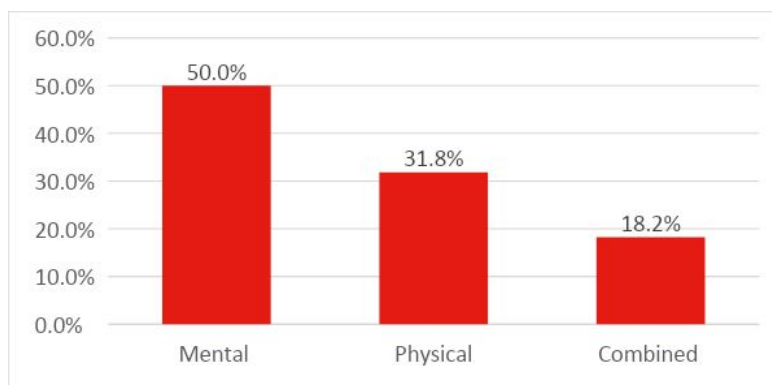


Table 5

As nearly a quarter of respondents identified as having a disability or health condition, this shows the importance of access to online distance learning – for both children and adults. Each year around exam results, NEC contacts students for case studies. And, each year, students recount that due to having a disability or health condition, online distance learning is the best option for them and has helped them achieve their learning aspirations and qualifications, which had previously been unattainable. This is yet another reason, but a very important reason, why extra funding should be invested in distance learning.

Student story: My experience with GCSE Maths

In Year 8, Rebecca was hospitalised with Crohn's disease along with her twin sister. This put her education on hold. She got a small amount of work sent home while recovering, but this was not enough to catch up. Maths was always a struggle and she left school with an E grade at GCSE. She went on to study Functional Skills Maths at college and missed out on a pass by one mark.

Two years later, she applied for a grant from Crohn's & Colitis UK to study with the NEC and started studying GCSE Maths online.

[Read more of Rebecca's story on our website](#)

Go for it!

Within the qualitative survey, students were asked:

What advice would you offer to someone considering studying by distance learning?

There were a number of common responses, the most common theme being self-motivation. Respondents also repeatedly referenced choosing a reputable provider as opposed to the cheapest provider and just giving it a go.

Be ready to push yourself and stick to your own deadlines. Self-motivation and discipline are key.

NEC courses are flexible so make them fit round your timetable.

Don't stress, just take the course bit by bit.

Go for it. Your tutor will be with you every step of the way, so there is nothing to fear.

Go for it. It's never too late and will be the best decision you make!

Assessing developments during 2020

Overview

The coronavirus pandemic has defined 2020 and has done much to impact present and future forms of learning. The move online has been accelerated due to its compatibility with social distancing and, as such, so has the popularity of online distance learning.

This is best demonstrated by comparing the 2019 and 2020 Adult Participation in Learning Surveys. In 2019, only 13% of learners were learning online,¹⁵ compared to 90% of lockdown learners claiming that they went online to do some or all of their learning.¹⁶ There has been a high uptake in learning and particularly online learning during the pandemic.

The significant event that happened in summer 2020 was centre-assessed grades (CAGs) for GCSE and A level qualifications as a result of the cancellation of the exams.¹⁷ For NEC students, this mainly had an impact on students who enrolled from 2018 onwards with intentions to sit exams in 2020, but could not have been anticipated when students responded to the initial quantitative survey. Responses relating to the pandemic were subsequently collected in the follow-up qualitative survey.

There are undoubtedly going to be high levels of unemployment for the foreseeable future due to the impact that the coronavirus has had on the worldwide economy. This is likely to lead to an increase in the need to gain qualifications in order to upskill, progress or change career.

¹⁵ Smith, R, Egglestone, C, Jones, E, and Aldridge, F (2019) *Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2019*, accessed 7 January 2021

learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Adult-Participation-in-Learning-Survey-2019.pdf, p. 6

¹⁶ Aldridge, F, Jones, E and Southgate, D (2020) *Learning Through lockdown: Findings from the 2020 Adult Participation in Learning Survey*, accessed 7 January 2021

<https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/learning-through-lockdown/>, p. 5

¹⁷ This will also occur in summer 2021. See Coughlan, S. (2021) 'Teachers' grades to replace A-levels and GCSEs in England', *BBC News*, 6 January, accessed 7 January 2021, www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-55561838

COVID-19

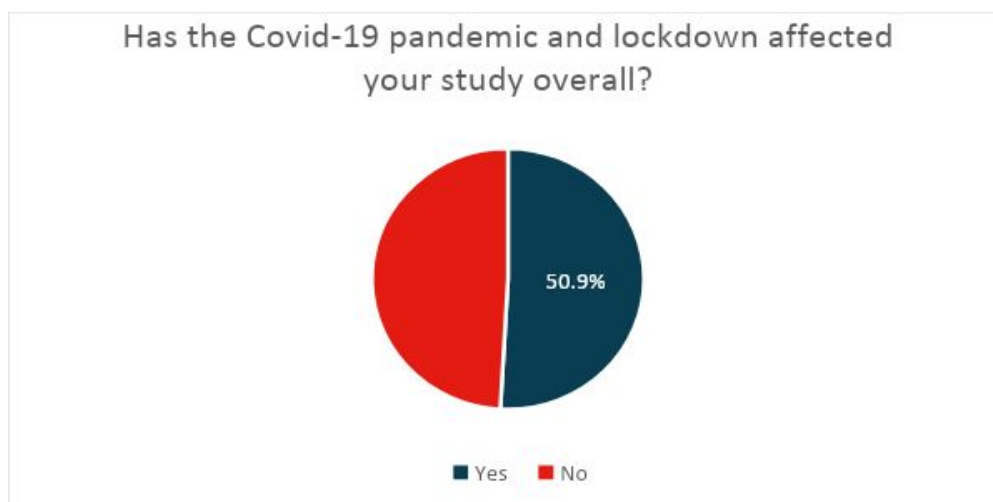


Table 6

In the qualitative survey, students were asked: 'has the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown affected your study overall?' The responses, shown in Table 6, were split almost equally, with 50.9% of respondents describing the ways in which the pandemic had negatively affected their study and 49.1% commenting on the ways that the pandemic had not affected their study, or had affected it in a positive way.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has **increased my commitments** and has slowed down my study".

"I was in the middle of revising hard for my exams when they were cancelled. I'd done flash cards and got my husband to test me and everything. **That was a devastating blow that has tainted my feeling of achievement somewhat.**"

Turning first to those who had their studies impacted negatively, the reasons vary, consisting of: increased childcare responsibilities, difficulties with mental health (including a lack of concentration and motivation), lack of study space due to the closure of libraries and tutors being unwell.

The cancellation of exams was repeatedly cited as a negative for private candidates¹⁸, with some exam centres refusing to refund fees. The deferral of exams has a significant impact on distance learning students who fall into the working age categories. As distance learning students in those age categories are often balancing study alongside employment and home commitments, combined with what one student aptly describes as an increase in commitments caused by the pandemic, it may be that students who intended to sit their exams in 2020 are disproportionately affected and do not end up gaining their qualification(s). For NEC it would be

¹⁸ Morpeth, R (2017) 'A crisis averted for distance learning students', 13 January, accessed 7 January 2021 www.nec.ac.uk/2017/01/13/a-crisis-averted-for-distance-learning-students/

worth monitoring these students, ensuring that they are well supported and that retention rates do not drop.

“It did not affect my studies that much, **my lessons continued as normal from home**”.

“I’m able to work from home so I’m fitting my study around work/family as usual”.

On the other hand, unlike students studying in school who had no option but to study online when school closures occurred, NEC students had actively signed up for online learning. Due to this, some students remarked on being well adapted and readier for the challenges posed by studying in the time of the coronavirus.

According to figures by the ONS, “only half of parents who were homeschooling (49%) strongly or somewhat agreed that they were confident in their abilities to homeschool their children. Parents also reported that homeschooling was negatively affecting their jobs and well-being”¹⁹, alongside the well-being of their children, between the period May and June 2020.

This highlights the importance of government in supporting schools to provide high-quality online provision for students. One of the methods in doing this should be consulting with providers such as NEC, who have been practicing distance learning for over 55 years.

¹⁹ Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2020) *Coronavirus and Homeschooling in Great Britain: April to June 2020*, accessed 7 January 2021
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/articles/coronavirusandhomeschoolinggreatbritain/apriltojune2020/pdf>, p. 3

Recommendations

The world is not fair and no-one gets to choose their start in life. But a fair and just society is one that gives its citizens the opportunity to change their circumstances. Education is key to this and lifelong learning in its broadest form needs to be established as a flagship policy. We are pleased this has been recognised and embraced in the recent Education Select Committee's report [‘A plan for an adult skills and lifelong learning revolution’](#) (published on 18 December 2020). The report sets out four actions designed to revolutionise the adult education system:

1. Establishing a community learning centre in each town
2. The creation of individual learning accounts
3. A boost for part-time higher education
4. More employer-led training.

More specifically, distance learning needs to be valued as an important mode of study for people of all ages and a credible alternative to face-to-face education by policy makers instead of being regarded as a marginal mode.

Funding

Reinstate tuition fee grants for all disadvantaged part-time learners and create a learning entitlement for adults.

Social mobility ‘cold spots’ exist in adult learning just as they do for younger learners. In addition to location, finance is a significant, if not the most significant area that needs to be addressed within lifelong learning. Only 3.8 percent of respondents in the qualitative survey identified as receiving financial assistance, either partial or in full, to study with NEC. **Only a very small proportion of individuals are eligible for funding, meaning that many adults are unable to afford to take on the significant financial commitment of studying for a national qualification.**

Adult enrolment in part-time higher education has fallen by 70% since 2009/10, with enrolment levels falling as funding has been withdrawn. This lack of funding persists throughout the different levels of qualifications that students accrue. For example, if students manage to get together the funding required to study A level qualifications to enable them to go on to higher education, they then reach a funding barrier if they choose to study part-time.

NEC supports the Centre for Justice (CSJ) recommendation in their June 2020 report *The Long Game* to ‘reinstate tuition fee grants for disadvantaged part-time HE learners.’ Unlike the CSJ, however, this should not be limited to those ‘who study qualifications that meet skills needs’.

Although addressing skills needs is essential, funding should not be limited to this but available to all disadvantaged part-time HE learners in order to build a fulfilled and higher skilled workforce. Opportunity should be on the basis of the interests and aspirations of the individual, rather than on meeting skills needs alone. We believe that this could best be achieved through a learning entitlement which a learner could use at any stage in their life. We were pleased to see that this is also one of the recommendations of the Education Select Committee and we support the proposal in its [recent report](#)²⁰ to reinstate individual learning accounts (ILAs) in a modified form.

Create an enabling infrastructure

Remove the barriers to assessment and provide high quality advice and guidance.

Funding learning is only part of the solution. Policy makers need to ensure that there is high quality advice and guidance available for lifelong learners. Currently the National Careers Service platform is limited to providing information about ESFA courses and leaves out the valuable provision of third sector and online providers.

The barriers to assessment and the costs of assessment are unnecessary barriers for students who enter national and vocational qualifications as private candidates.

Digital literacy

Take immediate action to improve digital literacy and access to online distance learning.

NEC also welcomes the government's new digital skills entitlement, fully funding individuals aged 19 and over who have digital skills assessed at below level 1. This is a good first step, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and increased demand for digital literacy. However, it is just a first step. Much more has to be done to close the digital literacy gap and make online distance learning and the use of technology within the workplace a possibility for individuals across the country.

²⁰ Education Committee (2020) *MPs call for adult skills revolution to foster new culture of lifelong learning*, accessed 13th January 2020
<https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/203/education-committee/news/138043/mps-call-for-adult-skills-revolution-to-foster-new-culture-of-lifelong-learning/>

Build on the current enthusiasm for learning

Make a firm commitment to lifelong learning that is sustained when lockdown restrictions are lifted.

The pandemic has dramatically reversed the decline in adult learning, with 43% of adults choosing to learn during lockdown, 90% of whom studied online. However, we are yet to see whether this reversal is short-term or has long-lasting effects. This surge in engagement would be a massive missed opportunity if we do not take advantage of it. Indeed, the survey found that '91 percent of lockdown learners said that they were likely to continue to engage in online learning in the future.'

While the high satisfaction rate is a testament to the acceptance of online learning, the government needs to make a bold commitment to lifelong learning in order to sustain engagement and ensure learners do not drop off.

Support online learning for mainstream provision

Invest in distance learning and build it into education policy decisions.

We are therefore calling for investment in distance learning as a credible alternative to traditional school or college-based full-time education or apprenticeships. Policy makers need to change their mindset to embrace distance learning instead of assuming that all learners are aged under 21 and studying full time.

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Appendix: data collection

The quantitative survey was sent to 3,045 individual students, which is the total number of NEC students who:

- enrolled between 1 September 2016 and 30 September 2019
- were aged 18 years and over
- had the enrolment status of confirmed, completed or new (i.e. active NEC students).

In total, 204 students completed the survey which is a 6.7% response rate. Although this falls short of the 10 per cent benchmark, it is much higher than previous NEC surveys. This is most likely due to the incentive that students were given to complete the survey by being entered into a prize draw, having the opportunity to win a £50 Amazon voucher and have £50 donated to a charity of their choice.

The survey was composed of four sections: Background Information, Studying with NEC (Parts 1 and 2), About You and Keeping in Touch. Several questions were optional in line with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) legislation regarding protected characteristics. Other questions were optional to increase the likelihood of a response. As such, responses to all questions vary.

Students excluded from completing the quantitative survey fall into three categories:

- students under 18 years, due to safeguarding and parental permission requirements
- students serving custodial sentences, who lack access to the internet
- students who had paused study or decided not to continue.

In particular, one of the excluded groups, those under 18 years, are significant despite not featuring in survey data. Therefore, an NEC student body sample has been included to compensate for this. The sample consists of NEC students enrolled between 1 September 2018 and 21 August 2019, which gives a representative sample of NEC's student body which can be compared to the 2019/20 survey results.

Out of 204 students who completed the quantitative survey, 54 completed the qualitative survey – a much higher response rate from this sample of 26.5%. The qualitative survey was sent out in June and closed on 12 July 2020. This made it possible to ask students how the COVID-19 pandemic had initially affected their study. As the coronavirus has had a large impact on the education sector, this data is significant in making predictions for both the barriers and benefits that online distance learners face.