Student digital experience insights survey 2020

UK higher education (HE) survey findings
We are living in a time of immense and continual change – one in which, even given all the challenges, taking the opportunity to do things differently in education could transform the student experience. Through the COVID-19 lockdown, universities rapidly embraced technology, supporting their staff and students to work and learn remotely. The efforts to ensure students continue to have an equitable and high-quality learning experience online have made an impressive start.

It is now clear that the 2020/21 academic year will be unlike any that have gone before. Learning is likely to take place both on-site and remotely and, as the higher education sector continues to adapt, it is crucial that university leaders understand how their students are using technology and what help they need with their digital skills.

This report from Jisc offers insights into the digital experiences of 20,575 students studying in UK universities, both prior to and during the COVID-19 crisis. The survey provides a vital snapshot of areas such as digital equality, the need for a radical, technology-enabled curriculum and assessment redesign. It also reveals gaps in students' and staff's digital skills and confidence. These are just some of the barriers for universities to overcome in the weeks and months ahead. I will be keen to explore in more depth these significant insights as part of my own review of online teaching and learning, commissioned by the Secretary of State for Education, and launched on 3 September.

One of the most critical issues is the need to ensure students have reliable, affordable access to course materials and resources wherever they are located. The results of this survey suggest substantial further work needs to be done, as a matter of urgency, to reduce the digital divide in higher education. More than a quarter of students surveyed (28%) did not agree that their organisation provides them with access to online systems and services from wherever they are.

It is essential that students receive practical support to develop their digital skills both to ensure they progress academically as well as in preparation for the careers of the future. We should not make the assumption that all students are confident and capable with the new tools and apps they are being asked to use. Although this report finds 60% of students rating the quality of support they receive from their organisation to develop their digital skills as ‘good’, ‘excellent’ or ‘best imaginable’, only 51% agree they receive guidance about the digital skills they needed for their course. Only 34% agree that their organisation provided them with the chance to assess their digital skills.

The report also indicates the potential for innovation in curriculum design such as building in the opportunity for students to collaborate online – a key component of succeeding in the digital workplace. The survey findings here show that although 56% of students worked online with other learners, 44% said they never did this. This is a powerful insight to build on. I feel sure university leaders will use this insight and many others in this Jisc report to consider how new approaches to teaching and learning might unleash the potential of their students.

Finally, I encourage the HE sector to take advantage of the expert advice and support provided by Jisc to bring a digital perspective to issues such as curriculum and assessment redesign and wellbeing. Surely the time is now for universities to work in collaboration with their students to ensure they are providing the best possible education experience – one in which technology is integrated and offers opportunities for all learners to develop the skills they need to thrive through these challenging times, and flourish in the fast-changing digital world.
This year, 20,575 students from 28 UK universities took part in our student digital experience insights survey. The survey was conducted between October 2019 and May 2020.

The high level of satisfaction from students in terms of the quality of organisational provision and use of technology in teaching and learning is encouraging, but there are also some major concerns:

» Digital inequality presents significant barriers for students who do not have adequate access to devices, wifi and other essential systems and services

» The rapid move to remote learning has amplified the need for pedagogical learner centred approaches with technology enhanced learning and teaching as an integral aspect of learning design. The number of students who engaged in active and collaborative digital learning practices was low

» The survey findings show that more needs to be done to develop students’ digital capabilities and confidence throughout their learning journey. Student confidence in essential knowledge and behaviours such as digital wellbeing and safety was low. Substantial numbers said they never had an opportunity to develop their digital skills

» Few students engage in collaborative activities online. This not only emulates workplace practices but also helps to connect students with the wider learning community and can help mitigate feelings of isolation, build support networks, friendships and maintain motivation to study

The data presented here gives a national picture that provides a useful comparison for the individual data sets that each participating university obtains. The COVID-19 pandemic means that the sector has experienced unprecedented challenges that will continue for some time. These individual data sets provide a strong basis upon which universities can develop their own digital strategy and construct the digital experience they want their students to have. The survey yields rich and detailed data – please use this opportunity to hold focused conversations with students to gain additional insight and forward direction for the challenges that lie ahead.

COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic occurred towards the end of the survey and has been a unique factor this year. 90% of students who completed the survey did so before the lockdown on 23 March 2020 and the move to off campus learning; 10% completed it on or after this date. While this may have influenced the responses of some students, attitudes and opinions generally take longer to form and it would be methodologically unsound to assume that responses relate specifically to a pre- or post-COVID-19 experience.

Instead, we have drawn on the wealth of additional research on the impact of COVID-19 on learning and teaching alongside the survey findings to look forward and consider how we can use this combined knowledge to better understand the role and potential of technology in learning and to make positive improvements to the digital experience of all students.

The 2021 survey results will provide an opportunity to examine the impact of COVID-19 and how these compare to the mainly pre-COVID-19 situation in the 2020 survey results.

It has never been more important to listen to the student voice and to work as partners with students to ensure their digital experience delivers what they need and shapes the digital future of the students that follow.

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Theme one: you and your technology

Theme one explores what access to devices students have, both those they personally own as well as those provided by their organisation. We also look at use of, and support for use of, assistive technologies and how confident students are in using technology.

What personally owned devices do students use in their learning?

- 93% laptop
- 83% smartphone
- 29% tablet
- 21% desktop
- 0% none of these

Laptop and smartphone ownership are high but what is less clear is whether the laptops being used are of a sufficiently high specification to fulfil all students' learning needs or what sort of learning activities smartphones are used for (transactional or transformational). Many organisations responded quickly to student needs during the COVID-19 pandemic by providing laptop loans or bursaries. This implies that the devices some students owned did not meet their requirements.

How often do students help others to develop digital skills?

- Often 27%
- Sometimes 60%
- Never 14%

While it is encouraging to see how often students help others there are opportunities to develop this further. Student partnerships, ambassadors and peer-to-peer approaches encourage collaboration, emulate workplace practices and build confidence for all involved.

Assistive technologies

- 19% of students used at least one of four assistive technologies
- Only 51% of those who used them said their organisation offered them support

Students were asked about their use of four specific technologies: screen readers, dictation, alternative input devices and screen magnification. Nearly half of students who used assistive technologies said they have not been offered support to do so.

Attitudes and confidence in using technology

- 54% of students enjoyed trying out new and innovative technologies
- 43% were comfortable using mainstream technologies
- 4% preferred not to use technology unless they had to

Substantial numbers of students were confident at, and enjoyed, trying out new and innovative technologies. Very few expressed a preference either not to use technology or said they were not confident at doing so.

Student quote: developing digital capabilities

“Perhaps implement “technology helpers” (more tech-savvy students) that wouldn’t mind helping other students with tech-related issues.”

Student quote: access to hardware

“Generally, I find this to be just another place where I feel excluded and just plain poor when compared to my peers.”
Theme two: technology at your organisation

The questions asked in theme two help us to understand how students experience the digital environment provided by their organisation. This includes access to essential services and systems, their use of learning platforms, the support they receive and confidence in how data is collected and used.

Quality of organisational digital provision

- 85% of students rated the quality of their organisation’s digital provision as ‘good’, ‘excellent’ or ‘best imaginable’
- Only 3% rated digital provision as ‘poor’, ‘awful’ or the ‘worst imaginable’

The high levels of satisfaction with organisational provision is encouraging and a positive endorsement of the efforts made so far. Student needs evolve and their expectations rise so while pleasing, there is always more that can be done to provide a robust and future looking learning experience.

Access to essential services

- 81% of students had access to reliable wifi on campus
- 80% agreed that their organisation let them access online systems and services from anywhere
- 68% said that their organisation supported them to use their own digital devices

While the situation may have changed in recent months, these figures are lower than is desirable – access to these services is critical to learning both on and off campus.

Access to digital resources on demand

- 89% of students said they had access to online course materials whenever they needed them
- 81% said they had access to e-books and e-journals
- 54% said they had access to file storage and backup
- 51% said they had access to recorded lectures
- 39% said they had access to online skills training resources
- Only 1% said they had access to none of these

While high, access to online course materials and e-books and journals is an expected ‘given’. Only just over half of students said they had access to file storage and backup and fewer said that they had access to online skills training resources although this may be a lack of awareness of what is available and how they can be accessed. Students value lecture recordings and the opportunities for additional learning and understanding, revision and catchup. The timeliness of recordings being made available is also important.

Digital activities over the last week

- 81% checked course dates or deadlines
- 56% submitted coursework
- 26% took a quiz
- 25% used their learning environment to discuss coursework with other learners
- 21% worked with other learners on a shared presentation or report
- 10% did none of these things

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Theme three: technology in your learning

In theme three we discover more about what digital tools or apps students use, the digital activities they find useful and the frequency with which they engage in common digital practices. We also find out how motivated students are to use technology and who supports them most to use technology in their learning.

Overall quality of digital teaching and learning

- 77% of students rated the quality of digital teaching and learning on their course as ‘good’, ‘excellent’ or ‘best imaginable’.
- Only 5% rated it as ‘poor’, ‘awful’ or the ‘worst imaginable’.

The average (mean and median) rating for the quality of on-course digital teaching and learning was ‘good’.

Motivation to use technology to support learning

- 83% of students said they felt ‘very’ or ‘quite’ motivated to use technology to support their learning.
- Only 3% were ‘not very’ or ‘not at all’ motivated.

This is an encouraging response but research conducted during COVID-19 highlights that students need support to maintain motivation over and above reliance on using technology for access to learning. They need to understand the benefits of engaging with technology and how to do so effectively.

Who supports you most to use technology in your learning?

- 34% said lecturers on their course
- 28% cited online videos and resources as their most common source of support
- 25% got this support most from other students
- 9% said family and friends
- 4% said other support staff

The high number of students who cite lecturers on their course as providing most support highlights a need to ensure there is at least an equal emphasis on the skills development and support of staff. Is there potential to make greater use of online videos and resources and student peer support initiatives?

What is most useful to students?

- 38% practice questions online
- 24% course-related videos
- 18% references and readings
- 13% interactive polls or quizzes in class
- 7% time working online with other students

Students found course-related activities most useful but are perhaps less aware of the benefits of some of the other activities, particularly working online with others.

What one thing could universities do to improve the quality of digital teaching and learning?

The top four themes were:

- Help teaching staff to develop digital skills so they can support students effectively
- Record all lectures and upload promptly
- Improve consistency and navigation of the learning environment
- More interactivity and collaboration in digital learning

Carrying out digital activities

On a monthly or more frequent basis:

- 90% of students said that they got digital feedback on their work but 10% said they did not get this at all
- 77% worked with data (eg analysis or visualisation), but 23% said they never did this
- 59% of students used live polls or quizzes in class, 41% said they never did so
- Although 56% of students worked online with other learners, 44% said they never did this
- Only 55% created a digital record or portfolio of their learning, 45% said they never did so
- Only 20% of students said they used simulations, virtual or augmented reality, 79% never used these

The combined ‘weekly or more’ and ‘monthly or less’ statistics give a positive view on how frequently students received digital feedback and worked with data but surprisingly high numbers of students said they never worked online with others or created a digital record or portfolio – two valuable experiences that support future employment.

Student quote: teaching staff skills

“When lecturers are forced to use technology they are not already familiar with it decreases the quality of the teaching.”

Student quote: relevance to future employability

“Develop pedagogy around the tools used in the field.”
Theme four: developing your digital skills

Theme four is all about the opportunities and support students have to develop their digital skills as they prepare for future study and employment.

Quality of support to develop digital skills

» 60% of students rated the quality of support they got from their organisation to develop their digital skills as ‘good’, ‘excellent’ or ‘best imaginable’

» 29% rated it as average

» 11% rated it as ‘poor’, ‘awful’ or the ‘worst imaginable’

Discussing digital skills

» 21% of students did not discuss their digital skills either during induction, during one to one sessions with tutors, in lectures and classes or with other students.

Organisational support for digital skills development

» 51% of students agreed they received guidance about the digital skills they needed for their course, 38% gave a neutral response and 11% disagreed

» 34% agreed that their university provided them with the chance to assess their digital skills (eg for careers planning), 46% gave a neutral response and 20% disagreed.

Large numbers of students gave neutral responses to these questions which requires further investigation at a local level.

Developing students’ digital skills

Approximately two thirds of students said their university supported them to develop research and information skills, but other areas of digital development received less favourable responses:

» 67% said they were supported to develop research and information skills

» 61% supported to develop basic IT skills

» 43% supported to develop their data analysis skills

» 34% supported to develop skills in use of specialist software

» 21% supported to develop skills to create digital materials

» 17% supported to manage digital identity

How informed do students feel about key digital behaviours?

» 78% agreed they were informed about online copyright and plagiarism

» Only 45% agreed they were informed about keeping personal data safe

» Only 41% agreed they were informed about staying safe online

» Only 33% agreed they were informed about their health and wellbeing as a technology user

Given the importance of keeping personal data safe, staying safe online and health and wellbeing, these statistics are disappointing. Universities must emphasise online student privacy and personal safety. While legal aspects will have been covered at least during induction, more needs to be done to ensure students understand and see the relevance of this throughout their studies.

What one thing should organisations do to help students develop their digital skills?

» Students’ preferred mode of support was via teaching on their course, followed by dedicated workshops and online resources (videos and interactive tutorials)

» The content they wanted to cover was wide ranging, but the most often requested skills were specialist skills related to their course of study, career skills, and research skills such as data analysis

» Some students wanted support to use university digital platforms

» Other themes were that students wanted: signposting to digital courses/resources relevant to their needs, opt-in workshops, and practice with subject-specialist tools

Student quote: digital identity and wellbeing

“I don’t hear my instructors speak about things like keeping my personal information safe online, or my health and wellbeing as a technology user, ever.”

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Improving the student digital experience

Looking across the survey findings, there are some clear indications of the challenges the sector needs to address to improve the digital learning experience.

Three that stand out are:

» Pedagogy and learning design
» Addressing digital access and inequality
» Developing student digital capabilities

Pedagogy and learning design

The rapid move to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed technology to the fore. While there have clearly been challenges, there are also opportunities. Through Learning and teaching reimagined, Jisc and partners Universities UK, Advance HE and Emerge Education, are working with universities and UK sector agencies, representative bodies and professional associations to explore university learning, teaching, assessment and student support from a digital perspective. The insight gained from the survey data and our expert panels as well as the learning and teaching reimagined webinars highlights areas for improvement and further exploration.

Technology enhanced learning and teaching is complex

Technology is used to communicate, connect, learn, engage, support, inspire and more. It touches on all aspects of the overall student experience and requires clear vision and leadership to deliver well, along with the coordinated efforts of a range of stakeholders and service providers.

Our survey findings show that students are motivated to use technology to support their learning. Most rated the overall quality of digital teaching and learning as good, although nearly a quarter rated it as average or below.

The most frequent digital activities that students engaged in were transactional (checking dates or deadlines, submitting coursework). The numbers of students who engaged in more active and collaborative digital learning practices were far less. Confidence in essential knowledge and behaviours such as digital wellbeing and safety was low.

Digitally mediated collaboration and connectedness is underused

The survey findings highlight that digitally mediated collaboration is not an activity that students engage in often. Low responses were recorded for activities such as discussing coursework with peers, working online with others and discussing digital skills development with other students. Yet, when asked what one thing their organisation should do to improve the quality of digital teaching and learning, “more interactivity and collaboration in digital learning” was the fourth most frequently cited response.

Creating a sense of community online that is of parallel value to that available on campus is a priority. Connecting students with peers, with academic and support staff, with essential services and with the wider learning community can help mitigate feelings of isolation, build support networks, friendships and maintain motivation to study.

Student needs evolve and so must learning design – some key tenets

» Pedagogic considerations must come first but good learning design includes use of technology as an integral element rather than a bolt on consideration. Learning design that incorporates a blend of technologies to support discipline-appropriate approaches may require new skills and new ways of thinking for some. More needs to be done to research and develop digital practices for practical subjects

» Accessibility and wellbeing are fundamental aspects of learning design. Ensuring learning is accessible is a legal requirement that also improves the learning experience for everyone. Poor learning design can have a negative impact on digital wellbeing

» Assessment practices must continue to evolve. Not all students who took part in the survey said that they received digital feedback on their work. Out of necessity, radical changes to assessment were made in the summer of 2020. More research is needed on all aspects of assessment – formative and summative – and on the affordances of different digital options. Jisc’s guide to the future of assessment: five principles, five targets for 2025 is the result of an experts meeting exploring assessment in universities and colleges and how technology could be used to help address some of the problems

» Industry relevance is vital. Students need to know that their study experiences genuinely prepare them for the future with up to date skills, knowledge and proficiency in using technologies, devices, software and apps that they will encounter in their employment and ongoing study. They need access to this wherever they study.

» Student involvement is beneficial to all. Very few students agreed that they had the chance to be involved in decisions about digital services, substantial numbers disagreed. The large volume of students who take part in our annual surveys show that they are keen for their voices to be heard. There are many examples of student partnership initiatives and their value
Addressing digital access and inequality

Not all students have personal access to the devices they need to study effectively, particularly when off campus. On campus provision may be good but lack of personal access to devices, wifi and affordable data, essential services and systems can be significant barriers that limit opportunities to learn.

Are students’ own devices up to spec?

The majority of students owned a laptop and high numbers owned a smartphone. However, there are concerns about how up to date students’ personally owned devices are, whether they have sufficient processing speed and up to date wireless adaptors, whether students can access the software they need and whether they have sole or shared access to devices. Device loan schemes for use both on and off campus, access to software and comprehensive support for those who use their own devices can mitigate some of these issues.

Off campus wifi

Personal access to broadband and wifi is unaffordable for many. This presents a real barrier to learning online and can also lead to isolation and damage wellbeing. Jisc, the Association of Colleges (AoC), Universities UK (UUK) and ucisa are working with telecoms companies to explore this issue and what steps can be taken to address this.

Space to study

Students need suitable places to study and take assessments. It can be difficult to find a quiet place at home and students may not have access to appropriate desks, chairs and other ergonomic equipment. Ensure that estates policies provide a range of appropriate settings with charging points and secure storage. Promote these to students and signpost health and safety support and guidance including low-cost approaches, ideas for home study and any equipment available on loan.

Keep it simple

There are so many technologies available and a keen desire from universities and staff to innovate. Being selective about the platforms and technologies you expect students and staff to use to deliver a core suite of systems and software well, with focused support, will help you to build a strong basis from which innovation can grow.

Developing student digital capabilities

Whatever subject students are studying or their intended employment destination, they need digital skills – for employment, future learning and for life.

Showcase your support

Most universities provide a wide range and extent of support, far bigger than most students may realise. Student awareness of where and how to access this can be patchy. The roles of all who play a part in supporting digital capabilities may also be unclear to students – many universities have specialist technologists or roles with similar expertise within the library teams and some universities support student ambassador programmes. Pooling the various support mechanisms and the efforts of all stakeholders will provide a cohesive approach, make best use of the collective resource and facilitate clear signposting.

Mixed levels of confidence

While student satisfaction with universities support for digital skills was good overall, nearly 40% rated it as average or below. High numbers of students gave neutral responses to questions that asked them about the guidance they received on the digital skills they needed for their courses and the opportunities they had to assess their digital skills. Substantial numbers said that they never had an opportunity to discuss their digital skills and that they did not feel sufficiently confident about data protection, managing their digital identity and looking after their digital wellbeing.
A journey of digital development

The concept of a digital development journey is one where opportunities to discuss and develop digital skills are embedded in all stages of the learning experience. It recognises that students will arrive with a diverse array of skills and experiences and helps them to take charge of their own digital development.

Stages of engagement

It begins at the first point of contact, before students start their studies with you, when you have opportunities to:

» Tell students how technology will be used in their studies, how it will be used to support them, the value of the experiences they will have and the skills they will develop
» Explain the relevance of the digital aspects of their learning to their future career plans
» Suggest or provide digital skills development activities that students can engage in while they are waiting to start their courses
» Invite students to self-assess their digital skills and explore opportunities to develop these prior to course commencement
» Given that so many university students have a laptop you may consider suggesting a suitable spec prior to their arrival and providing details of any loans and bursaries available

It turns into a commitment on induction when you:

» Reiterate and extend the information you gave at the beginning, illustrating this with real-life examples relevant to subjects being studied
» Provide initial training on how to access systems and resources, legal aspects and wellbeing
» Signpost the different support options (online guidance and resources, the people and roles who provide support for digital skills development)
» Encourage students to self-assess their digital capabilities and present them with opportunities to discuss their development needs and aspirations – our discovery tool can support them to do this and our digital capabilities role profile for learners helps students to see how they might use digital skills in their learning
» Identify student skills gaps and map these to subject demands – plan to address these in curricula activities
» Outline how ongoing discussions about digital capabilities, digital wellbeing and GDPR will be woven into curricula activities

Providing and signposting these opportunities throughout the overall learning journey will enable students to revisit topics, grow capability and confidence, expand knowledge, deepen understanding and foster independent learning.

Continue to signpost and embed digital skills development throughout their studies

» Include digital development conversations as part of regular curricula activities – with lecturers, with tutorial, learning resource, student support and careers teams
» Embed learning on essential topics within curricula with appropriate subject-related examples to make the importance and relevance of topics like GDPR, digital wellbeing and online identity come alive for students and ensure they know how to safeguard themselves when visible online
» Actively promote the resources and support that you provide – not just once but on a regular basis, timing specific topics to coincide with relevant curriculum activities and national initiatives where possible (eg student union campaigns)
» Foster independent digital development and encourage students to look beyond the resources and guidance their lecturers provide

Include digital development conversations as part of regular curricula activities – with lecturers, with tutorial, learning resource, student support and careers teams
» Make sure that digital developments are promoted in digital portfolios and career planning
» Recognise too the input and value of those who support others (eg student champions/ambassadors and academic and support staff)
» Consider engaging alumni to promote the value and relevance of digital capabilities beyond their study and to support career progression

Recognise, celebrate and reward digital achievements on completion of studies

» Acknowledge and celebrate digital skills development. There are many opportunities to do so and these are generally good promotional activities for the organisation too. Digital badges, internal awards and special occasions linked to external schemes (eg the discovery tool, idea.org.uk) are some examples
» Make sure that digital developments are promoted in digital portfolios and career planning

See also our guide to planning induction for autumn 2020.
Get involved

See the digital experience through the eyes of your students and staff

Sign up to take part in our 2020/21 survey

We’ll be running the 2020/21 digital experience insights surveys for students from October 2020 to April 2021. If you are interested in participating in this or our other surveys for teaching staff, professional services staff and researchers please contact us at help@jisc.ac.uk putting ‘digital insights’ in the email subject line.

Teaching and learning reimagined: inspiration for an uncertain future

The rapid move to remote teaching and learning due to the coronavirus pandemic has been a profound shock to the higher education sector and has made the future for higher education even more complex and uncertain. It has never been more difficult for university leaders to plan a preferable future for their staff and students.

Learning and teaching reimagined, with the support of its advisory board, will provide university leaders with inspiration on what the future might hold, guidance on how to get there and practical tools that you can use to develop your plans.

Visit https://www.jisc.ac.uk/learning-and-teaching-reimagined

Contact your account manager

Let’s work together to transform your digital experience https://jisc.ac.uk/contact/your-account-manager

Find out more at: digitalinsights.jisc.ac.uk

Read the full survey report which includes a question by question analysis of findings from students in UK further and higher education.

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