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**AN ANALYSIS OF NATIONAL PATTERNS OF LEARNING PLATFORM USE BY  
STUDENTS IN SCHOOLS AND ACADEMIES**

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**Abstract:** *The United Church Schools Trust and the United Learning Trust comprise a national group of 12 independent schools and 17 academies across a wide range of geographic and demographic areas of England. In 2008, the decision to implement a learning platform (also known as a Virtual Learning Environment or VLE) across the group was made. Although a fully supported technical solution was provided along with a sustained programme of continuous professional development, the decision as to how the learning platform was to be used was owned by each individual school and academy according to its own priorities.*

**Keywords:**

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The learning platform chosen was itslearning©, developed in Bergen University College in Norway and now adopted across a wide range of educational establishments. As a cloud-based product, itslearning offered a number of attractive potential benefits including:

1. Ease of use
2. Speed of implementation
3. Enhanced collaboration
4. Continuity of curriculum anywhere and anytime
5. Minimal initial investment
6. Scalability
7. Reduction of operating costs
8. Reduction of hosting costs

Once the learning platform was embedded in many of the schools and academies with consistent, sustained usage in areas of excellence, it was been decided to undertake research into how the learning platform was being used and what strategic and implementation lessons could be learned so far. A survey was been consequently undertaken of 1000 students into how they used the learning platform and what their perceptions were about it as a vehicle for teaching and learning. The survey was based on the most commonly used features of the learning platform and was conducted online using the built-in survey tools of itslearning.

The following descriptor preceded the survey:

*To help us improve itslearning in UCST schools and ULT academies, we are asking you to fill in a survey. We are looking at ways in which itslearning can help with students' education and to see if there is anything we can learn from the way that you use it. We would like you to do a short survey which will not take up too much of your time. You will not need to give your name and no-one will be able to identify you from your answers. We would like you to do this survey so we can look at what © UCST 2011 2 | Page students themselves think and do. You do not have to do it, but we hope that you will help us in this way. However, we understand if you would prefer not to take part. It is totally your choice.*

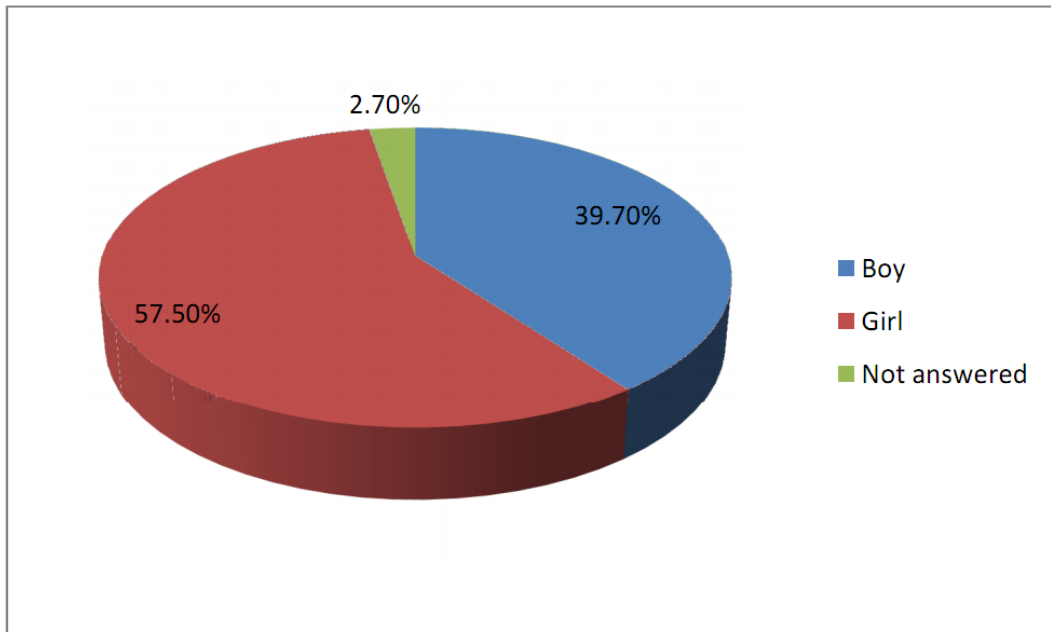
The following is a list of questions that were asked using the survey:

1. Which school or academy do you attend?
2. Are you a boy or a girl?
3. Which year are you in?
4. How often do you use Itslearning?
5. Where do you use Itslearning?
6. When do you prefer to use Itslearning?
7. Which subjects do you use it in?
8. What do you use Itslearning for?
9. What do your teachers use Itslearning for?
10. Have you ever used Itslearning on your phone?
11. Would you like to be able to change the colour and design of Itslearning?
12. How much does Itslearning help with your learning?
13. How much do you enjoy using Itslearning?
14. How easy is Itslearning to use?
15. Do the people who look after you at home have access to Itslearning?
16. What do you like best about Itslearning?
17. For which subjects do you find Itslearning most useful?
18. What things in Itslearning could be made better?

All schools and academies across the group were invited to participate in the survey.

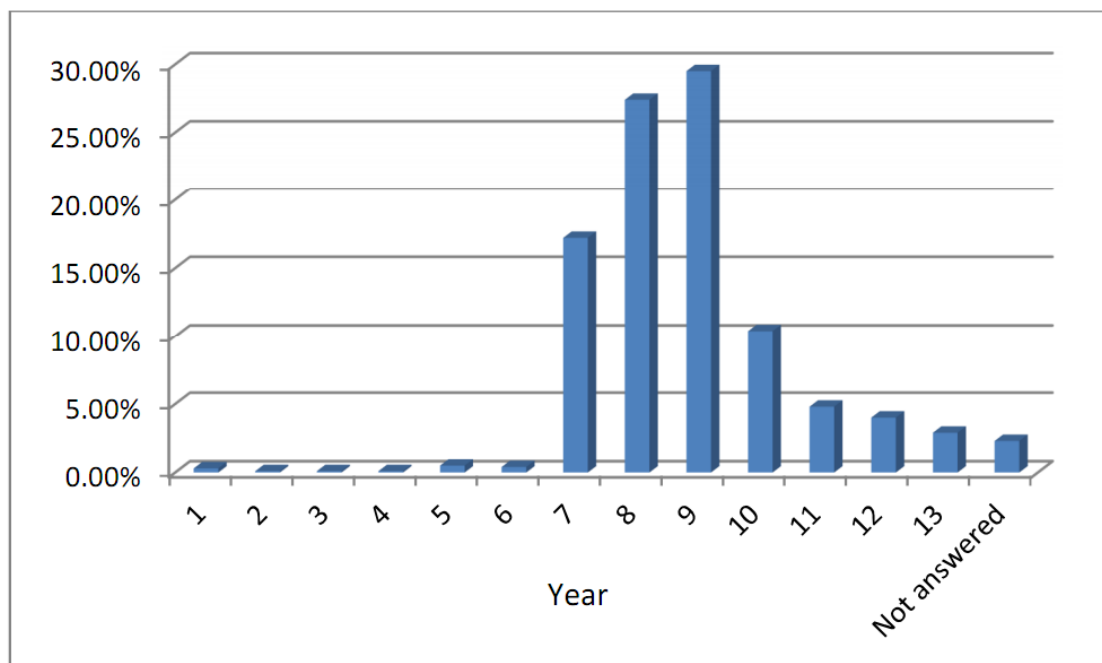
- Those who responded were:
- Barnsley Academy
- Guildford High School
- Hampshire Collegiate School
- Accrington Academy
- Hull Collegiate School
- Caterham School
- William Hulme's Grammar School
- Ashford School
- Northampton Academy
- Arnold School
- Lambeth Academy
- Lincoln Minster School
- North Oxfordshire Academy
- Salford City Academy
- Sheffield Springs Academy
- Stockport Academy

## Findings Gender



There was a skewing of the sample towards the female gender, partially because some of the schools' populations were predominantly or exclusively girls. However, upon analysis there was no gender bias in any of the survey question responses, so the overall responses to the survey cannot be said to have any directly gender-attributable content.

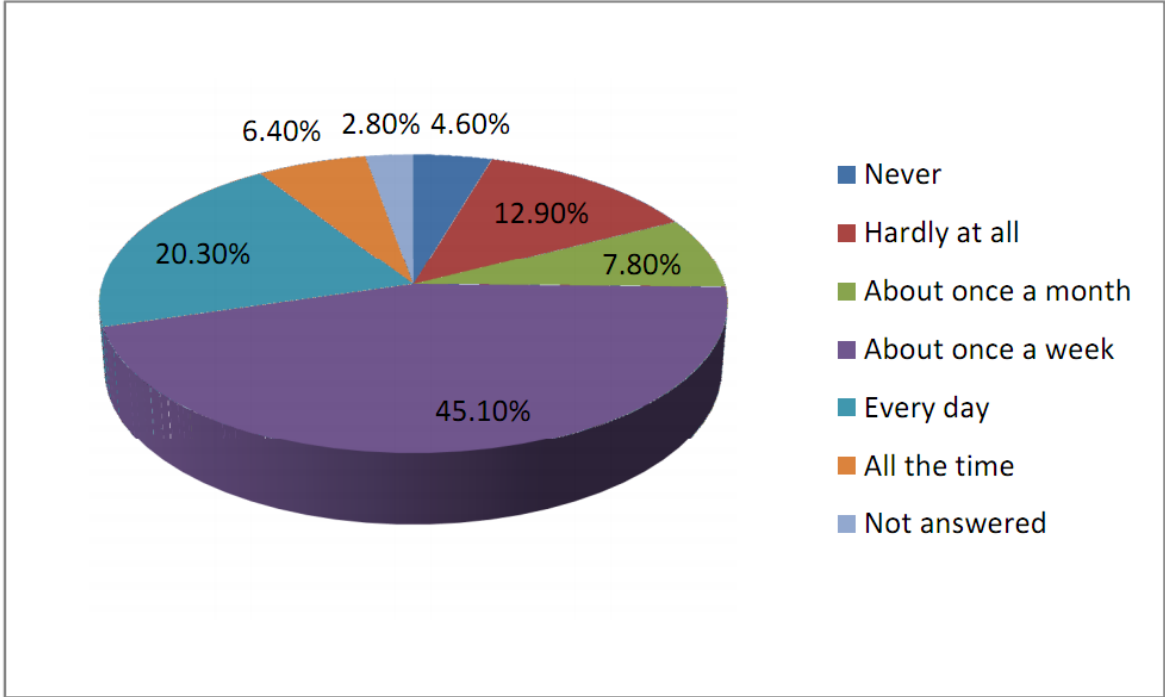
## Year Groupings



Although many of the schools provide education from year 1 (or earlier) up to year 13 and all children were given the opportunity to respond to the survey it can be seen from the data that there was little response from the early/foundation years and the primary phase. The majority of responses came from

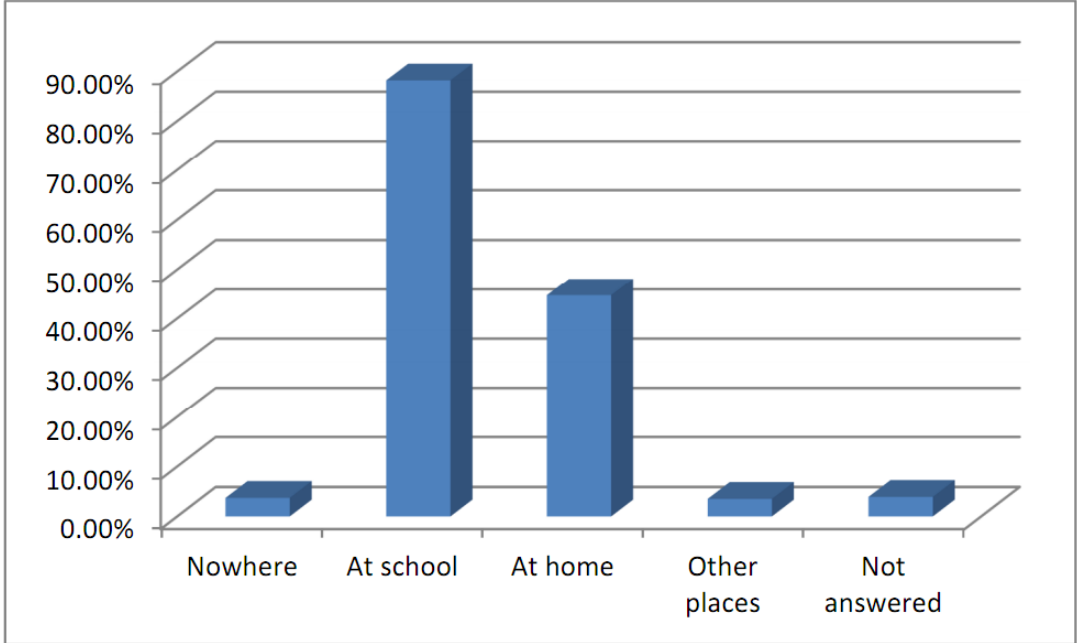
the first four years of the secondary phase (11-14 years of age) with responses tailing off in years 11-13. This is partially attributable to the way in which teachers use the learning platform, with the teachers of those age groups using the learning platform to deliver continuity of curriculum and children increasingly taking a higher level of responsibility for independent learning.

**Frequency of Usage**



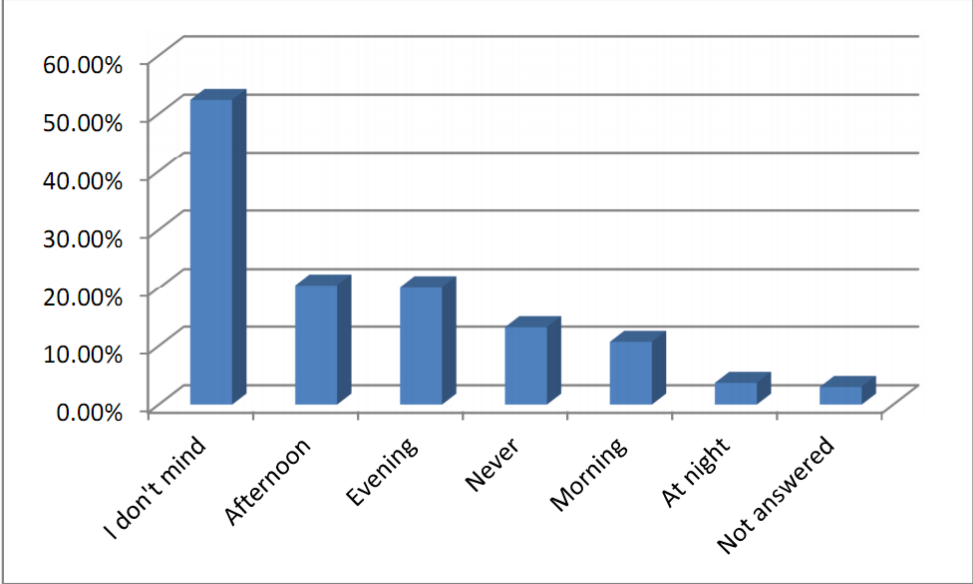
Although less than a quarter of students reported rare usage of the learning platform (i.e. once a month or less), nearly three quarters of students used it at least once a week with less than a quarter using it every day. The most common frequency of usage reported was once a week.

**Location of Usage**



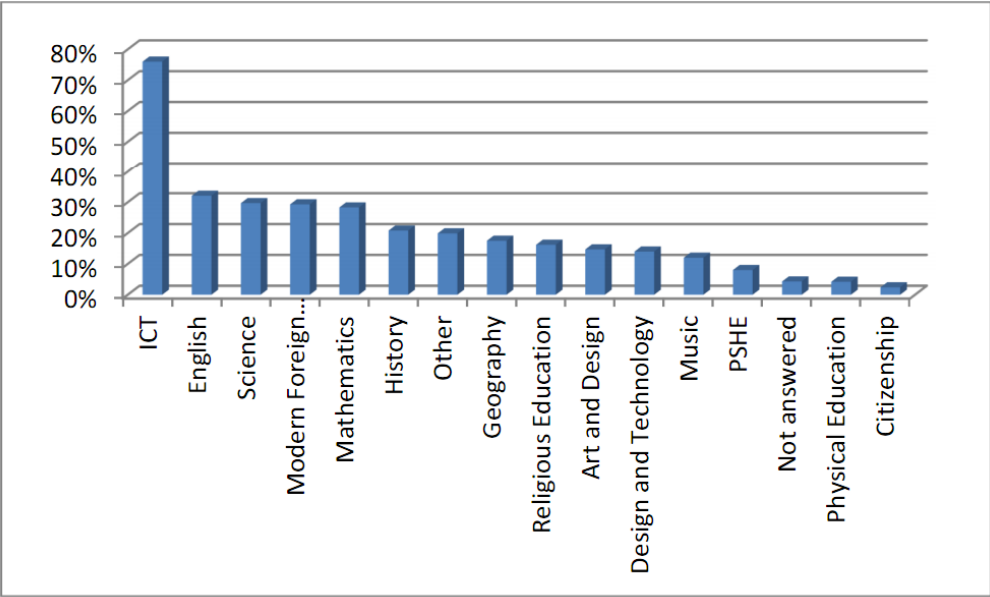
By far, the most common place where the learning platform was used was at school, although nearly half of the students also reported using the learning at home. The data show that those schools which actively encouraged students and teachers to use the learning platform had a higher uptake of usage both at school and at home, although usage in school was reported as being higher.

**Timing of Usage**



When asked which time of day they preferred using the learning platform, half the students indicated no preference. Of those times where preferences were indicated, afternoon and evening were preferred with morning and night ranking low as preferred times. A small percentage of students indicated that they never preferred using the learning platform.

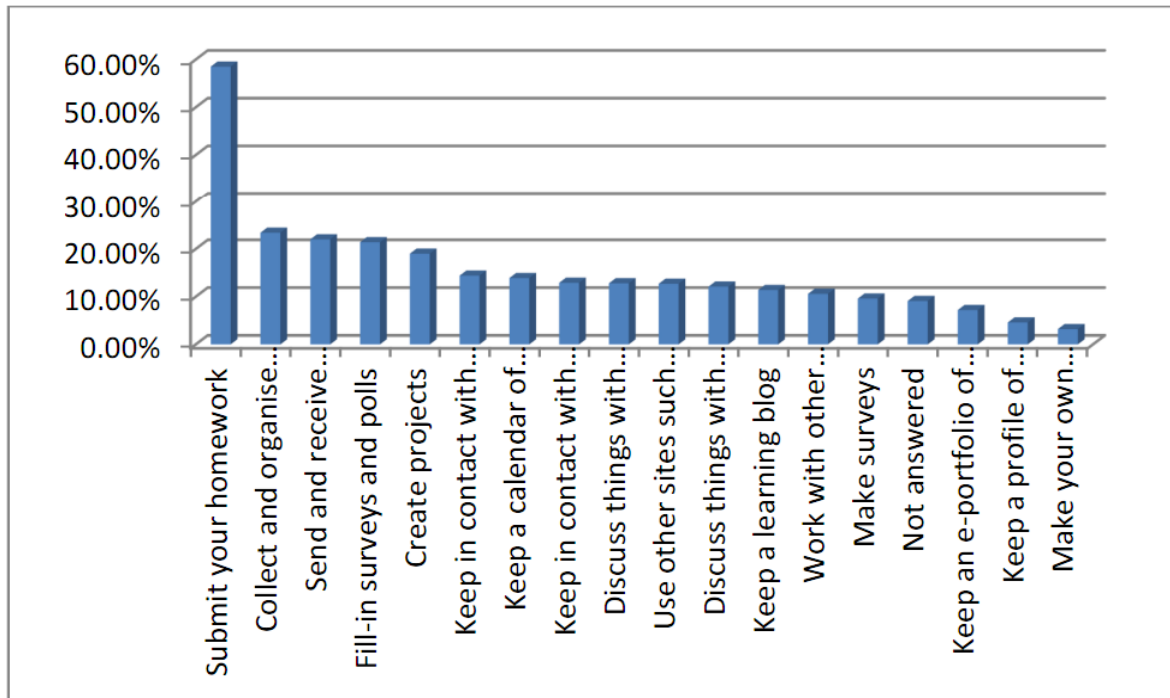
**Subjects**



It is perhaps unsurprising during the early years of adoption of a technology in the school that the subject in which the technology is predominantly used is ICT. Given the digital nature of ICT, the

content of the curriculum and the teachers' possible willingness to be early adopters in learning technologies, it is predictable that we see a disproportionate usage of the learning platform in ICT. It is however, interesting to note that 'core' subjects such as English, Mathematics, Science and Modern Foreign Language are also amongst the most highly visible subjects in learning platform usage.

### Students' Purpose

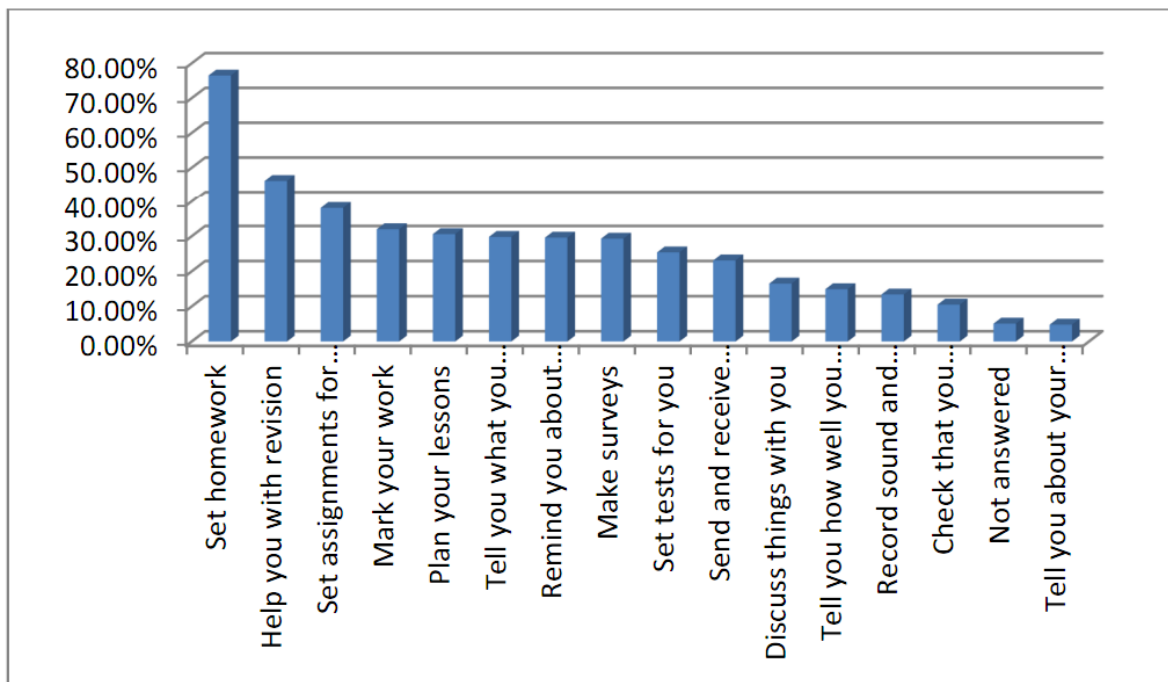


When asked the purpose to which they put the learning platform, students ranked the applications in order as follows:

1. Submit your homework
2. Collect and organise this week's work
3. Send and receive messages
4. Fill-in surveys and polls
5. Create projects
6. Keep in contact with teachers
7. Keep a calendar of things like tests or homework
8. Keep in contact with other students
9. Discuss things with teachers
10. Use other sites such as MyMaths. for example
11. Discuss things with other students
12. Keep a learning blog
13. Work with other students
14. Make surveys
15. Not answered
16. Keep an e-portfolio of all your best work
17. Keep a profile of yourself
18. Make your own webpage

The more administrative uses by students ranked as the most often used, with homework, work management and communications ranking most highly. It was interesting to note a reasonably high uptake of surveys and project creation as well.

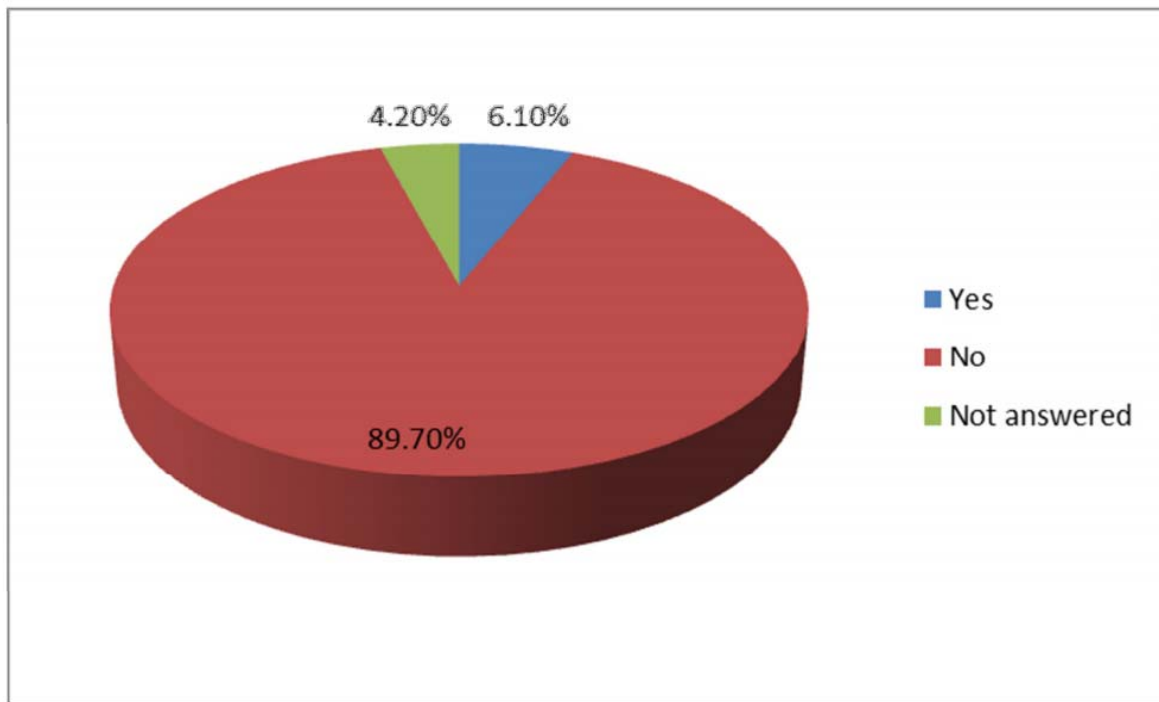
## Teachers' Purpose



When asked how teachers used the learning platform, students' responses closely matched what they had already stated about their own use. Administrative applications such as setting homework, providing material for revision, setting assignments and marking students' work ranked as the most commonly reported (by the students) use of the learning platform by teachers.

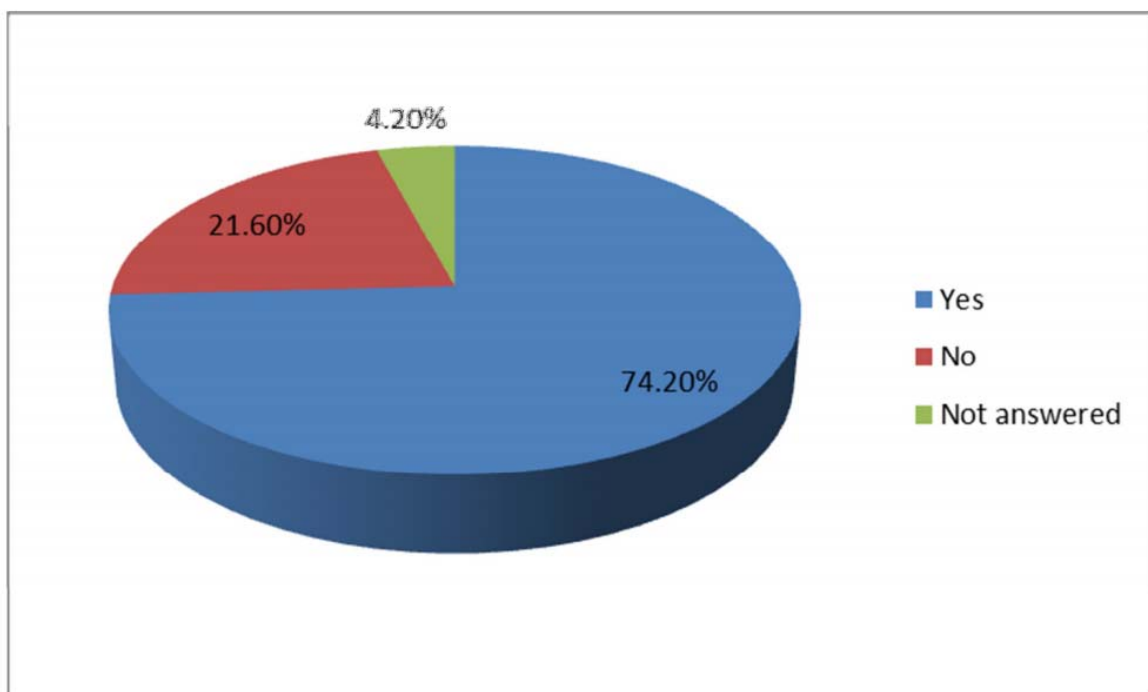
1. Set homework
2. Help you with revision
3. Set assignments for you
4. Mark your work
5. Plan your lessons
6. Tell you what you need to learn
7. Remind you about things
8. Make surveys
9. Set tests for you
10. Send and receive messages
11. Discuss things with you
12. Tell you how well you are doing
13. Record sound and video for you to listen to and watch
14. Check that you haven't copied things from the internet
15. Not answered
16. Tell you about your behaviour at school

### Mobile Usage



Although a mobile version of the learning platform is available for use on smart phones and tablets, very few students reported using this facility.

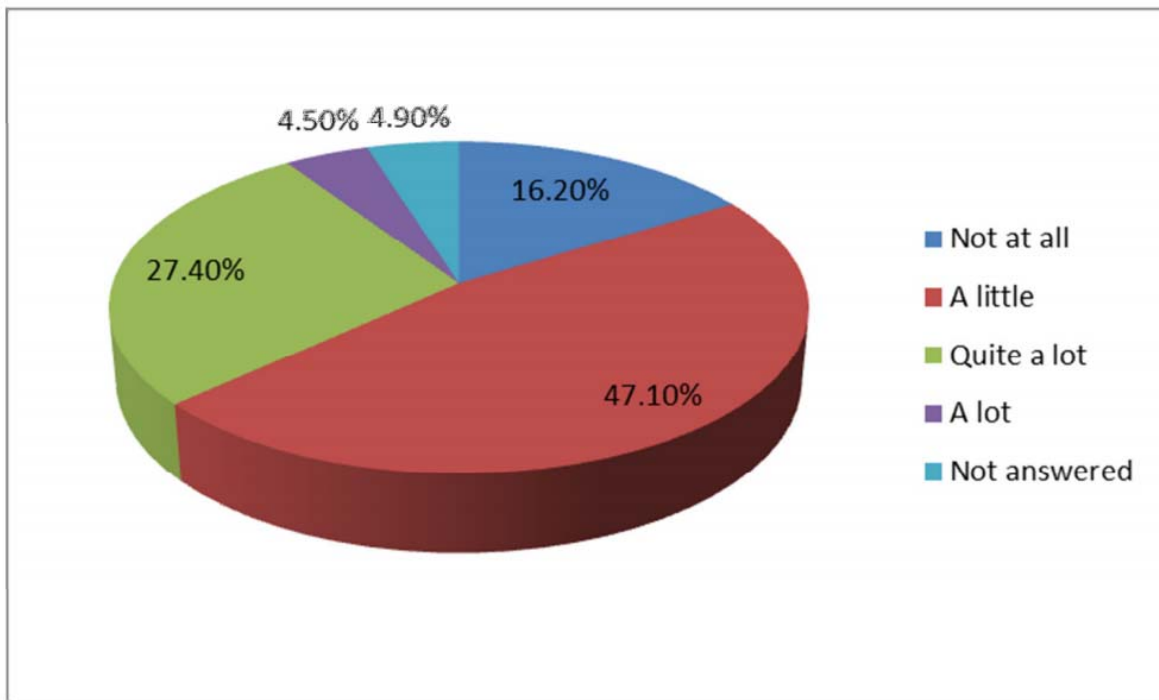
### Colour and Design



Unsurprisingly, when students were asked if they would like greater control over customising the colour and design of the learning platform an overwhelming proportion of them answered in the affirmative, indicating that personalisation is a key attraction in using online spaces.

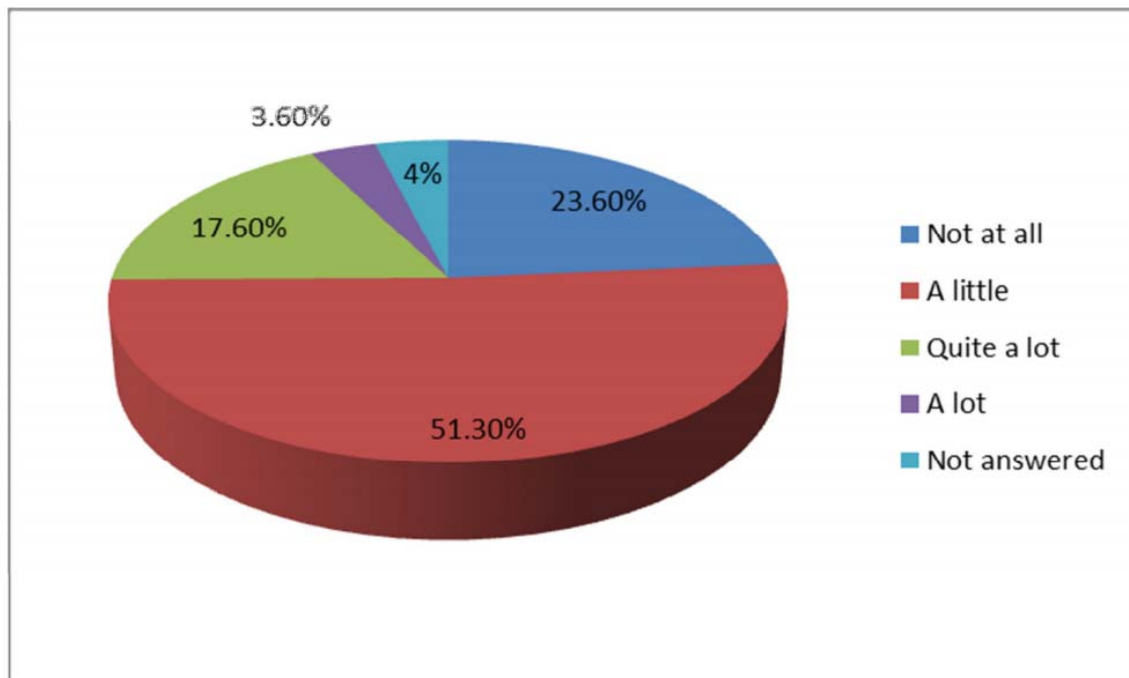


### Usefulness



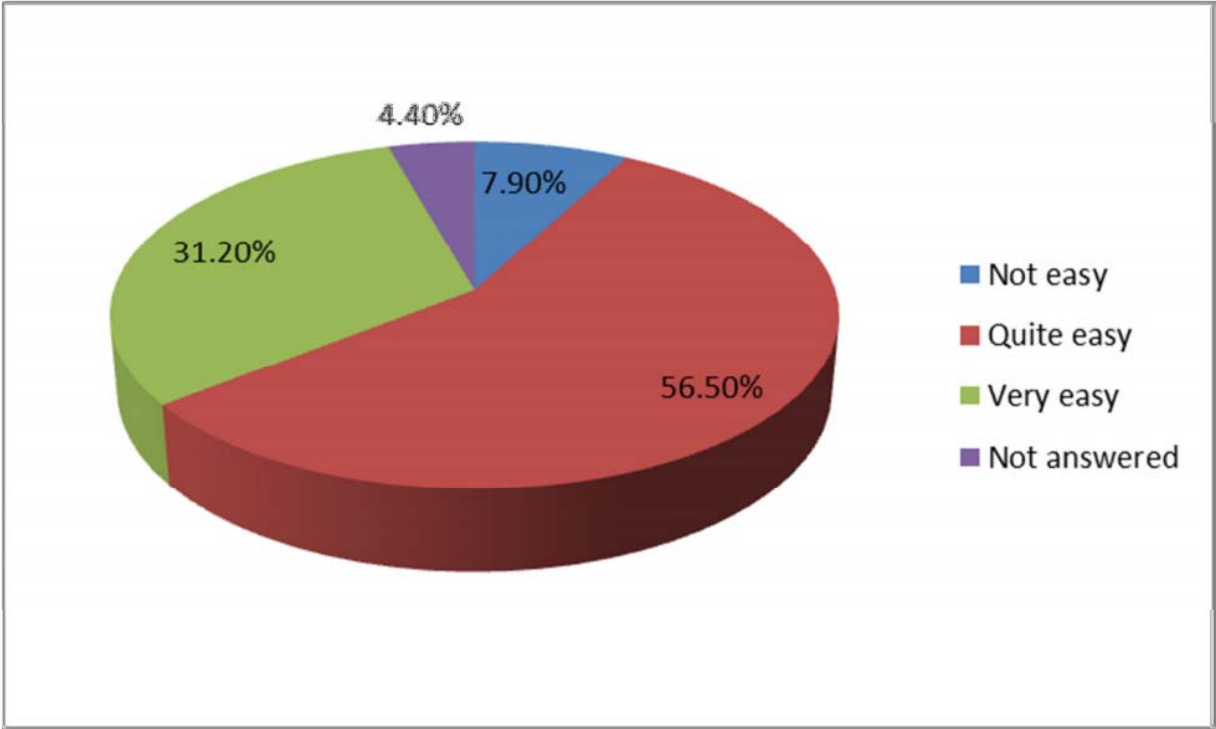
More than three quarters of students reported that they found the learning platform useful to some degree.

### Enjoyment



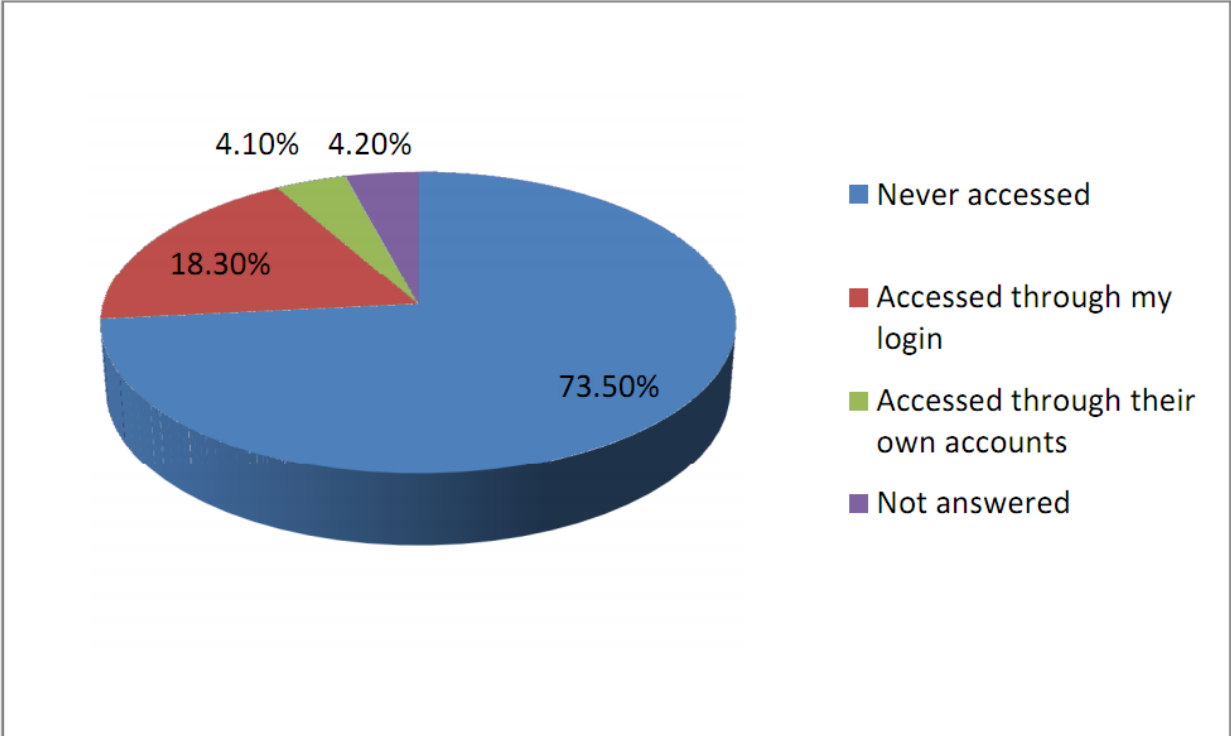
Less than a quarter of students reported that they did not enjoy using the learning platform. Given that homework was the most reported use of the learning platform it is unsurprising that so few students reported enjoying using the learning platform a lot.

**Ease of Use.**



The learning platform was perceived as being easy to use with a very small percentage of students reporting it as being not easy to use.

**Carers' Access**





## Improvements



Most of the suggested improvements by students of the learning platform focussed upon aesthetic rather than functional changes. Students indicated a desire to be able to change colours, design and layout although some also requested educational games to be built into the system along with a greater capacity to use the social elements of the learning platform. However these latter two suggestions seemed to stem from a desire to make the learning platform more recreational, rather than a desire to improve its educational worth.

## Summary of findings

1. There was no statistical difference between boys' and girls' use of the learning Platform
2. Most students' usage occurred during the first four years of secondary school (11-14 years of age)
3. Most students used the learning platform at least once per week
4. Students mainly used the learning at school, but many also used it at home
5. Students generally had no preference for the time of day when they used the learning platform
6. Most common usage of the learning platform was in ICT, English, Science, Modern Foreign Languages and Mathematics
7. Students mainly used the learning platform for completing and submitting homework, organising their weekly work and communicating with teachers
8. Students reported teachers mainly using the learning platform for setting homework, helping with revision and setting assignments
9. Few students used the learning platform on mobile devices
10. Students wanted greater control over the colour and design of the learning platform
11. Most students found the learning platform to be useful
12. Most students enjoyed using the learning platform to some degree
13. Most students found the learning to be easy to use
14. Few adults at home accessed their children's learning platform
15. Students reported homework as being the best feature
16. Students found the learning platform most useful in ICT, Modern Foreign Languages, English and Mathematics
17. Students mostly wanted design improvements to the learning platform

## Recommendations

1. Most of the reported usage of the learning platform came from students in the 11-14 age group. There is potential for a greater usage in both the primary phase and also in the upper years of secondary education.

2. Usage of the learning platform is dominated by a few subjects. Greater support is required for 'minority' subjects. This may involve professional development to assist teachers in identifying resources and activities that might be brought into an online learning environment.
3. Although usage of the more basic, administrative functions of the learning platform are well embedded, there needs to be more focus and support on the more creative applications within the learning platform. Teachers need to be encouraged to explore the more creative elements available.
4. As teachers and students increasingly have access to devices that are small, portable, personal, and networked so consideration needs to be given to ways in which the learning platform might be usefully deployed on these devices.
5. Students have argued for greater flexibility in the look-and feel of the learning platform. This should be explored within the constraints of health and safety guidelines for colour and contrast, perhaps with a view to offering choices of theme-based interfaces.
6. In order to facilitate true online educational partnerships, ways need to be found of engaging parents, teachers and students together within the learning platform environment.
7. A similar survey of teachers should be conducted later this year to compare and correlate the findings with the students' survey. This will help to formulate future strategies on planning, implementation and professional development.

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