

EtonX self-study courses: an overview of school take-up and use during Covid-19 school closures

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PREPARED BY

Dr Iro Konstantinou
Eton College



Key findings

- Building in some accountability in the delivery of the courses is vital to ensure student engagement . This does not need to be too time-consuming for teachers, a check-in can be enough.
- Not all students have the required resources (laptops or Wi-Fi), so the experience varies across students.
- Making the relevance of the courses obvious is necessary for student engagement.
- Self-study courses have a place in post-lockdown education and all schools would be eager to use them again.
- The cost of such a resource can be prohibitive for schools.
- Building students' skills through the courses was one of the main benefits teachers identified.
- Some schools mentioned that mainly high-achieving students engaged with the self-study courses. Seeing as the value added of these courses is to raise the aspirations of low-achieving students, we need to better understand how all students can benefit from the courses.
- 100% of schools agreed that they would use self-study courses beyond Covid-19.
- The asynchronous nature of self-study courses, which fosters independent learning, followed by teacher check-ins is the ideal blend for asynchronous learning.
- Very few schools collected data from students to measure the impact or benefits of the courses and this is a possible area for future research.

Overview

When the first UK lockdown came into effect in March 2020, EtonX and Eton College offered free access to all their self-study student courses to UK state schools. In the first lockdown (April-July 2020), 34,120 students enrolled on the courses. During the second lockdown (September-December 2020), another 10,213 students enrolled, and in the third lockdown (January 2021 – ongoing), we saw 6,537 students take up the courses. We offered a range of courses based on the various skills schools wanted to develop in their students and we saw a wide spread of take-up of the different courses (Table 1). Image 1 shows the geographic location of the various schools which enrolled, a testament to fact that schools were spread all across the UK.

COURSE	NO OF SCHOOLS
Resilience	495
Job interview skills	304
Research skills	303
Creative problem solving	294
Writing skills	250
Making an impact	242
CV writing	169
Critical thinking	126
Public speaking	57
Entrepreneurship	41
Verbal communication	36

Table 1. Course name and number of schools

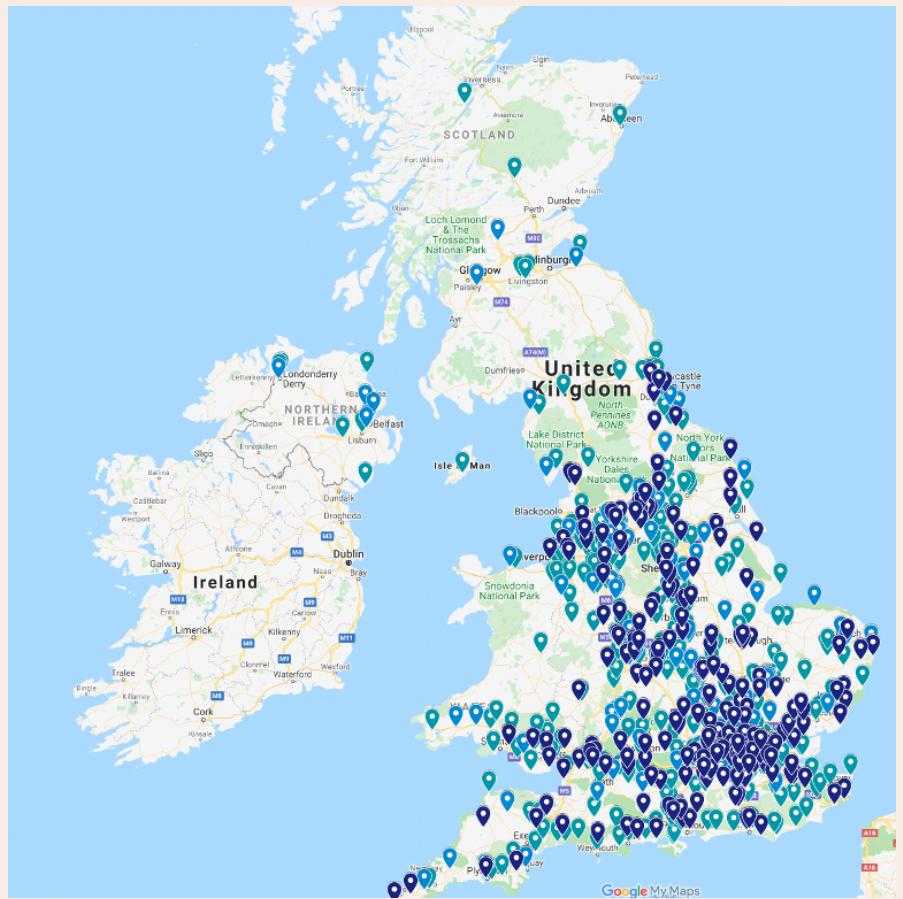


Image 1. Locations of schools which enrolled in the courses

METHODOLOGY

In March 2021, we sent out a short questionnaire to participating schools which had high course completion rates. The reason for this was to prevent overwhelming students and staff who were already very busy during a very stressful year. As such, we chose schools that had engaged and could provide some good insights into how the courses worked. There were 14 open-ended questions following the themes outlined in the discussion below; namely, reasons they enrolled in the courses and perceived benefits, student engagement and how schools monitored engagement, difficulties with delivering the courses and future directions for self-study courses.

In total, seven schools filled in the questionnaire. Table 2 shows the breakdown of how many students from each school enrolled on a course. Even though only a small number of schools replied to the questionnaire, the open responses gave us some interesting insights into how the courses worked for schools. There was also a good spread of how many students enrolled in courses at each school, which provides a comprehensive overview of enrolment. Following the questionnaire, we emailed schools and asked them to take part in in-depth interviews to better understand their experience. In total, four schools agreed to a telephone interview. The interviewees were staff involved in enrolling students in the EtonX courses and monitoring the progress. The data was analysed thematically since this was a qualitative project which tried to capture the experiences of different schools.

NUMBER OF STUDENTS	NUMBER OF SCHOOLS
0-50	1
51-100	1
101-200	2
201-300	2
300+	1

Table 2.

Findings

Year groups and choice of courses

The courses were used across year groups, with most schools using them for Years 10 to 13.

The most popular course was Resilience. One of the teachers explained that this was because of the situation students were in. During Covid a lot of the support networks students would have had at school were taken away and, as such, they were encouraged to take up this course. Another school mentioned that the school had a focus on Growth Mindset and the course complemented their own work. Complementing what the schools already offered was mentioned in relation to other courses. For example, interview skills were being provided by one school and the additional course was offered to strengthen these skills. Overall, we found that schools liked the breadth of choice and believed that this was one of the draws of the EtonX self-study courses.

Reasons to enrol and benefits of EtonX courses

The questionnaire showed three main reasons why schools chose to enrol students on EtonX courses: it was easy to monitor what students were doing; to build necessary skills that students have missed during lockdown and to enhance their learning; and there was a good variety of options for courses.

This was supported by the interviews.

Discussing skills students needed to develop, School A believe that, especially in Y12, things often go wrong as students prepare for A level exams and they need to be able to deal with failures and persevere. Therefore, learning how to be resilient is vital. School C mentioned that all schools should decouple academic learning from skills learning and ensure that there are explicit opportunities to develop these skills.

School B mentioned that students completed the courses over the summer as preparation for Y12. Since they did not do GCSEs, they missed out on essential skills which are associated with the process of preparing for and sitting exams. So, the courses helped with the maturation process and critical thinking that comes with the GCSEs and preparing for A levels. This was also reflected in the questionnaire where developing skills, which might otherwise be developed incidentally in the classroom, was mentioned as one of the reasons for completing the courses. The opportunity for incidental learning was lost and as such schools wanted to fill these gaps. Another school mentioned that these skills are often developed tangentially but that explicit teaching of some skills is necessary for all students to pick these up; although students who do not perform well academically tended to be the ones who lacked such skills.



Year groups and choice of courses

The asynchronous nature of courses, with follow-up from the teacher, is the ideal blend for many schools. Students became more familiar with online activities through school lockdowns and the tutor check-in brought accountability to what they had to do. This was not easy with other such courses which could not be checked easily online. School D thought that this model would be the future of some educational activities, as a takeaway from the pandemic. As some students are preparing for the workplace, it is important for them to learn how to be self-motivated, manage their own time to complete tasks and feed back to someone, which was what EtonX courses offer. This was another perceived benefit by schools.


Most schools mentioned that they had a wide offering of co-curricular activities but nothing which required the level of independent learning needed for EtonX courses. School B mentioned that they were great additions to their own offerings, since there was a wide range of courses which students could take. The fact that the courses were free was also an incentive for many schools. They acknowledged that not all of them had the resources to offer such a comprehensive selection of courses. Resources like this usually cost a lot of money and they welcomed the fact that these were offered for free.

One of the strengths of the courses, and why teachers found them very useful, was that they did not require extra work for teachers. Apart from checking in and encouraging students to complete the activities, the structured nature of the courses meant that teachers did not have to give time to creating resources or checking homework. Students could work independently with little supervision. This is rare because many activities require input and explanation by teachers and, as such, the different approach of EtonX courses was welcomed by staff.

Engagement, delivery, and monitoring

Most schools advertised the courses via email or during form time. A small number of schools advertised through the parents and ran assemblies. Most schools found that, unless it was compulsory to complete the course, there were varying levels of engagement.

Not all schools followed the same formula for monitoring and some schools changed their approach between lockdowns. School A offered courses during the first lockdown but students were not monitored. This led to varying results of engagement. On average, around 50 per cent of students logged in and very few completed the course. During the second lockdown, students were monitored more closely. They were offered time in school to do the courses and this led to successful engagement and completion.



School A did not monitor what students got out of the course but they thought it was important to do so in the future. Even though students completed the course, it was important to measure the impact on students. It was not obvious how they might do this, but they would like to explore this further. From anecdotal evidence they found that some students gained a lot from completing a course, whilst some students didn't, so filling in the gaps would be useful. School A mentioned that they will be offering the Resilience course in Y12. This will be a structured process during form time when tutors will check student progress.

School B mentioned that they did not monitor the progress at Y12 and Y13. They wanted students to focus on exam preparation. This led to poor engagement. For Y11, where students were completing the courses over the summer, teachers checked engagement periodically. The majority of students engaged and completed the course. The teacher at the school guessed that this might have been because students knew that someone would be checking when they came back to school in September.

Course engagement is more likely when students can see the relevance of the course to their immediate needs. For example, one student who completed the Interview Skills course went on to have an interview for Oxbridge. They could see how the course could help them prepare for this, and, after they did the interview, they reflected on how the course had been useful and how what they learnt could be applied during the interview. This was echoed by all staff during the interviews: being able to see the relevance was crucial in ensuring student engagement.

Schools mentioned how different students were likely to engage differently. For example, School D mentioned that students from some cultural backgrounds tend to be very engaged because of parental expectations. This was observed in other co-curricular offerings at the school and it was also the case with the EtonX courses. Another school mentioned that these courses would be better suited to those who are intrinsically motivated and want the extra challenge. They mentioned that students who struggled academically needed to focus on core curricular and subject engagement and that they usually allocate more time towards encouraging them to do that. School C mentioned that students who struggle academically will find it difficult to engage with the course fully and get the full benefits. This was because of the independence required to complete the courses and the minimal teacher support.

Difficulties

Access to resources and a good WiFi connection were mentioned as a difficulty by several schools. Students in School A, for example, had to complete courses mostly on their phones, since most of them did not have a laptop.

Many students were not used to online learning to complete homework/activities and understanding of what they needed to do slowed things down for many of them. Students' digital literacy levels varied widely and some students found it difficult to navigate some of the materials. The process of signing up was flagged by many schools as something which caused confusion but had nothing to do with the course itself.

Some schools found monitoring students challenging. Unless there was a process in place, it was common for students to stop completing the tasks. For many schools, which were not accustomed to similar courses, it took some trial and error to find the best approach, as discussed in the previous section.

Making time for extra-curricular activities is always a challenge for schools. One school said that when things get back to normal and everything gets busy again, it is difficult to imagine when students will have time to complete these courses.

Future directions

100% of respondents said that they are very likely or likely to use asynchronous self-study courses when schools go back to face-to-face learning and 100% agreed or strongly agreed that self-study courses are needed for students beyond the lockdown.

All schools were very positive about the take up of self-study courses moving forward. Upskilling students and filling in the gaps from the lockdowns was a priority for all of them and they saw the opportunities offered by self-study asynchronous courses.

Schools appreciated the variety of EtonX courses and they would like to see even more on offer which would relate to topical issues and skills. They did not think that these were needed for subject-specific purposes. Many schools thought that the courses would be very beneficial for the transition between year groups and they were planning to use them again. The only limitation would be the cost if these courses were to be offered at full price, since schools' budgets would not allow for such courses.