

AccessApps at Dundee College

PADDI Project Evaluation



1. Executive Summary

The PADDI (Portable Access Device and Development Initiative) project has provided students at Dundee College with access to a wide range of open source and freeware applications bundled under the name 'AccessApps'. The full set of highly useful tools was made available to students on USB sticks so that they could use them on any Windows computer with an enabled USB slot, including at home. Within the college, a narrower range of tools was installed on the college network. Both within the college and on the portable USB sticks, library resources, including links to the catalogue and induction material, were integrated within the AccessApps interface. The majority of students (over 80%) responding to the final evaluation have made use of AccessApps in their studies and acknowledge the flexible benefits of its many tools and resources. Library staff have been key to the success of the project; increased interaction with students has enhanced students' appreciation of assistance available from the library, both in terms of personal support and of awareness of online resources. The findings of the project evaluation suggest that one of the main benefits of AccessApps is the flexibility that it offers to students to tailor the support they receive to fit with their individual learning needs. In this sense it has been an empowering project, giving students individual control over the selection of assistive or other technologies that are most useful in their studies.

2. Introduction

This report has been produced by the JISC Regional Support Centre Scotland North & East (RSC) to evaluate student experiences of the AccessApps suite of portable open source and freeware applications, rolled out across Dundee College in 2009-10 as part of the PADDI (Portable Access Device Development Initiative) project. AccessApps provides a range of solutions to support writing, reading and planning, as well as sensory, cognitive and physical difficulties. The project, which was led by library staff at Dundee College, with the assistance of the RSC, involved contributions from curriculum and learning support staff. The role of the RSC was to provide training and advice, as well as to carry out the project evaluation.

120 students from within 3 curriculum areas (Catering, Care and Special Programmes) participated in the project. Baseline information about participating students was captured at the outset of the project (in late 2009). Following AccessApps training and the provision of the apps on USB pens to students, an additional survey was conducted at the end of the project in April 2010. The project team, including the RSC and Learning Centre Team Leader, carried out several focus groups and interviews in order to gather additional information on student views of AccessApps. 22 people were interviewed in total.

3. Baseline survey

All participating students responded to the baseline survey, conducted in late 2009. It found that the majority of respondents (92%) had use of a computer at home. Student attitudes towards computers varied, although the majority were positive and the most

enthusiastic responses came from those with a home computer. On the whole, students appeared confident in their use of computers and specific applications such as Internet browsers, word processing, spreadsheets and email. They were less familiar with presentation and mind-mapping software. The majority of students (59%) expressed the view that they would like computers to be used more in teaching & learning. The figure was slightly higher for those who considered themselves to have additional support needs.

4. Final Survey

4.1 Student information

Just over half of participating students provided final evaluation material (67). Most (50%) were in their first year of study.

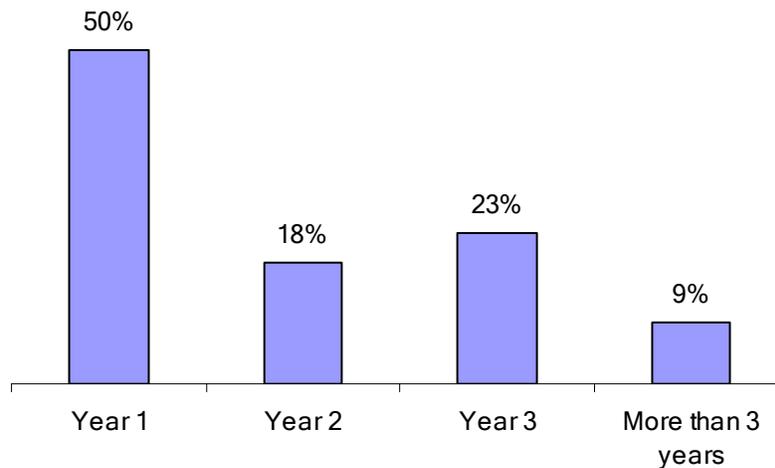


Fig 1: Year of study (N=64)

67% of students were studying on an Access or Introductory level course. The full range of courses is outlined in Fig 2.

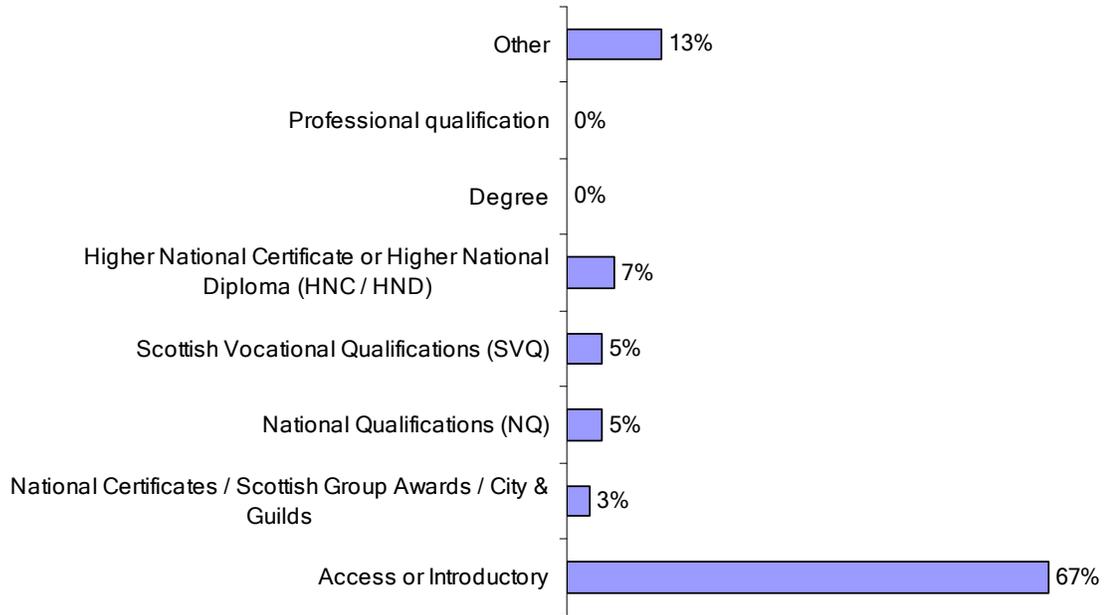


Fig 2: Level of course (N=61)

Additionally, a couple of students commented that they were studying via distance learning.

4.2. Attitudes towards technology

In line with responses collected at the outset of the project, the majority of students were confident in the use of computers. 43% considered themselves to be enthusiastic users and 40% described themselves as 'able'. Obviously, it is possible to be both enthusiastic and have a low level of IT skills and one student indicated that they felt this was true in their case.

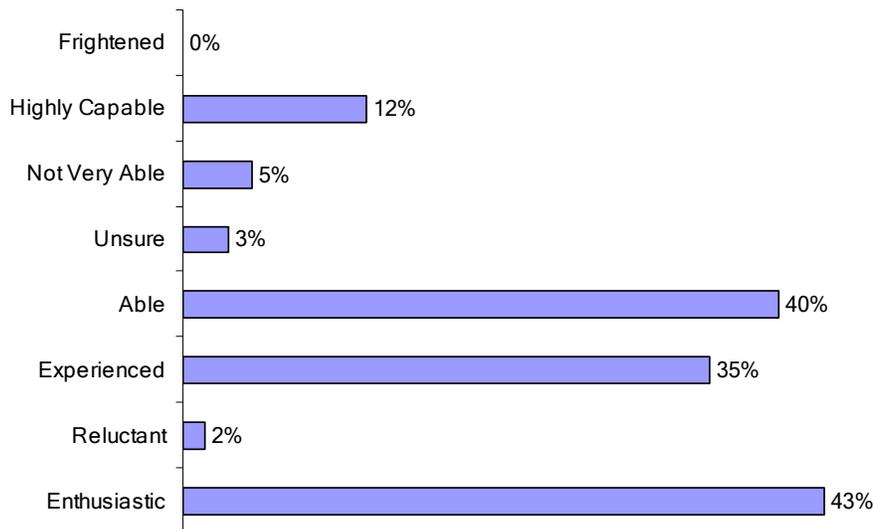


Fig 3: My attitude towards using computers (N=65)

4.3. Experiences of AccessApps

4.3.1. Use of AccessApps

The majority of students (81%) indicated that they had used AccessApps.

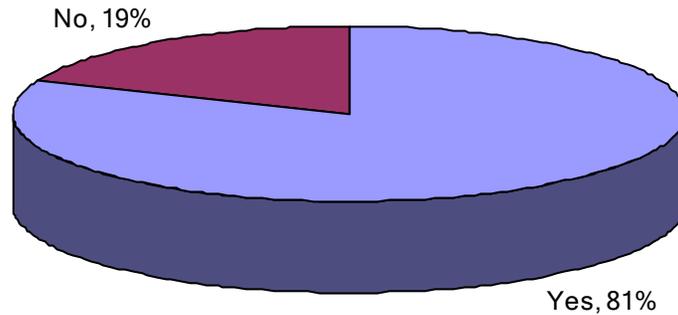


Fig 4: Have you used AccessApps? (N=63)

Students had made use of a wide range of AccessApps applications as shown in Fig 5. The most widely-used programs were TypeFaster (a typing tutor), RapidSet (font & background changer), the Sage (dictionary & thesaurus), the Virtual Magnifying Glass and Vubar (used to read one line of text at a time).

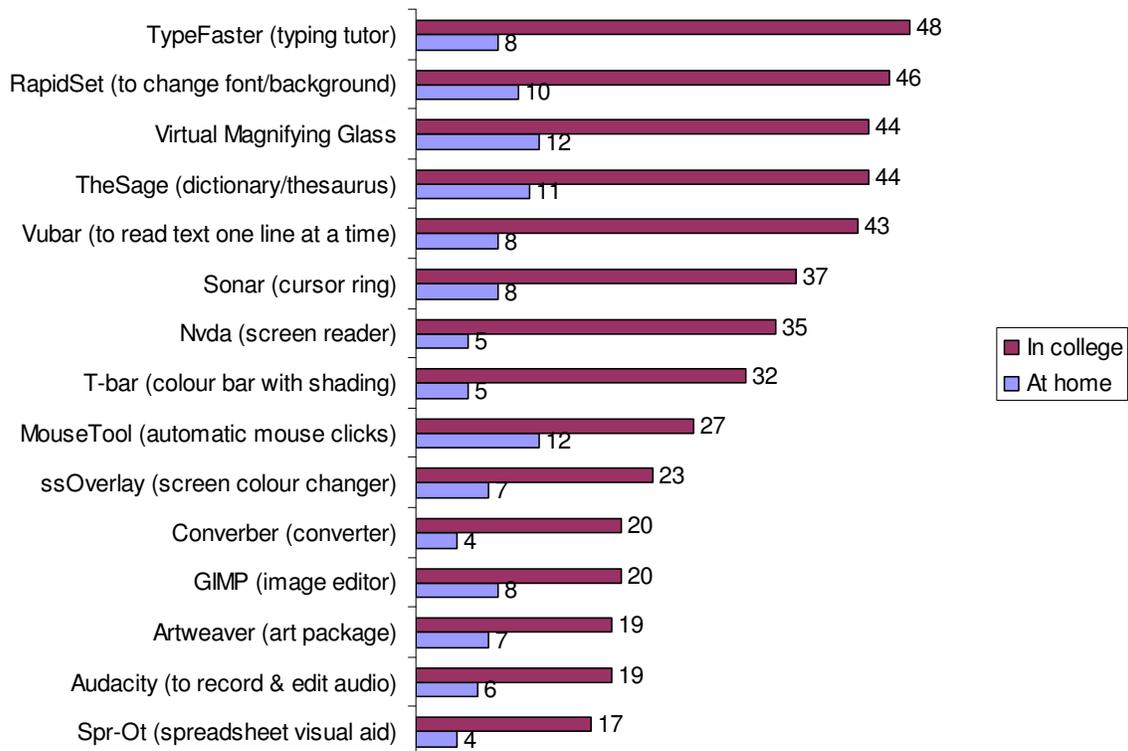


Fig 5: Use of specific applications (N=62)

Interestingly, 9 of the 12 students who stated that they did not use AccessApps went on to specify particular programs that they had used within the AccessApps suite.

The majority of students (80%) felt that AccessApps had helped them in their studies. Students were asked to identify their favourite programs and discuss how they had used them on their course. Of the 53 open text comments received, 28% referred to the TypeFaster typing tutorial, with several students stating that it had helped them to complete college work more easily. The virtual magnifying glass was also popular with students, with 21% citing this as their favourite tool because it helped them read the screen more easily. RapidSet was also popular with students (19%) for a similar reason. Comparable views were also expressed in the focus groups and individual interviews.

Students were also asked to list any programs that they had run from the USB pen, other than those they had already identified. There were 27 responses to this question (40% of the total sample). Of these, the majority (41%) stated that they had used the games that are available on the stick, but several others were identified including Open Office, RapidSet, Sonar and the MouseTool (some of which are also available on the College network).

A few of the students who participated in interviews mentioned that they had used some of the individual tools at home. Other students expressed an interest in using AccessApps at home and agreed that they could see the potential benefits of using such applications.

4.3.2. Library resources

AccessApps has enabled more focus for students on library resources. A large number of students who responded to the survey indicated that they accessed library resources and services via the built-in menu within AccessApps. 67% had linked to the library catalogue and many had also linked to the library induction and podcast.

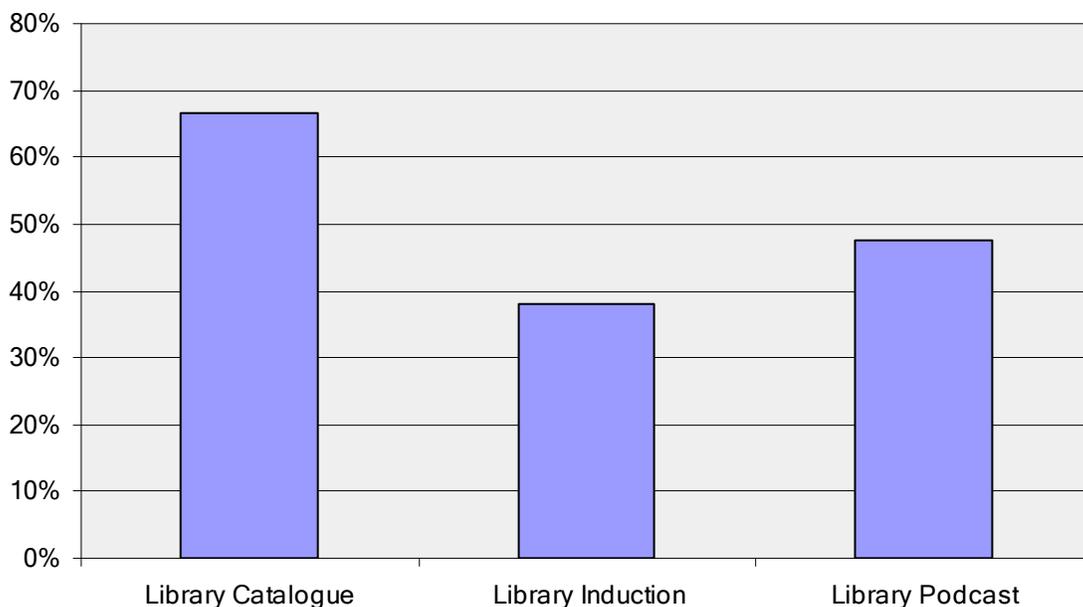


Fig 6: Use of library resources (N=42)

Additionally, 71% of students stated that they had used the various AccessApps help guides (collated by library staff) available on Blackboard.

4.3.3. Additional support needs

A number of students identified themselves as having additional support needs. The responses are outlined in the chart below.

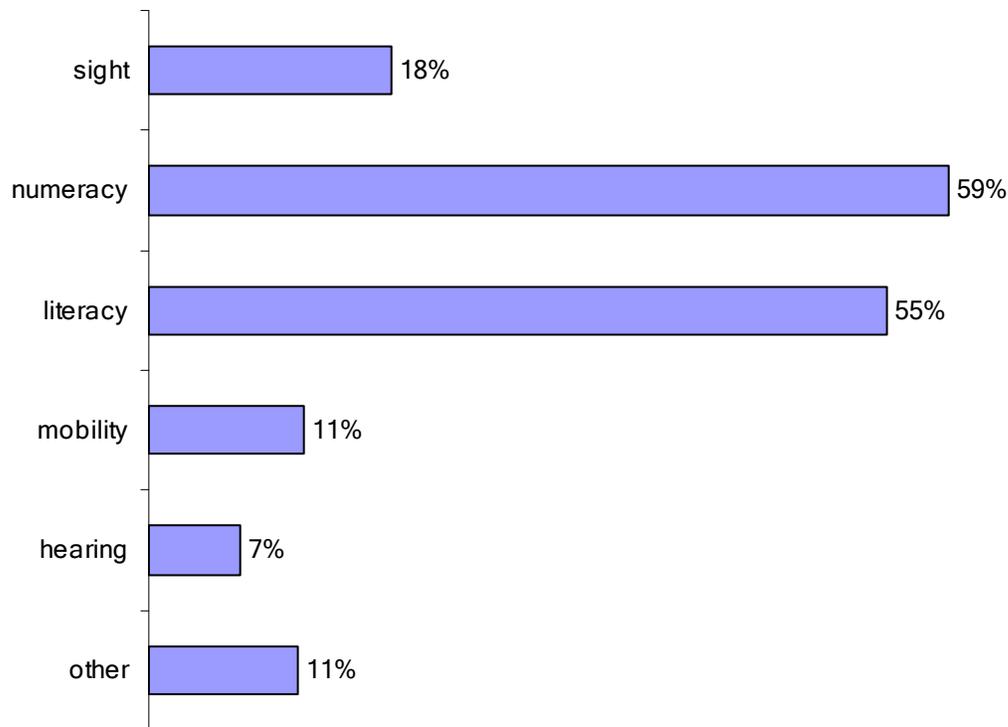


Fig 7: Additional support needs (N=44)

86% of those who considered themselves to have additional support needs had used AccessApps (compared with the overall figure of 81%). The top three tools identified by this group were Typefaster, T-bar colour bar, and Spr-Ot, a spreadsheet visual aid. However, all the programs available on the College network were in general widely used. Many students also used AccessApps off campus. Here the program that was most used at home was the MouseTool.

The final survey question invited students to make additional comments about AccessApps and the related software. 30 students responded to this question and the overwhelming majority of comments were positive. As reflected elsewhere in the survey, students felt that AccessApps assisted them in their studies and helped to meet their own individual needs. As demonstrated in the comments below, AccessApps offers flexibility for the end user:

- It was good to use – it helped me see the computer screen better
- Really interesting, helpful subject information that I didn't know about until this year

- I like the pen but I haven't got that many needs for it – it's handy for saving revision documents

Comments received from curriculum staff towards the end of the project also supported the notion that specific needs could be met through the use of AccessApps. Staff noted a number of different applications in use by students according to their individual requirements. Additionally, staff commented how specific applications were of interest to different subject groups. For example, one member of staff noted that art students tended to use the magnifying glass to view images in detail, whereas the music students were interested in using Audacity (a recording tool).

Overall, student experiences of AccessApps have been extremely positive and this is reflected in responses to the final survey question, a representative sample shown below:

- Excellent initiative
- It helps a lot, it makes a big difference
- I wish all these programs had been around when I was young. It would have made my learning so much easier. I'm so used to just plodding on. I hope the younger students appreciate how fortunate they are. Keep working hard to help them.

5. Conclusion

The PADDI project has provided students with a range of assistive technology, study skills software and other tools to support their individual learning needs. The variety of programs in use by students across the college supports the notion that AccessApps can offer flexibility to the learner, both in terms of the tools available to students and the ability to use these resources anytime, anywhere (either via the college network or at home with the provided USB pen). Library staff have played a pivotal role in the rollout of AccessApps across the college and library resources have been successfully integrated with other tools and resources from the AccessApps suite. Through AccessApps, students have become more aware of assistance and resources available through the library and these resources are now more immediately available to students, wherever they choose to study.

This report has been prepared by the JISC Regional Support Centre Scotland North & East
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