You’re listening to the Jisc podcast. For me, horizon scaling is less about predicting what’s coming and more about thinking about the gap between what we’re doing right now and where we’re going. It’s within that gap that the real innovation lies.

That was Elizabeth Ellis from the Open University talking about horizon scanning. There’s a lot of interest in the next generation of digital learning environments and we spoke about it at Digifest. We caught up with Laurie Phipps, our Senior Co-Design Manager who spoke with Ange Fitzpatrick from Cambridge University and the aforementioned Elizabeth Ellis about what those environments might just look like.

I’m Ange Fitzpatrick, I’m the Head Librarian at Judge Business School, University of Cambridge. I think there’s a few things to focus on. One would be mobile learning, learning from devices, so making sure that content is device neutral and it can be accessed in a way that is appropriate regardless of the device that you’re using. Integrating with other technologies is important too, so if we can design our in-house technologies to work with the places that people live and work, places like Facebook, Twitter, so that they can share their experiences, so they can work collaboratively, so they can work at a time and place that suits them, whether that’s a physical place or a digital space.

Well we’re very early on the sort of the digital learning pathway, so everything is currently up for grabs and one other thing we are doing is gathering feedback from students as much as we can and from the people that design and delivering those courses to see what’s working and what isn’t working, but I think we are going to be looking more at how we learn socially and also how we take stuff out of silo’s, so that we can get content that will work across the platform more effectively and that we’ll be able to share expertise across our business courses.
My name is Liz Ellis, I am a Product Development Manager in Learning Innovation at the Open University and I work in the Technology Enhanced Learning Team. I think it’s crucial that we start using the technology that we have already better and as well as constantly exploring and being able to accommodate the newer, more cutting edge technology. That said, I think that there is some stuff that could be deemed quite crazy. As soon as you start trying it in an HE or an FE context, suddenly it starts to turn in to something that’s a little bit more useable, little bit more normal, but just ignoring something until it starts to make more sense is not really a solution. I think we have to get in somebody at an institution, has to get in on the crazier stuff as soon as possible really.

I think that one of the most important things that has happened over especially over maybe the last couple of years is that students are being engaged in a different way, not just being asked what they like or don’t like about the way they’re learning, so we’re not just asking them over and over and over again, ‘Do you prefer books or do you prefer learning online?’, because you’re not actually getting anything decent from that question, but actually involving them and going actually watching them how they do something or doing a side-by-side with them and witnessing what they’re doing, getting them to talk about what they’re doing and what they need, rather than what they like.

I think future proofing begins with strategic investment and I think that’s a strategic investment in staff as well as our students. The student facing obviously is incredibly, incredibly crucial, that’s why we’re here, but you can’t expect staff to be innovative and on you know, absolutely on it if you’re not giving them the proper level of support, both technical and tel related support. I think asking students what they expect in the short to medium long term is actually quite unfair on them because they have no idea what to expect. I think they have no idea what they’re, what we’re expecting of them, so getting them to try and engage in that question, I think you have to be really clever about how you do it. I think that’s why it’s really important for us to think about, especially sort of five to ten years, thinking about the types of students that we’re expecting to get, depending on what the environment is like, what the political environment is like, all of the economical stuff and also thinking about the sorts of people that we’re going to need doing the sort of jobs that we actually don’t know about. For me horizon scanning is less about predicting what’s coming and more about thinking about the gap between what we’re doing right now and where we’re going. It’s within that gap that the real innovation lies.

I concur everything you say, but just a few trends to pick up on. I think we can probably guarantee is I think our production values have to raise their game a bit. I think as people spend more time online using a variety of tools, their expectations for how those work, how those inter-operate with each other have just got to the point where when things don’t work they’re actually surprised and when our stuff doesn’t look good and as universities I don’t think we always produce the nicest looking educational technology, it’s off-putting. I know we said in our session that sometimes just because people enjoy using them doesn’t mean that they do any better, but that enjoyment in using the tool sparks curiosity, it takes people to the next step, in their educational pathway and respecting that and getting on board with that would be a real boom to us in HE going forward.

I think according to scale for the future for all of us regardless of what discipline we’re involved in, I think it shows them behind the scenes what’s going on, they might understand the products a bit better, but this is a great opportunity for us to produce truly interactive teaching materials, so we’re going beyond the idea of having some kind of quiz or even some kind of interactive forum, we’re actually going to get people through that kind of
endeavour to create teaching materials, to create teaching platforms and that sounds fantastic, that sounds like a great idea going forward.

I think it’s interesting that you use the word coding there really, because I think coding sometimes can become shorthand for being digitally capable or digitally confident, digitally creative and the thing is is not everybody wants to code and not everybody necessarily needs to learn to code, but what they need to be able to do is to be confident and creative in digital spaces. I think I would definitely agree with what you’re saying Ange about the level of experience people are getting. I have a colleague who often says that we at the OU we’re not actually competing always with other HEI’s. What we’re competing with is Facebook or TripAdvisor or a variety of different digital experiences that people are having because often they don’t see, they themselves don’t always make the mental shift to go oh I am actually in learning mode now and that’s what they’re judging us against rather than oh this is an institution of learning and so you might need to expect something that’s not quite so great.

I’m Laurie Phipps, I’m a Senior Co-Design Manager at Jisc and I’ve just chaired the ‘What does the next generation of digital learning environment look like’. It was a really interesting audience participation, it was really interesting hearing from both Ange Fitzpatrick and Liz Ellis. What do you think was the most interesting point that came out and I’ll start with Ange?

I’m going to say the library stuff aren’t I. The idea of the library space, the safe space that’s there where people can ask questions, where people can show their thought processes, translating that somehow into a digital space would give us a whole new angle for how we do digital education and I think it’s achievable as well.

So for me I think the thing that really jumped out at me was the fact that we had people really talking about I wanted, I felt like they were saying, ‘I want to be able to change this, but where do I even start because my institution doesn’t want to engage with that’ and I just felt very much like that’s a common problem across the board, how do you get them to engage. I was really surprised that even though I said because I really wanted to have a go at anybody who claimed that analytics was surveillance, I really wanted to do that and nobody brought up analytics and I was actually really disappointed, because I feel like we’re not having a big enough conversation yet about AI analytics, the possibilities for NGDLEs.

So for me I was thinking about this and when we put the debate together, we both, we all spoke, we talked about what we were going to do and we talked about the sorts of things that are happening, but the thing that came out and I think from both you guys but also from the audience, that everything that was being raised was about culture. It was about the culture of institutions, the culture of students. Do you want to comment on that, starting with you Liz?

Yeah I mean I think the culture of the sector, not even just the institutions, but also I think when we start talking about culture, starts to become very clear how much pressure we’re all under. We’re all under so much pressure and we’re all going under different metrics and sometimes I think we forget about the poor student in the middle who really is just trying to get the qualification that will make their lives better and you know job or no job it’s about making students’ lives better and I think we’re at risk of forgetting that bit.

Fashion conclusion to come to that it wasn’t about the technology, it wasn’t about the content, it was about the people involved in it, even though we’re doing this at a distance, even there’s a transactional distance there,
we’re slowly beginning to inch that close, but when it comes to the culture, it’s not just the people that we work with, with our students, I think we really have to take this on with vendors as well and with the providers of EdTech to make sure that their values are aligned with what we’re all trying to achieve. It was a great question from the floor about start-ups, it’s such a complicated relationship to be in but yeah, we need to start having those conversations outside our institutions.

And as ever, head to our website for more information. Thanks for listening.