



# Who, what, how, and why: Scottish education practitioners and online professional learning. Summary

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# Introduction

This report presents the findings from an online survey to explore Scottish educational practitioners' experiences of online Professional Learning (PL) in the post-COVID era. The survey was open to educationalists across Scotland from Early Learning and Childcare to the Colleges sector, with 183 individual respondents. Respondents were contacted through social media platforms and existing contacts and networks of The Open University in Scotland Schools Engagement Group<sup>1</sup>.

We aimed to understand *who* is engaging with online PL, *what types* of online PL are being engaged with, education practitioners' *experiences and perceptions* of online PL including whether it has met or not their *personal professional learning goals* and what *future developments* in online PL education practitioners would like to see.

Findings were analysed using a combination of descriptive analysis, factor analysis and thematic analysis.

## Summary of key findings

### Nature of professional learning undertaken by this group

- **Who:** 76% of respondents indicated they had undertaken unaccredited online PL courses or workshops, and 63% had engaged in online conferences or seminars in the last 12 months. These findings indicate the ongoing presence and importance of online PL opportunities.
- **What:** Educationalists were most likely to engage in non-credit bearing / unaccredited PL facilitated by Local Authorities or National Education Bodies. Respondents were most likely to have engaged with PL related specifically to pedagogic approaches or learning topics linked with their role (e.g., phase, discipline).
- **PL drivers:** The primary driver for PL was an intrinsic motivation to learn more about their current practice(s), closely followed by a focus on future practice(s). An interesting 3<sup>rd</sup> factor was the role of required PL (i.e., required by an institution, LA or others).
- **Funding:** 77% relied on one or two sources of funding, with free opportunities the primary source (66%).
- **Facilitators:** 46% of respondents accessed two or fewer facilitators of PL, with National Education bodies and Local Authorities being the most reported.
- **Synchronous - Asynchronous:** Respondents reported experiencing combinations of formal asynchronous, informal asynchronous, synchronous, or own-paced learning in the last 12 months, with the most experienced being synchronous online PL (75%). 31.1% of responses referred to informal asynchronous learning, which we had defined as peer-led forums, discussion boards, email groups or social media.

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<sup>1</sup> Distribution included through Young Applicant in Schools Scheme, Teachers Learning to Teach Languages scheme, Scotland based Associate Lecturers and Staff Tutors, OU partner contacts in the Unions, Further and Higher Education Colleges, and Local Authority Directors. Social media posts were shared on Facebook and Twitter.

- **Synchronous professional learning platforms:** Teams (87%) and Zoom (63%) were the most popular platforms. Approximately one in nine (10.9%) indicated they had no experience with synchronous platforms.
- **Asynchronous professional learning platforms:** Roughly 60% of respondents used more informal social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter. However, 24% of the respondents did not use any asynchronous platforms.

## Experiences and perceptions of online professional learning

- **Advantages of online PL:** Key advantages to engaging in online PL were identified as: interpersonal (the opportunity to connect with others), balancing commitments (personal and work), and reduced cost and travel. Across the survey questions, there was a tension between the pragmatics of online PL and a feeling that online PL might create a disadvantage in connecting with colleagues.
- **Challenges:** Educationalists identified two main challenges when engaging in synchronous PL namely skills, their ability to access and engage with online learning, and equipment, including internet access and computer resources. Responses suggested a need for further work around digital learning pedagogies and skills to support facilitators and teachers to make the most of online PL.
- **Synchronous PL approaches:** Useful synchronous approaches included, listening to experienced practitioners, sharing resources, engaging in social interactions, and finally, keeping up to date with current issues.
- **Asynchronous PL approaches:** Making contacts to share ideas and resources was identified as useful within asynchronous PL. Sharing learner resources seemed more important in asynchronous compared with synchronous platforms.

## Meeting needs

- **Professional development needs:** 75.4% of respondents indicated their professional development needs had been met by the online PL opportunities made available. The two most frequently cited reasons why online PL did not meet professional development needs related to the relevance of topics and the timing of the event.
- **Recent and future professional learning foci:** Role and stage of career influenced choices and plans for PL. Despite a return to face-to-face practices in most contexts, there was still a notable interest in blended / online pedagogies, while there was accompanying evidence of digital upskilling taking place. Notable by its lower profile in the responses was the role of practitioner enquiry, raising questions about the support for this as embedded ongoing PL.
- **Future developments in professional learning:** Access to PL, via suitable equipment, at an accessible time was most important to respondents. Responses to questions about future online PL created mixed responses, where stage of career and sector differences were evident.

## Emerging stories

While the individual details of this report create an interesting account of online professional learning within the education sector in Scotland, there are some emerging stories from our findings which either build on previous research or begin to share a different narrative. The backdrop for all these stories is the continued presence and importance of online professional learning in Scottish education.

## **Use of social media and emerging technologies to connect, share, discuss, and find new ideas and thinking**

The role of social media is evident as an important contribution to professional learning throughout our survey as

- A source of information about professional learning
- As professional learning in its own right (connecting, sharing, reading)

Other digital opportunities (e.g., podcasts) have begun to emerge through our findings but more exploration of these is needed.

However, there is a counter story about equity of access for those practitioners who may not engage with digital communities of practice, and where, despite the power of digital media to promote PL opportunities, the main sources of information about PL are still line managers and national organisations. In a sector where there is discussion about where external generative ideas are found in order to create challenge (OECD 2015), there is a question about the extent to which social media and other digital sources can be recognised and valued as part of this process.

## **Ambiguities about ‘what counts’ as professional learning and definitions of terminology around approaches / modes.**

This survey suggests that Scottish educational practitioners are engaging with a complex mix of professional learning modes, including synchronous, asynchronous, informal, and formal. While this is evident throughout, there are places where there is ambiguity around ‘what counts’, where more informal, serendipitous, and practitioner-led learning may not be given the same value as formal, facilitated events. While there is potential in the increasingly digitally connected workforce, understanding how this connectivity can itself support a broader definition and range of PL activities (including personal research, digital dialogue with peers, sharing resources and reading), is under-researched.

## **Challenges of creating agency for practitioners to plan, source and undertake professional learning driven by self-need, interest or aspiration**

It was clear that pragmatic considerations (e.g., funding, timing, topic) had an influence on PL decision making, and sometimes pragmatics overruled other drivers (such as accreditation, reputation of provider or topic). Key drivers for undertaking PL were reported as being around personal interest either for current or future practice. However, we suggest that there are ‘hidden’ drivers underpinning these decisions

- the role of required PL by an institution or LA, and the pragmatic considerations of those funding PL in promoting specific modes / topics.
- the role of practitioners’ professional identities (career stage / role / discipline) creating expectations or particular needs.

This raises the question as to how far practitioners can act with agency to plan, source, and undertake PL that can contribute to a varied and rich range of learning. There is an implied danger here that there are ‘well-trodden’ PL routes at different stages / roles. This can be an advantage in ensuring succession planning (e.g., for leadership) or ensuring practices are kept up-to-date (e.g., around discipline pedagogies, assessments or policies). However, there is a danger that this recycles homogenous routes through a practitioner career, combining expected PL linked to career trajectories and roles, with some responsive PL to policies, approaches, new resources or technologies. How far practitioners have access, funding, and support to drive their own PL journeys requires further investigation.

## **Expectations and experiences of the different types of spaces for professional learning and how these impact on what is provided / what tools are used / how practitioners perceive what they are signing up for**

Responses around the most useful approaches to synchronous and asynchronous online PL spaces, led to an interesting divergence, where respondents clearly assigned different spaces for different pedagogical purposes. The findings suggest that synchronous spaces were considered as a space for 'connecting with people and ideas' while asynchronous spaces are for 'finding and gathering'. This distinction is important for providers working with these spaces in terms of practitioner expectations and the facilitation of online PL experiences, but also in thinking about how blended online PL can be utilised to support the full range of these activities.

## **The role of professional learning (online or face to face) as a relational space for practitioner connectedness and wellbeing, as well as professional networking.**

The personal connectivity (through feelings of belonging and community) of PL spaces was evident throughout our findings, creating an emerging story as to the role of PL spaces as an important part of practitioner wellbeing. This is an aspect to be explored further, particularly for those practitioners who by their geography or roles and context are more isolated from colleagues who can share in issues or ideas that are important to them. Some respondents felt strongly that online PL was a 'less good' option for building these relationships, with a narrative of the 'trade-offs' of convenience and pragmatic considerations over the quality of interactions.

## **Recommendations**

- Consider the importance of line managers and national organisations in shaping what PL is engaged with. How do we ensure suggested or required PL contributes to a self-sustaining sector where new and generative ideas are engaged with?
- Recent calls for more clarity of PL pathways may be an expression of practitioners wanting to create agency to make personal PL decisions. However, our report also highlights a potential danger, of inadvertently promoting, valuing and potentially homogenising routes further.
- Explore the role / presence / support for practitioner enquiry, research, scholarship within Scottish Education, given its importance within the 2020 teacher standards.
- Continue to develop and extend sector definitions of professional learning, to give a clear steer of 'what counts', where informal, self-led, and serendipitous PL *may* have a greater impact than facilitated formal PL for some individuals.
- Explore further the pragmatic drivers and barriers to engaging in online PL, particularly around digital access, and digital upskilling of practitioners.
- Provide more of a focus on the relational aspects of online PL spaces. More work is needed to understand how this can be done, as for example our evidence suggests breakout rooms aren't necessarily useful.

