

Student digital experience Tracker

Case study: North Lindsey College

Context

North Lindsey College is the largest provider of post-16 education and training in North Lincolnshire, offering a wide range of further education programmes, both technical and academic, and apprenticeships at a range of levels. North Lindsey also offers HNCs, HNDs, degrees and foundation degrees.

Why the Tracker was used

The main interest at North Lindsey was to benchmark the student digital experience over time and across different courses of study and also relative to other providers. An important secondary aim was to inform future development plans for digital infrastructure and IT services. The outcomes were expected to be of interest to the Quality Team as well.

Engaging key staff and learners

The Tracker planning process was found to be very useful at North Lindsey as it ensured the team thought in advance about how they would use the data and what impact it might have. The project – led by the e-Learning Ambassador, Ross Anderson – was presented to the Quality and Standards Group and the Curriculum Quality Leadership Team which ensured it had approval from the key stakeholders. The College Digital Learning Working Group was also instrumental in the decision to take it forward. This group has representatives from all areas of college including learning resources, student support and business and information systems.

North Lindsey took a different approach to sampling from other sites. Rather than asking all students to participate and hoping for a representative sample to emerge, the team selected specific courses to

target, ensuring that a range of subject areas, levels and modes of study were included. To ensure that no students in the target groups were missed, the survey was timetabled into planned sessions over a 3-week period. With the agreement of the relevant tutors, iPads and computers were brought into class and students were supervised as they completed the Tracker. This meant that North Lindsey achieved exactly its target sample (230), and that the sample was distributed in a planned way across different areas of study. It also meant that the sample was not biased towards students with a particular interest in digital issues or those who were more comfortable than other students with online surveys.

The curriculum areas chosen to survey were:

1. Hair & Beauty Levels 1-3
2. Childcare Level 3
3. Sports and Uniformed Public Services Level 3
4. Construction Level 1
5. Business & Travel/Tourism Level 3
6. Computing Levels 2-3

Area Heads and curriculum leads for the relevant courses had to be fully engaged with the Tracker, along with the student support team and student union representatives. Timetabling had to be carefully managed to ensure devices and support were available in the right time and place, and with students who were ready to engage. The college e-Learning Ambassador oversaw and monitored the whole process.

What the Tracker found

Looking at the learning experience, 65% of respondents said that when technology is used by teaching staff, it helps their learning experience. They were very likely to have found information online during the last six weeks of their studies (88%), likely to have produced work in a digital format (71%), and somewhat less likely to have worked online with others (39%) or created a personal record of their learning online (37%).

Learners at North Lindsey College have rather fewer personal devices available for learning than the sector norm: for example, they are significantly less likely to have a personal laptop or tablet than some of their peers at other colleges. However, they have better than average access to these devices at college. This tends to confirm the importance of North Lindsey's fixed computing provision: 75% of respondents said that they could access college computers and printers 'most of the time' when they wanted to. Access to digital services such as wifi and file storage, and online learning resources, are around sector average.

With guidance and support for digital issues, North Lindsey scored well on every question. Compared with other colleges, a higher number of students said they had support to '*Modify digital devices to suit your learning needs (e.g. text-to-speech, assistive software)*' and to '*Create a positive online profile (e.g. LinkedIn, CV, e-portfolio)*'. Around 45% of learners felt that they had '*a chance to be involved in decisions about digital services*'. Though less than half this is still well above the sector norm.

Free text responses show that on the whole learners are happy with digital provision: when asked what they would like North Lindsey to '*keep*' doing, their overwhelming response is '*everything*' and '*more of the same*'. *Blocking, restricting* and *banning* specific devices or social media sites are high on the list of things participants would like the college to '*stop*' doing. And when asked to think about what should *start* happening, students requested more access to laptops, iPads and tablets, more time to explore with technology, better wifi and more up-to-date computers – in common with students everywhere!

Responses and reflections

The overall results have been seen by the Digital Learning Working Group and shared at college Curriculum Quality & Leadership meetings, leading up to a special meeting with the Senior Leadership Team which will review the findings and take forward a response. Benchmarking with other FE colleges was found to be '*very useful*' and has helped to secure senior management attention. Results by course area have been sent to all participating area leads and local responses are under discussion. The data is also being compared with student voice feedback and with other survey data to see if further trends can be identified.

The College has already unblocked Facebook and on the evidence of the Tracker is considering further changes while continuing to address safeguarding with students. The possibility of providing more tablets or personal laptops is also being considered so that learners have access to devices whenever and wherever they can add value to learning.

Overall, implementation of the Tracker was very straightforward and the results were informative, so the College is keen to use it in an ongoing way. In future, the plan would be to introduce the Tracker during induction and again as part of course review tasks. There is also the possibility that Tracker data could be used as evidence for a future Ofsted or area review.

At the outset it was hoped that learners would be able to use the Tracker to evaluate their own digital skills and confidence and that the College could use this to support their progression onto Higher Education, employment or apprenticeships. This would also have allowed the College to demonstrate its commitment to the North Lincolnshire Employability Framework, which has an emphasis on digital skills for work. However, the Tracker is not really designed for individual self-assessment and development, but rather to give a snapshot of the student digital experience across the college. The team at North Lindsey is keeping a close eye on developments with the Jisc Digital Capability Discovery tool, which does support individuals in assessing their own digital capabilities and would be a useful complement to the Tracker tool.

"This provides a good starting point for colleges to effectively evaluate student skills and needs to be able to ensure they provide the right provision and support for learning."

"I just want to say what a great job you [in the Tracker team] have all done. The data and benchmarking is really interesting. We would definitely look forward to rolling out across all our provision in September if possible."

Ross Anderson, e-Learning Ambassador

"The Senior Leadership Team at North Lindsey College is committed to develop the digital skills and literacy of our students. These skills and attributes are vital to success in today's (and tomorrow's) competitive world. Through this carefully- managed project we have been able to discern from the data the extent to which we are already making strides but importantly the trajectory of future developments."

Claire Foster, Assistant Principal Curriculum

Key lessons

1. A targeted sampling strategy allowed the college to be sure of meeting its targets for completion and to distribute responses in a planned way across different course areas. It also reduced the likelihood of the sample being biased towards students with more digital awareness and confidence.
2. The Tracker could be used in conjunction with a personal discovery tool to give learners the feeling that they were being supported and progressed as well as surveyed about their digital experience.

3. The Tracker can provide colleges with a valuable source of evidence for submitting to Ofsted and in support of area reviews, to demonstrate how their learners' views are informing the development of the digital environment.