

MAPPING THE KEY MOTIVATIONS OF OPENLEARN LEARNERS IN THE PANDEMIC

P. Law

The Open University (UNITED KINGDOM)

Abstract

OpenLearn is the free online learning platform provided by The Open University (OU) in the UK. Growth to the OpenLearn platform since its launch in 2006 as part of the broader open educational resources (OER) movement has been steady, with pre pandemic visits of nearly of 13 million. Shortly after the first UK lockdown in March 2020, the platform saw a doubling of visits overnight.

Previous analyses of platform users have identified key groups using the free courses, articles, videos and educational interactives, along with their motivations to study, demographics and usability requirements. These data have resulted in a range of commissioning approaches, and technical and usability developments to better serve the OU's own students and the body of international non-formal learners, particularly with social mission in mind.

In December 2020 a survey of OpenLearn learners was undertaken to gather new data on the massive upsurge in traffic seen during 2020 due to COVID-19, comparing this with existing knowledge and to ensure that commissioning was reaching those who needed it most. During the financial year that incorporated the start of the pandemic (August 2019-July 2020) there were over 24 million visits to the platform.

The 6,689 survey responses received were analysed alongside key platform analytics data which were used to provide balance and insight into the geographical location of learners and the technology used by them.

Key findings show that OpenLearn appears to be in line with its social mission in terms of reaching learners in low socio-economic groups. Further, in probing to compare with UK data overall, OpenLearn appears to be reaching a significantly greater proportion of those in low-income households.

When asked if learners were influenced by the pandemic in choosing to study on OpenLearn, 51% of respondents said that they were.

This paper reflects on these users' stories, expanding on data behind the kind findings, showing that OpenLearn provided much needed supporting during the pandemic to those furloughed and unemployed, to educators and to students. It brings to life their reasons and situations and how – in discovering OER for the first time – they were able to make a positive difference to their mental health, educational and professional situations.

Keywords: Open educational resources, OER, OpenLearn, pandemic, free learning, online learning, digital badging.

1 INTRODUCTION

OpenLearn was launched by the Open University (OU) in 2006 and was the result of a two-year William and Flora Hewlett Foundation-funded project. The ambition was for the OU to release 5% of its taught courses into the public domain as OER under a Creative Commons licence. The University continued to undertake this activity after funding ended in 2008 as it complemented the OU's Royal Charter which states that it should "promote the educational well-being of the community generally" ([1]).

Today, the platform continues to provide high quality OER at scale and breadth, for free, recording nearly 16m visits to the platform in the financial year 2021/22 (internal OU metrics). The OpenLearn audience is international with the majority of content available in English, hosting nearly 1,000 free courses and 8,000 articles, videos and activities.

As a business activity for the OU, the platform not only delivers a key social mission activity, but supports the recruitment of new students and hence, a business interest for the University ([2], [3]).

Regular surveys have been undertaken to understand the key motivations of those using the platform which have in turn, underpinned content commissioning, platform development strategies and learning design approach. ([4], [5],[6]) These key developments in the history of the platform have included:

- 1 Technical and pedagogical developments to issue summative assessments and digital badges.
- 2 Technical developments to issue certificates (Statements of participation) and improved OpenLearn Profile.
- 3 Linking of OpenLearn digital badges and OpenLearn profile with the OU Student Record.
- 4 Development of OU undergraduate induction and study support material.
- 5 Commissioning of career- and skills-related content.
- 6 Provision of alternative formats of all OpenLearn courses which has provided a means of sharing content to third party platforms, such as Google, Amazon, iTunes and YouTube.

([7], [8], [9], [10])

In December 2020 a new survey was issued to ascertain the motivations of learners during the first wave of the pandemic in the UK, which was then assessed and reviewed in 2021 and 2022 against platform metrics. These data have shown changes in the demographic make-up of learners using the platform alongside a steep rise in learner numbers (Fig. 1).

Key reasons for issuing a new survey at the end of 2020 was to further explore the persistent question regarding users of OpenLearn over time: what are the demographics and motivations of learners using OpenLearn? In summary, the study was designed to:

- Gather data on learners who were part of the massive upsurge in traffic seen during 2020 due to COVID-19
- Review the reach of openlearn in terms of meeting its commitment to its social mission.

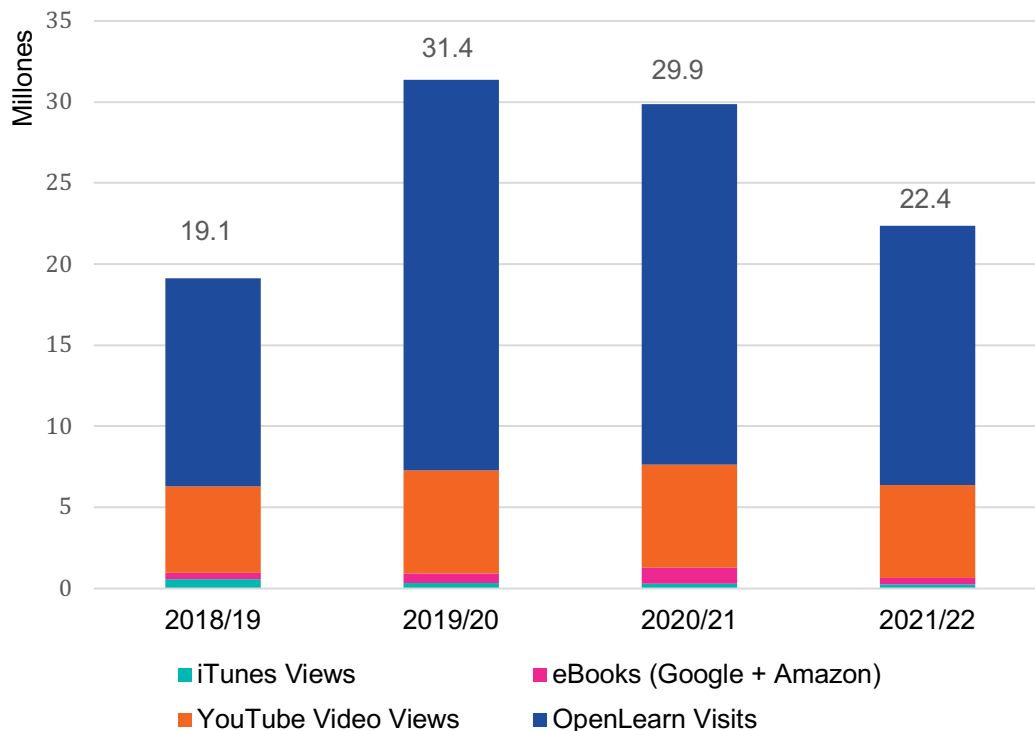


Figure 1. OpenLearn visit totals 2018-2022

Three key roles for the use of OER are discussed in this paper as seen through the lens of OpenLearn during this time:

- 1 Provision of resources to support mental health
- 2 Resources to support professional development
- 3 Provision of teaching resources for educators

2 METHODOLOGY

An online survey was designed to reach learners on a self-selecting basis engaging with all content types on OpenLearn capturing demographic data and motivations to use the platform. It was designed with input from stakeholders across the OU and was linked from the OpenLearn newsletter and the platform itself. It was comprised of a combination of Likert scale, multiple choice and open questions. Respondents could choose to opt in and no personal data was collected.

The OpenLearn survey ran from October to December 2020 and received 6,689 responses.

For the purposes of this paper, key analytics data have been used to provide balance and insight into geographical location of learners and the technology used, using Adobe Analytics. When reviewing survey data, it is important to bear in mind that more educated and more affluent people are more likely to participate in surveys than less educated and less affluent people and that women are more likely to participate than men ([11], [12], [13]).

3 RESULTS

New questions were added to the survey from previous studies to capture the desires of those using the platform as a direct result of the pandemic. 59% of respondents said that OpenLearn ‘[It] gave me something to do during lockdown’, followed by ‘I have always wanted to undertake extra learning but never had the time’ (45%), and ‘I can’t afford to pay for study due to changes in finance and OpenLearn is free’ (32%). The Under 25s were much more likely to respond Yes to this question (62%) while the Over 65s were less likely (41%).

51% of respondents said Yes to the question ‘Did events relating to the COVID-19 pandemic influence your decision to study on OpenLearn?’, with the Under 25s much more likely to respond Yes to this question (62%) while the Over 65s least likely (41%).

Figures 2-3 provide background as to the motivations and intentions of this group.

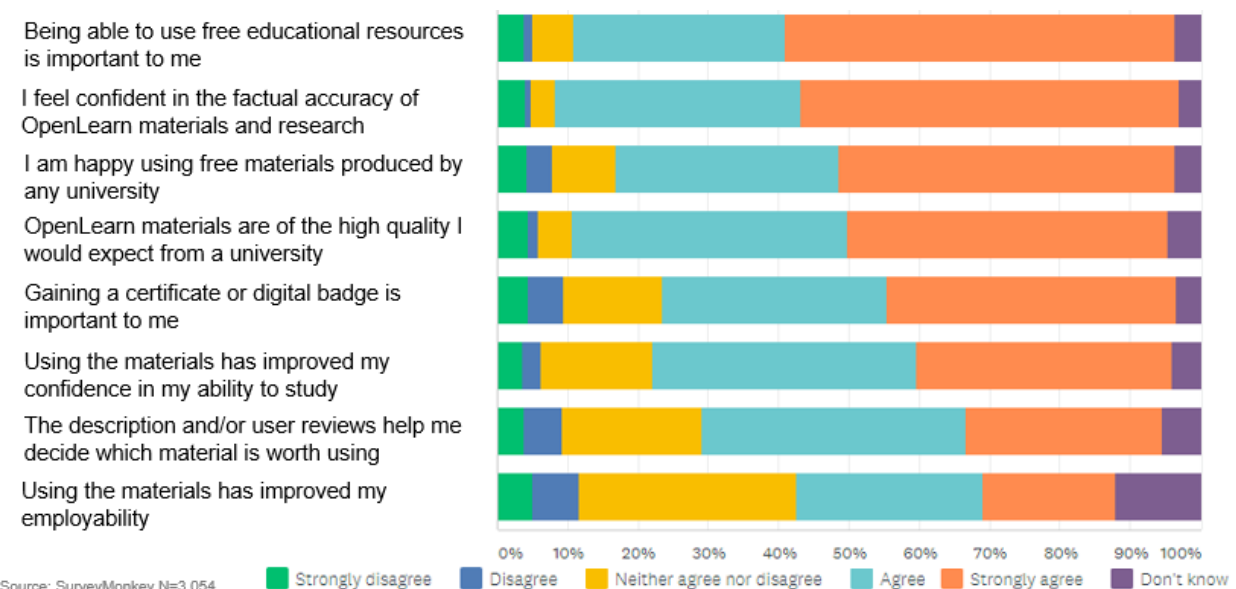


Figure 2. To what extent do you agree with the following? (n=3,054)

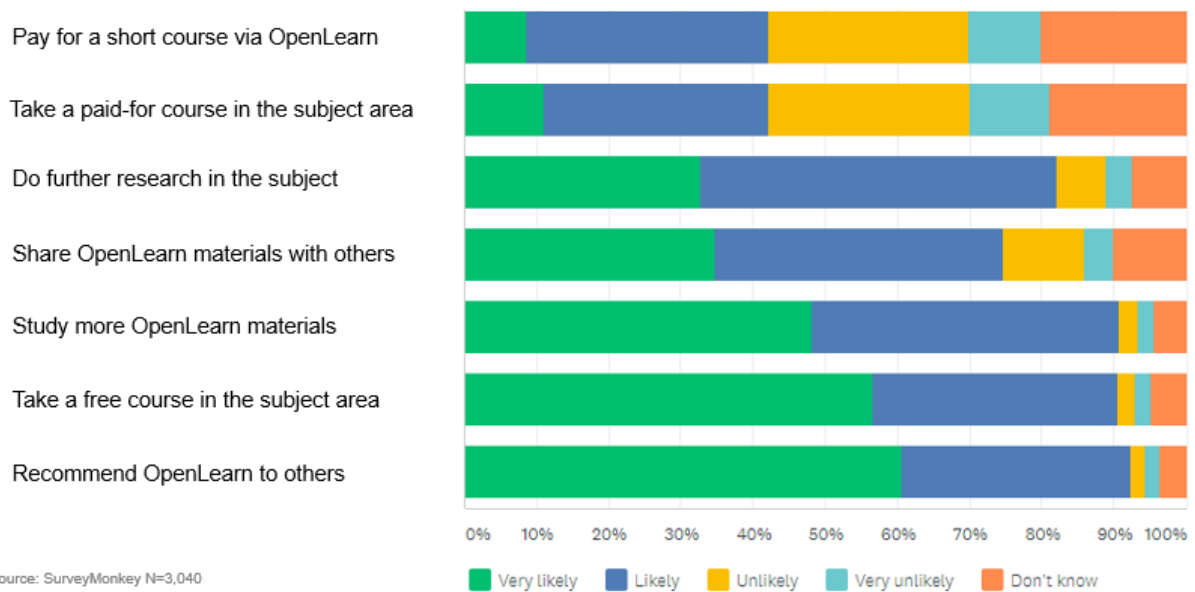


Figure 3. As a result of using OpenLearn, how likely are you to do the following? (n=3,040)

The following provides insight into the 51% of respondents in this 'Yes' group ('Did events relating to the COVID-19 pandemic influence your decision to study on OpenLearn?') and data in the following section is filtered by these respondents only. Respondents' comments throughout this group are from those who had agreed to '...free text comments made in this survey to be used in publicity material or research publications for OpenLearn'.

3.1 OpenLearn supporting mental health during COVID-19

27% of respondents said that 'Using OpenLearn helped support my mental health'. Disabled respondents answered 43% to using OpenLearn to support mental health during the pandemic, and under 25s answered 21%.

Comments below, with a brief summary of demographic status, illustrate these data.

Respondent: female, UK, Wales, white, undergraduate, caring responsibilities, household income under £20k:

There are lots of people suffering with mental health problems during COVID 19 . The courses I have read have taken my mind from the present situation and I've become more positive about the wonders of life. I recommend that people should try the courses.

Respondent: using OL to support mental health and support professional development, male, white, Wales, college diploma, working in voluntary/3rd sector, disabled, household income under £20k:

Gaining accredited certificates/badges is important to me because it would give a sense of achievement and be able to share with future employers.

I think people such as myself and background; working-class, unemployed, and having a disability. Would be reluctant to purchase a course unless it was fully recognised by employers and that there was a genuine demand for those skills. Because of my mental health being like a rollercoaster throughout the pandemic, I would be reluctant to take on courses that required the writing of essays, not because of laziness but have noticed that I've been so fatigued that its be so unbearable to even carry out the activities that I used to enjoy such as gardening. So multiple choice questions, audio and video clips are superb. The reason I would recommend OpenLearn to friends and family would be because it offers individuals to learn about subjects that are of interest. For example, having an autism diagnosis I found it delightful to see 'understanding autism' which helped me to relate to other people throughout the UK and to learn about the hardship of others. I furthermore, had interests of learning more about STEM-related subjects especially Space Science!

Respondent: Came to OpenLearn via a personal recommendation, furloughed, female, based in Scotland, white, college diploma, household income under £20k:

Studying has never been on top of my list as I am not a big reader and looking at a screen for any length of time worried me. These free short courses have helped me gain an interest in so many different subjects and may lead to something bigger. My work life has been varied and interesting but there is always something else!

If you have answered 'somewhat' or 'substantially' please tell us more about how your disability affects your use of OpenLearn:

Previously mentioned that my mental well-being can be so poor that if I was participating in a course and was asked to write an essay, I would have difficulty writing ideas/thoughts onto paper or digital word document. Because I would go through phases of feeling fatigue, which would prevent me from fulfilling course deadlines. However, being given extra time and ability to complete courses via multiple-choice, audio, and video clips are very beneficial to me for furthering my education.

3.2 OpenLearn supporting employability during COVID-19

In answer to the question over all respondents to the survey, 38% selected 'Upskilling and reskilling for career development' as one of the reasons for using OpenLearn (respondents could select more than one answer). (Fig. 4.)

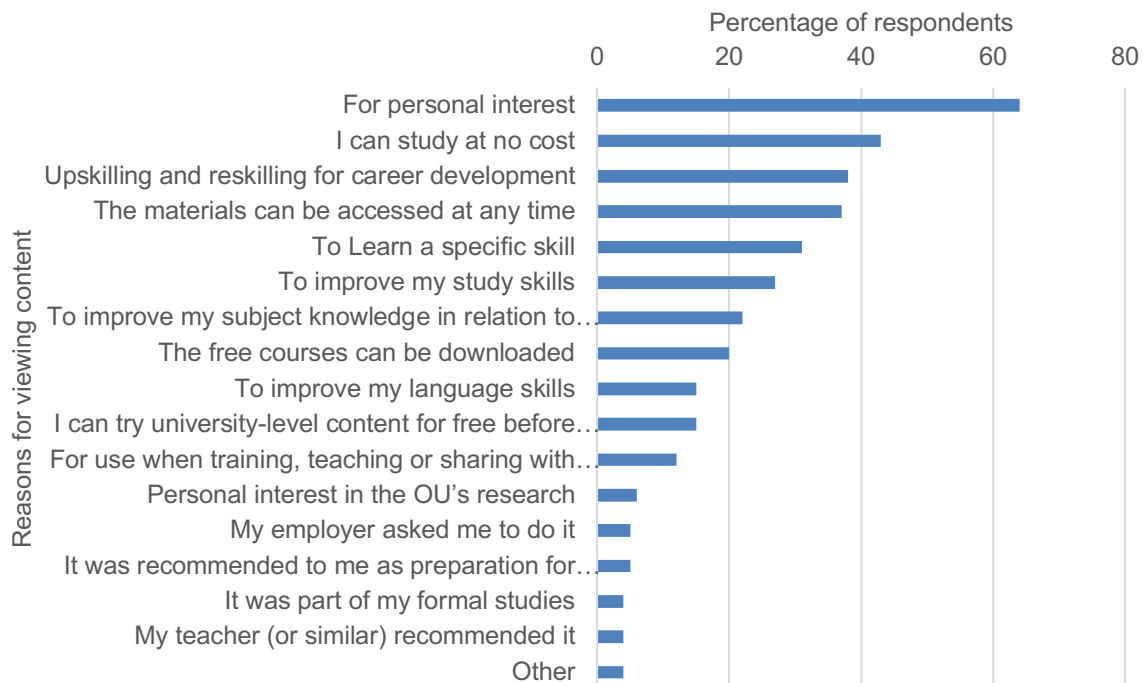


Figure 4. What was your reason for viewing this content? (n=6,343)

A selection of comments illustrate the range of difficult situations that learners found themselves in during the pandemic in relation to changes in employment and how OpenLearn was a support during this time. These were overwhelmingly positive and some are shown below with a brief summary of demographic status to illustrate the breadth of learners in this group.

Respondent: female, unwaged with domestic responsibilities, white, household shared with children, highest ed qual is school leaving certificate:

A lot of my friends are in the same position as me at this time, the OpenLearn courses are a great way to enrich your life, whether it be improving study skills, for future employment or just for personal interest. There are a wide range of courses that I would say cater for everyone, especially on low income, who would find it impossible to find the funds at this time.

Respondent: female, was an educator, UK, upskilling for career development, Asian, postgraduate degree, unwaged and seeking employment:

I have lost my job as a result of the pandemic and therefore can't afford to pay for another course at this present moment in time. The free course has helped me improve my knowledge, it has enhanced my employability skills. I have talked about the course in an interview.

Has OpenLearn content changed your mind about the subject you are learning about or researching? Yes. Please explain your answer:

It has given me a greater insight. I thought I had a good idea from my previous job however this has raised points I hadn't always considered.

Respondent: upskilling for career development, sports coach (had to stop earning due to pandemic), educator, based in Northern Ireland, female, white, post graduate, children in the household, household income under £25k:

Sadly we have been closed due to COVID and no income since Sept of last year as we are a tourist B & B. (We closed last year to support a charity fund raising event and provide them with accommodation and full board) We are now living on loans as have not been eligible for any support due to being a new business. I'll need to go back into IT /workplace for foreseeable future so trying to upgrade all skills to start applying for work.

Respondent: white, female, based in England, college diploma, disabled and not able to work, voluntary/3rd sector worker, with restricted mobility, dyslexia and pain, caring responsibilities, household income under £20k:

I'm a carer for an autistic 25 year old recently diagnosed. I wanted to help understand her and help her understand herself too. You may have saved her life. She's had to be 'episodes' prior to diagnosis that everyone put down to attention seeking and I know think she may have mild epilepsy. They looked like a fit. I'm going to be paying extra attention now as, since the death of her mum 2 years ago, she is she is living independently....this course is amazing and I get brownie points at the end with a digital badge. Even better.

As a community volunteer I've no money for improving my education in fields I'll need when working with vulnerable people. This course on autism is amazing. ... I feel more confident now... You have no idea how much good this will have done.

Respondent: female, white, unwaged and seeking employment, caring responsibilities, living with young children, Spanish as a first language, living in Scotland:

I would recommend OpenLearn to others, it is a great tool to improve one's skills using a free course. I wouldn't mind to pay for it but I don't have the financial resources currently, so having the option to do courses free is a great opportunity.

Respondent: furloughed, male, Asian, based in England, using OpenLearn to upskill, works as an educator in work-based training, uses OpenLearn to support lesson plans, children in household:

I've been studying to get things on my CV. I have skills - I want them verified - and what you offer has helped immensely, so thank you. I don't have money for a fully-fledged course. That being said I love learning.

3.3 OpenLearn supporting educators during COVID-19

Efforts to support those in education in terms of OpenLearn commissioning decisions in 2020 were not wasted, with 20% of respondents saying they were currently working as a teacher or trainer, an increase of 5% from the equivalent OpenLearn survey issued in 2017. Of these respondents, 51% said they were working in 'School Education' (Fig. 5).

When asked how OpenLearn had been used to support teaching online during COVID-19, 49% of 'teachers' selected 'To learn how to teach online' and 49% selected 'To provide content to my learners'. The badged course 'Take your teaching online' became the 11th most popular course on OpenLearn in the financial year 2019/20 with 121,452 visits to the course introductory page during this period.

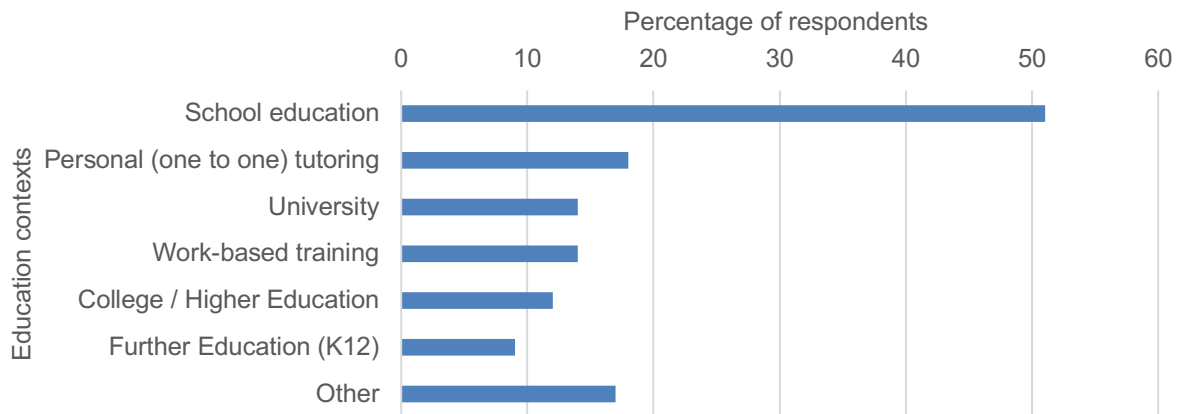


Figure 5. Do you work in any of the following educational contexts? (n=1,137)

Educators gave the highest proportion of 'Yes' responses (64%) to the question 'Did events relating to the COVID-19 pandemic influence your decision to study on OpenLearn?' of any of the professional groups examined.

From the perspective of educators using OpenLearn to improve their work-based skills, 42% of educators selected 'I'm an educator and used OpenLearn to develop skills to help me move my teaching online'.

Fig. 6 shows the range of answers to the question posed to educators: 'For which of the following purposes have you used free resources?', with the most favoured response being 'To get new ideas and inspiration' (67%).

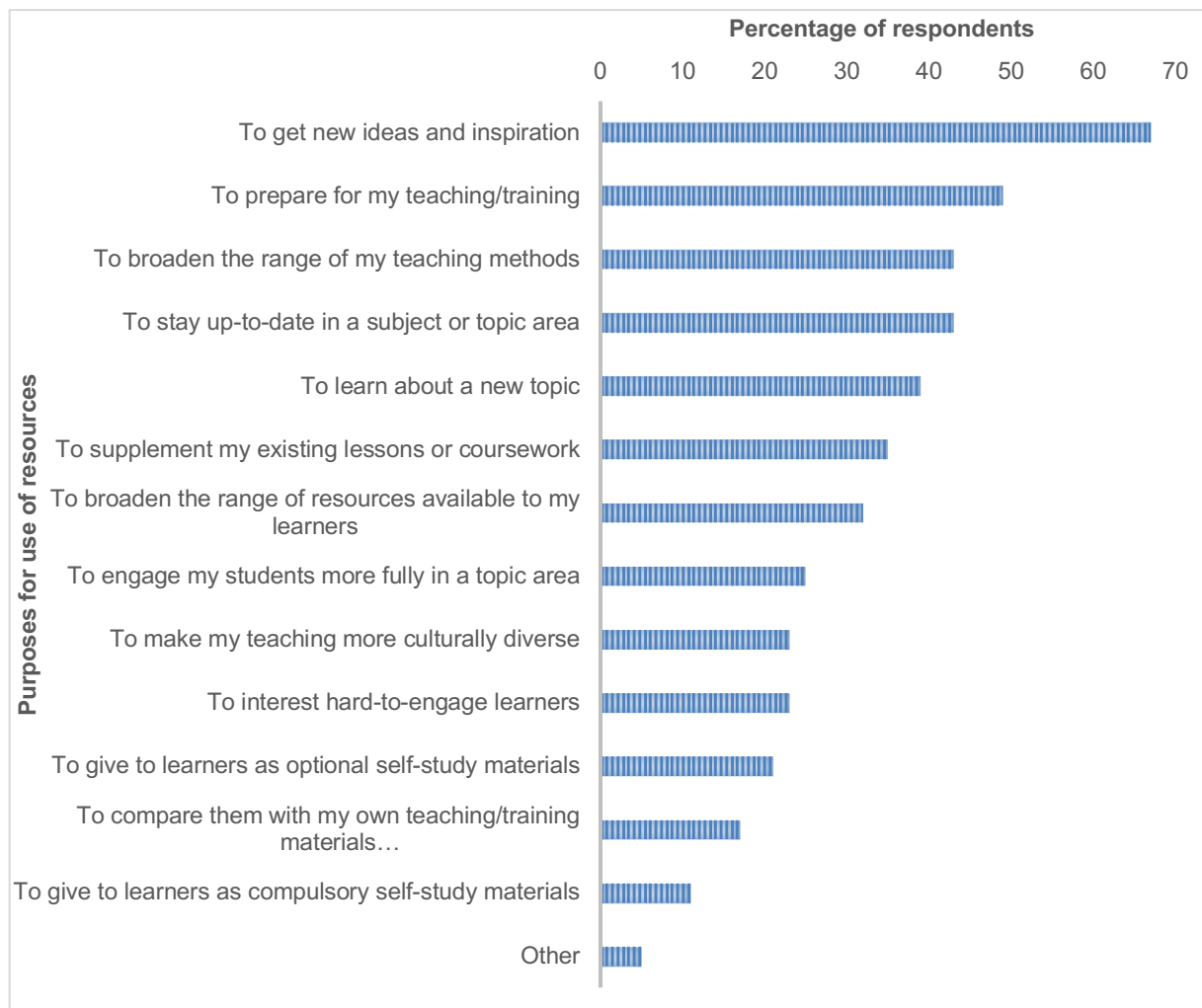


Figure 6. For which of the following purposes have you used free resources? (n=1,048)

This demonstrates the broad areas in which educators were using OER on the platform across a range of media: free courses, videos, audio and activities. Requests to the OpenLearn team from UK schools also revealed an increased in use of the platform by secondary schools, particularly those wishing to issue certificates for completion of OpenLearn materials.

4 CONCLUSIONS

By examining these data covering particular areas of support that OER on OpenLearn provides, this study shows that a heavy rise in learners to the site has not skewed the commitment to social mission at a time when free learning was highly sought. This has in part been achieved by responsive commissioning during the pandemic, support by OU IT to ensure platform stability and the promotion and curation of an already robust canon of OER.

The platform hosts a great diversity of subject matter and content type to a broad, international audience with differing priorities. However, the mental health and employability support role that OER played during the pandemic revealed itself in the data. Of particular note was the increase in educators using the platform to provide support for their move to online teaching in terms of their own professional development, as well as a source for material for their learners.

Other data in the survey require additional investigation and will be continually reviewed. For example, 65% of respondents under 25 stated that their primary spoken language is English, compared with 81% over all survey respondents. Further, under 25s were particularly positive regarding 'Completing a course on OpenLearn (e.g. gaining a certificate or digital badge) is important to me' and 'Using the materials has improved my employability'.

Further examination of the OpenLearn platform and its role in supporting learners will continue, in particular to ensure it is still meeting its commitment to social mission and to identify, as this study has, new groups of learners using OER for specific purposes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to Rosie Storrar who undertakes analysis of OpenLearn platform metrics for the OU which have been used in this report.

REFERENCES

- [1] The Open University, "The Open University Charter and Statutes." Updated 2005. 1969. Retrieved from <http://www.open.ac.uk/about/documents/about-university-charter.pdf>.
- [2] L.A. Perryman, P. Law, & A. Law, "Developing sustainable business models for institutions' provision of open educational resources: Learning from OpenLearn users' motivations and experiences," *In Open and Flexible Higher Education Conference 2013, 23-25 October 2013, Paris, European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU)*, 270–286. 2013.
- [3] P. Law, & L.A. Perryman, "Internal Responses to Informal Learning Data: Testing a Rapid Commissioning Approach," *European Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning*, 76–84. 2015.
- [4] P. Law, L.A. Perryman, & A. Law, "Open educational resources for all? Comparing user motivations and characteristics across The Open University's iTunes U channel and OpenLearn platform," *In Open and Flexible Higher Education Conference 2013, 23-25 October 2013, Paris, European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU)*, 204–219. 2013.
- [5] P. Law, & A. Jelfs, "Ten years of open practice: a reflection on the impact of OpenLearn. *Open Praxis*, 8(2): 143–149. 2016.
- [6] P. Law, "How Directing Formal Students to Institutionally-Delivered OER Supports their Success," *Journal of Learning for Development*, 6(3) pp. 262–272. 2019.
- [7] P. Law, "Recognising Informal Elearning with Digital Badging: Evidence for a Sustainable Business Model," *Open Praxis*, 7(4): 299–310. 2015.
- [8] P. Law, L.A. Perryman, & A. Law, "Badging and employability at The Open University," *European Journal of Open, Distance and E-Learning. Best of EDEN 2015 Special Issue*, 18 (2). 2015.

- [9] P. Law, "Digital badging at The Open University: recognition for informal learning," *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning*, 30 (3): 221-234. 2016.
- [10] P. Law, "The Identified Informal Learner: Recognizing Assessed Learning in the Open," In *Open Education: International Perspectives in Higher Education*, edited by Blessinger, P. & Bliss, T.J. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers. 2016.
- [11] R. Curtin, S. Presser, & E. Singer, "The effects of response rate changes on the index of consumer sentiment," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 64: 413–428. 2000.
- [12] J. Goyder, K. Warriner, & S. Miller, "Evaluating socio-economic status (SES) bias in survey nonresponse," *Journal of Official Statistics* 18(1), 1–11. 2002.
- [13] E. Singer, J. van Hoewyk, & M.P.Maher, "Experiments with incentives in telephone surveys," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 64: 171–188. 2000.