

PERCEPTIONS OF VOCATIONAL LEARNERS ON VALUE OF ONLINE TRAINING

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ABSTRACT

A neglected area of research has been the impact of online courses on vocational learners, where a more practical and skills-based approach to learning is needed. This paper presents the findings of a survey involving a group of 27 vocational trainers enrolled on online programmes to gain their vocational qualifications for teaching and assessing vocational students. It investigates their perceptions of the value of online training for vocational learning. Findings from the survey indicate that vocational learners do value their online learning experience and have acquired both skills and knowledge that extend outside the classroom. Participants reported they had gained in confidence and motivation and that online learning had renewed their interest in learning and given them a more positive outlook on education. Personal growth as well as professional development were both perceived to be benefits of online vocational training.

Keywords: Vocational Learners; Online Training; Skills Training.

1. INTRODUCTION

There has been much discourse on education and online training, but we have little information on how vocational learners perceive the value of the training they are receiving online. Many of the existing papers reference the pandemic when learners had little choice on how their learning was delivered. Others focused on university students, therefore there has been a bias towards the academic context. It seemed that there was a lack of understanding of how vocational learners experienced their online training. This was important as vocational learners are often those more involved in practical learning and may not be as adept at more academic tasks required from online learning, which is more attuned to transfer of knowledge. The teachers and trainers involved in providing vocational education rarely come from an academic background and they are more accustomed to face-to-face training. In this paper vocational trainers on online courses have been surveyed for their perceptions of the value of online delivery of vocational education.

2. ONLINE EDUCATION

Existing research on perceptions of online education has predominantly focused on university students, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, where learners had limited choice in the mode of delivery. A systematic review of research from 2020 to 2022 reported that university students were mainly positive about digital learning, although on the negative side limited digital skills were highlighted, especially among the teachers (Cramarenco, Burca-Voicu & Dabija, 2023).

Teachers experienced two main drawbacks: limited availability for student contact and unstable technological systems. African university students in Li, Odhiambo and Ocansey (2023) research showed that online learning satisfaction levels reached only 20% because students faced teacher availability issues and inadequate support and poor teaching quality.

According to Li et al. (2023) numerous students encountered issues when utilizing online systems. The level of academic self-efficacy and confidence students demonstrated led to improved online learning engagement which produced positive effects on their satisfaction with online delivery according to Jung & Lee (2018) and Shen, Cho, Tsai et al (2013).

A UK-based Jisc (2023) survey of 27,000 university students also showed improving satisfaction rates with online delivery. Yet, significant challenges remained, particularly in relation to digital access and motivation. Notably, such large-scale studies seldom address vocational learners, whose learning contexts and expectations differ significantly from those in academic settings.

Winch (2013) together with Brockmann et al. (2008) state that vocational education focuses on experiential and practical learning which emphasizes embodied knowledge and hands-on skills and workplace-based learning. The traditional cognitive-based nature of online learning platforms fails to support the performative and social aspects required for vocational competence development (Tummons, 2011). The mismatch between digital learning environments results in insufficient service for vocational learners.

Furthermore, adult vocational learners are often managing employment, family responsibilities, and financial constraints, which negatively impact their engagement with online study (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). The andragogical approach (Knowles, 1984) demonstrates that adult learners prefer functional learning which focuses on solving problems through independent work and practical implementation of acquired knowledge. Online vocational education should be designed and evaluated based on the specific needs of adult learners.

The absence of digital access stands as a major critical challenge. Vocational students tend to possess fewer digital abilities and experience less stable internet connections compared to traditional university students (Gallacher & Ingram, 2021). The combination of poor online learning preparedness and insufficient support puts students at a disadvantage in new virtual educational settings.

Motivation also plays a significant role. Student engagement according to Kahu and Nelson (2018) depends on institutional backing and how much the content connects to individual interests. Vocational learners need online training that proves its practical value while matching their professional objectives to maintain their motivation.

The right adaptation of online delivery methods offers potential benefits for vocational training despite existing challenges. Workplace-integrated digital tools alongside blended learning models allow students to develop contextualized active learning experiences according to the OECD (2021).

This research addresses a gap in existing knowledge by focusing specifically on vocational learners' experiences and their perceptions regarding online training for skill development, goal relevance and personal growth.

3. METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

An online survey was carried out targeting teachers and trainers delivering vocational courses in the UK and the Middle East. All were current students on online courses enabling them to gain accredited and professional qualifications for teaching and assessing vocational learners in the

workplace and in classrooms. A total of 27 respondents participated in the survey. The majority were enrolled in vocationally focused qualifications, with 63% on assessor courses, 30% on internal quality assurance (IQA) programmes, and the remainder pursuing teacher training qualifications. Survey participants included 56% native English speakers and 44% who had English as an additional language. An email was sent out to learners on these online courses inviting them to participate in an online questionnaire using MS Forms. All responses were anonymised. Quantitative responses were analysed by percentages and a thematic analysis was carried out on qualitative responses.

4. PERCEPTIONS OF EDUCATION AND ITS VALUE

An overwhelming majority of 96% of participants confirmed that education played a crucial role in their future achievements because they recognized its value for both their personal growth and professional advancement. A total of 70% of participants believed their ongoing course represented a valuable investment of their time and effort yet 11% disagreed with this assessment and 19% maintained uncertainty. More than eight in ten participants (81%) showed interest in additional education following their current programme completion while 11% remained open to the possibility. The respondents provided various reasons for enrolment where career development stood as the primary motivation for 53% of participants but job requirements motivated 29% of them. A significant 16% enrolled for personal interest.

4.1 Application of Learning

A total of 80% of participants stated they had acquired skills or knowledge from the course that extended beyond the classroom and were applicable in their workplace or daily lives. Participants found assessment techniques useful because they gained skills to prepare work-based assessments (P1), to apply measurement methods in assessments (P2), and to understand different assessment types and requirements (P3; P13). One participant detailed their experience by stating:

I've applied my IQA learning by sampling assessments, giving feedback to assessors, supporting standardisation meetings, and ensuring proper documentation. These skills have helped improve quality and consistency in our assessment process (P4).

The participants demonstrated clear comprehension of quality assurance with P6 reporting that they now knew how to keep assessments fair and honest. Another participant (P5) explained how they developed their practice by attending standardisation meetings, being observed when assessing learners and having professional discussions with the IQA. Valuable life lessons were gained during the course as P7 noted:

It has made me extra aware of quality checks and processes, not just in marking learners' evidence inside the classroom, but this knowledge has helped me gain extra awareness about paying attention to details in my real life (P7).

Participants reported better communication abilities, according to P10 who improved their listening and feedback skills and P8 who was happy to learn more about the sandwich feedback method. The participants developed better understanding through their experiences as P9 confirmed it deepened their knowledge about practice adaptation and resources and P11 stated it enhanced their understanding of inclusivity alongside teacher-student connections. The training produced observable effects that enhanced both their professional and personal growth, according to P18:

I've applied my knowledge of assessment planning, observation techniques, and giving structured feedback during real evaluations in nursery settings. These skills have improved how I support and assess early childhood educators in their professional development (P18).

Participant P19 described their growth in confidence as well as their understanding of audit surveys and IT improvement and efficiency. The majority of participants (74%) believed their present course effectively met their requirements by helping them reach their targets.

4.2 Reflections on Education

Participants expressed detailed insights about their personal views on education as well as their individual definitions of this concept. According to P1, education functions as a vital life-giving force for human beings just like oxygen, while P3 considers it as life's essential vital fluid. P5 explained that although he considers himself an educator and believes education holds essential value, he understands it is not sufficient as a standalone factor. The participants showed some agreement about education leading to expanded knowledge acquisition and new skill development as P6 and P4 mentioned.

To me, education means growth, opportunity, and empowerment. It's a way to better understand, it has helped me become more confident, skilled, and open-minded in both my personal and professional life. (P4)

There was acknowledgment that education could open doors for opportunities and success (P9) as well as new experiences (P12). The theme of progression and improvement was very strong throughout and usually linked to achievement and success, for example: *Development to gain knowledge and skills to equip me to do better in my role (P25)*. Not only does it help the participants, but many were keen to add that they, as teachers, were passing on their knowledge and experiences to a younger generation (P15) and supporting their students to reach their full potential (P10). Education created a powerful desire among individuals to create positive change through their educational work. There was a strong sense of wanting to make a difference through education, as stated by P21.

Education is both a personal and professional journey for me. It contributes meaningfully to my field, and inspire others, especially in early childhood education. It's not just about qualifications; it's about becoming a more impactful practitioner that why I am also pursuing my doctorate (P21).

The participants mostly expressed positive views about education, but one participant warned about its potential to prevent suitable candidates from reaching their goals or obtaining desired positions (P17). This view was very much in the minority as others saw education as power through knowledge (P8) and in P19's words:

Education, to me, means empowerment. It's not just about acquiring knowledge from books or classrooms—it's about gaining the tools to think critically, ask questions, solve problems, and grow as a person (P19).

According to P16 the personal experience of learning and skill development brings satisfaction and helps maintain their current knowledge base: *I enjoy learning and developing new skills, it keeps me up to date as things progress. I find it keeps my mind stimulated and I feel a sense of achievement as I gain these skills and qualifications (P16).*

4.3 Attitudinal Changes Towards Learning

Most participants expressed new learning perspectives after starting the program. The course generated higher confidence levels along with increased motivation among students. P2 acknowledged *I've become more intentional, confident, and motivated* and P4 and P9 shared this experience. P22 praised the tutor on the course, reporting *the mentor and her thoughtful, constructive feedback enhanced my confidence as a learner*.

Being on the course had reactivated commitment to studying which revealed new opportunities for education (P5). The experience made P3 understand learning's vital role better because they transitioned from information retrieval to standards and practice improvement. The enthusiasm about learning again was reiterated by P6 and P19 declared their positive learning attitude had been strengthened. Many people expressed their positive outlook about learning: P7 stated their love for learning and P8 expressed their eagerness to learn. A positive change in their outlook became apparent, according to P13, who reflected it had changed their attitude for the better and P14 acknowledged that self-paced learning benefited him and his fellow students.

4.4 Views on the Role of Education

The participants expressed diverse ideas regarding the function of education. Participants presented two views about education that included lifelong learning values at individual and community levels. Two participants had strong feelings about this:

Education is a lifelong journey that shapes both individuals and communities. I believe it should be meaningful, practical, and focused on real growth not just passing assessments (P10).

I believe education is a lifelong process that empowers individuals to grow, adapt, and contribute meaningfully to their work and society. It's not just about gaining qualifications, but about developing the skills, mindset, and confidence to face real-world challenges (P3).

Participant P1 declared that education provides knowledge to individuals, but practical application of education teaches them competency. P7 defined learning as the key to enduring success and continuous growth and professional advancement while P12 emphasised that every educational approach does not benefit every student because individual students need their own learning patterns and requirements addressed. The concept of education received approval from P8, yet he philosophised that not all education was useful:

I agree with education especially for young people whether that be academic or practical. I also believe that education is important for learning the necessary skills to be successful and safe within the work environment and beyond. I do however believe that there are too many course that are not of any particular benefit that have to be completed and that do not have a direct impact on the learner or their careers (P8).

P13 contributed an inspirational reflection when he stated: *"Teaching is more than imparting knowledge; it is inspiring change. Learning is more than absorbing facts; it is acquiring understanding."* —William Arthur Ward.

5. DISCUSSION

The research examined vocational students' opinions about online education to understand this neglected population in educational studies. Research findings demonstrated that vocational students highly value education since 96 percent of them acknowledged its value for their future

success. The study supports Knowles' (1984) concept of andragogy because adult learners seek meaningful educational experiences with practical applications.

The respondents found their current course to be worthwhile since 70% regarded it as a valuable investment while 81% showed enthusiasm for continuing their academic pursuits. Kahu and Nelson (2018) support this finding by showing that students become more engaged in learning when they perceive educational value as relevant to their personal or career advancement.

The research data showed that students applied their classroom learning to practical situations outside the classroom. Participants revealed how they employed assessment methods and observational methods and quality control measures in their actual work environments. The practical application found in this research matches the fundamental principles of vocational education, according to Winch (2013), who states that vocational learning focuses on practical and situational knowledge instead of theoretical concepts. That learners could articulate the transfer of learning from online settings into real-world contexts indicates that the vocational courses studied were effectively bridging this divide.

However, despite these positive reports, some participants expressed uncertainty or dissatisfaction. The results indicated that approximately 30 percent of learners either doubted or disagreed about their course value as an investment. The unclear perception of course value could stem from difficulties in providing practical training through online methods which Tummons (2011) criticises regarding digital learning's inability to develop performance-based competencies.

The reflections from participants also provide insight into the emotional and motivational impact of vocational training. Students reported both increased confidence levels and renewed enthusiasm for studying along with appreciation for structured feedback from their tutors. The research backs Merriam and Bierema's (2013) theory that adult education requires personal significance and empowerment and relational aspects.

The strong desire for advancement emerged as a main theme which included personal role development as well as assisting others in their growth. The study participants who functioned as educators stated their duty and responsibility to teach essential skills to upcoming learners and pass these skills on to the next generation. The concept of vocational educators as "dual professionals" aligns with OECD's (2021) perspective viewing these educators as professionals dedicated to both their trade expertise and teaching effectiveness.

Nevertheless, in terms of educating others, multiple barriers emerged regarding inclusive practices as well as unclear expectations and course relevance. A participant mentioned that specific required qualifications fail to match properly with workplace responsibilities thus revealing an inconsistency between mandatory certification standards and real workplace requirements. This tension highlights the importance of ensuring vocational qualifications remain contextualised and learner-centred, as stressed by Gallacher and Ingram (2021) in their study on digital inclusion.

The overwhelmingly positive view of education expressed by participants, who described learning as "oxygen," "empowerment," and "a key to success" demonstrates both the intrinsic motivation of vocational learners but also the transformative potential of education. These perceptions reinforce the need for education providers to create online learning content that is meaningful, practically oriented, and emotionally engaging.

6. CONCLUSION

This research investigated how vocational students view their online education, because this group is often overlooked within traditional academic discussions. The research findings show vocational learners deeply value education because they recognise it serves both their professional advancement and their personal development and social involvement.

The participants indicated their acquired skills and knowledge surpassed classroom boundaries since they improved their work performance and improved their dedication to their roles as educators and practitioners. This echoes other research that confirms online vocational education can achieve meaningful learning outcomes (Knowles, 1984; OECD, 2021) when designed properly.

The study demonstrates existing difficulties. A small group of students expressed doubts regarding their course values and practical connections to real-world needs, supporting the report by Gallacher & Ingram (2021). The delivery of practical performance-based learning through online platforms remains difficult because it conflicts with the fundamental principles of observation-based assessment and feedback in vocational training (Tummons, 2011).

Importantly, the research reveals emotional and motivational aspects that students experience during their online learning process. Students experienced increased confidence together with better feedback appreciation and stronger dedication to continuing their educational pursuit. These findings demonstrate why online vocational education needs to be developed that is instructional but also contains relational and affirming elements.

In conclusion, vocational learners are not passive recipients of online training but are active, reflective, and highly motivated individuals who seek relevance, application, and growth. Educational institutions must keep developing online learning models which address both practical needs and individual learning experiences and vocational knowledge complexities to meet the needs of their students effectively. Not only must these be inclusive, but they need to acknowledge the lived experiences of adult learners.

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