

Student Expectations Study

Findings from preliminary research

Briefing Paper

September 2007

Prospective university students have difficulty understanding fully what university life will offer, including what Information and Communications Technology (ICT) provision to expect. However, new research conducted by Ipsos MORI on behalf of JISC suggests that students do come to university with a set of inherent expectations about ICT provision and use and, further, that such expectations have important implications for institutions and the ICT services they provide.

There have been many studies examining students' expectations of higher education but few have focused specifically on those of incoming students and ICT issues. There has also been a tendency for these studies to be conducted with students already at higher education institutions (HEIs), adopting a retrospective analysis of whether their ICT expectations prior to reaching university have been realised.

As technologies and social computing rapidly increase in popularity and evolve (e.g. Web 2.0), it is important that the academic community remains aware of issues faced by learners both before and during higher education. There is also the need to explore whether the learning experience of students is changing over time, how they want to learn through technology and the level to which they want to learn virtually or in the 'classroom'.

The Student Expectations Study looked at what prospective students fluent in the use of technology anticipate from university life in terms of ICT, through discussion groups and an online panel.

What do students expect?

Understanding students' expectations of ICT provision needs to be set in the context of their expectations of university life overall.

The research showed that there was some uncertainty among respondents about what universities had to offer in general. Although some had an idea of what it will offer – through visits, contact with friends and family or online research – it became apparent that understanding of what life would be like, both academic and otherwise, is undeveloped.

Uncertainty is compounded by the fact that students are used to being 'parented' either at home or at school. To them, university is a time when these controls disappear and they become independent – something they embrace while still clinging to some of the original safety values they are used to.

Understanding how to manage these expectations will have important implications for a range of issues, including future recruitment and retention of students.

Key findings

The apparent uncertainty about ICT and its use among these students, suggests that if they don't know what to expect when they get to university, there will not be a mismatch between

About the research

The key aims of the research were to:

- **Understand** better what students who currently use technology to a reasonable degree expect from universities when it comes to accessing and using ICT in both social and educational environments
- Begin to **examine** whether there is a mismatch generally between student expectations of what they will be able to do and what institutions can and do offer in terms of ICT

Qualitative and quantitative techniques were used to understand the uptake and usage of technology at a UK level, and also to delve into the finer points of ICT use and gain a deep understanding of why the target group uses technology and the way it uses it – in both social and learning environments.

- **Qualitative** – 3 discussion groups with students from differing backgrounds and levels of engagement with technology
- **Quantitative** – 501 surveys completed by an online panel of 16–18 year olds, all of whom hope to go to university. As the target audience was those who had at least some knowledge of ICT it was felt appropriate to carry out the research with a group which is, by virtue of being part of an online research panel, perhaps more open to and adept with technology than the profile of the general public

It is important to note that, while the research encompassed a broad range of students, it is not necessarily representative of the attitudes of all types of student in this age group, for example those with disabilities or from ethnic minorities. These students may have very different views, expectations and demands from HEIs, an area requiring further exploration.

expectation and reality. However, the research shows that they will bring inherent expectations for ICT with them, display instinctive preferences for technology when presented, and be able to evaluate any new technology they may meet at university.

Next steps

This research is preparatory to the establishment of a Committee of Inquiry, being convened by JISC with the HE Academy and funded by HEFCE this autumn, into the changing learner experience. The Inquiry will address the implications for HEIs of the experience and expectations of learners approaching full-time higher education with a view to informing senior management and providing advice to universities and colleges.

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| Key findings and their implications | |
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| This group of students... | |
| 1 ...had difficulty in discussing their expectations of ICT at university | |
| FINDINGS | IMPLICATIONS |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The group expressed general uncertainty about what university life will entail overall ■ They find it hard to project how technology will help them learn in ways they have not experienced before ■ Students don't know what types of teaching and learning techniques they might meet, and try simply to map their current learning experiences onto this new world ■ They do expect ICT to have a bigger role at university but are unclear as to what this will be | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ It is important not to overestimate the understanding that students have of the day-to-day experience of being at university, when explaining how their ICT provision fits in with student life ■ The prospective students automatically think of ICT improving their learning through giving them more access to data and research resources, rather than imagining totally new methods of teaching, learning, or interacting with peers or lecturers |
| 2 ...are digital natives | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The group of students is immersed in technology having grown up with more advanced technology than any preceding generations ■ They have an implicit understanding of technology and its use, particularly its role in their social lives but also within the classroom teaching environment ■ The students see technology as a core part of social engagement ■ They regard ubiquitous internet access as the norm ■ Around half look at ICT provision when applying for universities, although their expectations of this may well be limited by their current understanding | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ There is a basic level of ICT provision that students assume will be present at all universities, e.g. (unrestricted) internet access for all, a level of technical support for admin systems, a profile or presence 'on the system' to help an individual access resources, and an online backup for lectures, course notes and other resources which could be accessed if, for instance, a student missed a lecture ■ Expectations are often based simply on the school's provision of ICT, along with a lack of knowledge about what universities both provide and are capable of. These students need clear information about how ICT will work in the context of learning at university ■ Students are able to evaluate the benefits of new technologies in their social and academic lives |
| 3 ...make widespread use of social networking and Web 2.0 | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Only 5% claim never to use social networking websites; 65% use them regularly ■ Three-fifths (62%) use wikis, blogs or online networks; 44% maintain their own blog or website ■ But only a fifth (21%) are part of an online community such as Second Life ■ The prospective students struggle, however, to see how social networking could be used as a learning tool ■ They are cautious of publishing/sharing coursework online for public scrutiny | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The group thinks technology is very important to their social lives but not a substitute for face-to-face interaction ■ They expect unlimited access to and use of the university's systems/network, possibly leading to a potential issue for bandwidth capacity for the more demanding of activities (e.g. file sharing sites and online multiplayer games) ■ Students need to be clear about universities' stance on the use of such technologies via their systems/networks ■ Students need to know/understand how social networking tools relate to learning if they are to be used |
| 4 ...don't believe in technology for technology's sake | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Students are quite adept at evaluating different ICT options when presented with them ■ They use technology as a means of doing other things, not as a replacement or as an end in itself ■ They are flexible and ready to accommodate new technologies in different ways of learning if they can see tangible benefits of doing so | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The students are not constantly looking for new technology to incorporate into their everyday lives. They appreciate it when they can see a palpable social or academic benefit ■ Institutions need to steer clear of the assumption that new technology is automatically youth friendly ■ Students need more information about how technology can help them in their daily lives rather than about the technology itself (e.g. knowing they can download resources to support lectures) |
| 5 ...strongly value face to face interaction in learning/teaching | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The students see traditional methods of teacher/pupil learning as neither hierarchical nor outmoded; they see personal, face-to-face interaction as the backbone of their learning ■ However, students do not fully understand how ICT and learning can work together outside the school context | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ While students expect to be able to set themselves up, technologically, in the same way they are used to now, they will not expect either their connectivity to decrease or the technology to encroach on what they see as the key benefits from university – interaction and learning ■ Students need to know how and why using different techniques and how technology can be a tool to complement different ways of learning ■ Students' opinions about various forms of learning and ICT use may differ greatly once they have experienced the different teacher-learner relationships of university |

Further information and resources

Student Expectations full report

www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/publications/studentexpectations

Learner Experiences of e-Learning Phase 1

www.jisc.ac.uk/intheirownwords

www.jisc.ac.uk/elp_learneroutcomes

Learner Experiences of e-Learning Phase 2

www.jisc.ac.uk/elp_learnerexperience

Information for conducting research into learner experiences

www.jisc.ac.uk/learnereval

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