Student digital experience tracker 2017

How do further and higher education students feel about using technology for learning, and how are institutions finding out?
The tracker enables organisations to survey how their students and learners are using the digital tools, environment and support provided and to benchmark their provision against their sectors.

This briefing summarises the survey’s findings across the UK and offers insights into how individual institutions have used the tracker. It is in three distinct parts:

**At a glance** describes the tracker and provides some key survey findings, highlighting areas in which many UK institutions should be considering further development.

**In focus** looks at one aspect of the UK-wide data findings in more detail, shining a spotlight on what further and higher education learners like and dislike about using technology for learning.

**Institutional insights** provides eight mini case studies of how universities and colleges have used the tracker to support their development of the student digital experience. They offer a range of approaches to student engagement, data analysis and action on the findings.


This briefing is a snapshot of a valuable insight into the state of technology-enhanced learning in UK post-compulsory education - and so we hope the findings will be useful to policymakers, education researchers and curriculum designers - as well as educational leaders looking to improve their own provision.
At a glance:

the student digital experience tracker 2017
The student digital experience tracker is a survey tool that enables organisations to explore how students use and feel about the digital tools, environment and support they provide.

This year, 74 UK institutions ran the tracker with their students collecting 22,593 student responses, while 10 international universities collected an additional 5,000 student responses.
Device and digital service use
Providers need to get the basics right. The survey reinforces the need for providers to ensure that they are meeting the basic IT needs of learners.

Learners using institutional desktops
Despite the increasing number of learners bringing their own devices into organisations for learning, use of institutional desktops remains high, particularly for FE learners.

Learners using personal laptops
While a broad variety of devices are used to access learning, ownership of laptops varies between different learner groups.

Learners with reliable wifi access
Wifi access remains an issue for some providers, particularly within FE.

83% FE
66% HE

48% FE
88% HE

69% FE
80% HE
Digital activities within courses

Use of digital activities within courses varies, despite evidence that technology-mediated active learning supports better educational outcomes.

This suggests that the full benefits of technology to support learning are not yet realised, with technology more commonly used for convenience rather than to support pedagogic practice.

At least 9 in 10 learners in all groups have access to online course materials.

Roughly only 6 in 10 FE learners and 4 in 10 HE learners have used an educational game/simulation.

FE learners

HE learners

Only around two thirds of FE learners and half of HE learners have used polling devices/online quizzes in class.

FE learners

HE learners
Digital skills and the workplace

Learners do not feel their courses are preparing them well for the digital workplace - a wake-up call for the sector?

This suggests a shortfall in either provision and/or signposting of services to students which support the development of digital skills and capabilities.

82% of HE learners feel digital skills will be important in the workplace, but only 50% agree their course prepares them for the digital workplace.

63% of FE learners feel that digital skills will be important in their chosen career, but only 51% agree their course prepares them for the digital workplace. Yet we know that around 90% of all new jobs require good digital skills.
Attitudes to digital technologies
Attitudes towards digital technologies in learning indicate students are generally positive, valuing the convenience and flexibility that technology provides.

Learners on the whole do not believe that the use of digital technology - for example to give access to course resources and recorded lectures - makes them less likely to attend class.

70% of HE and FE learners agree that when digital technology is used on their course they are more independent in their learning and can fit learning into their lives more easily.

80% of HE and 62% of FE learners agree that submitting assignments electronically is more convenient.
In focus:

spotlight on what further and higher education learners like and dislike about using technology for learning
What do learners like?

Learners value the convenience of digital systems provided by their learning organisation

80% HE students
61% FE learners

67% HE students
48% FE learners

Rely on their institution’s VLE to do their coursework.
Regularly access their institution’s VLE via a mobile device.

More learners felt that their institution’s digital systems (like the VLE and e-assessment system) were convenient than those who felt they were enjoyable, provided them with better feedback, or helped them avoid plagiarism.

This suggests that learners notice the convenience of digital systems ahead of their potential learning value: they identify with the transactional benefits, but are not yet fully harnessing the transformational learning potential.

Only data from FE (n=12,347) and HE learners (n=8,190) are included in this section of the briefing.
Most learners (70%) found it more convenient to submit assignments electronically...

... Although HE students were much more positive than FE learners (80% of HE students agreed in comparison with only 62% of FE learners).

HE: 80% agree, 14% neutral, 6% disagree; FE: 62% agree, 25% neutral, 13% disagree. Chi Square = 450.1; df=2; p<0.001

Men were more positive than women (73% of men agreed in comparison with 66% of women).

Men: 73% agree, 19% neutral, 8% disagree; Women: 66% agree, 22% neutral, 12% disagree. Chi Square = 79.7; df=3; p<0.001

Those aged 21 - 24 were the most positive.

Those aged under 21: 66% agreed; 21-24: 78% agreed; 25-60: 75% agreed and 61+ 60% agreed. Kruskal-Wallis=152.7; df=3; P<0.001
Most learners (58%) enjoy using online quizzes to test their knowledge...

... Although HE students were slightly more positive than FE learners (58% of HE students agreed in comparison with only 56% of FE learners).

HE: 58% agree, 29% neutral, 13% disagree; FE: 56% agree, 29% neutral, 15% disagree. Mann-Whitney U= 26,385; df=2; p<0.001

There was no difference in the opinions of men and women.

Enthusiasm differed between age groups, with only 40% of those aged 61 or over reporting that they enjoyed online quizzes.

Results: Those aged under 21=57% agreed; 21-24=59% agreed; 25-60=61% agreed and 61+=40% agreed (Kruskal-Wallis=23.9; df=3; P<0.001)

The use of quizzes and polling devices during lecture time (especially if anonymous) was a popular theme when learners described useful digital course activities.
“We were given remote controls and we voted on questions and got to see results at the end. Closed answers made it more honest and were really useful to see what other people thought.”

HE student

“Using a responseware polling app in lectures is really useful. More lecturers should use it as it means you actually try to work it out and see how many questions others got it right or wrong.”

HE student

“I like it when lecturers incorporate QVR into a class. I think it helps me see where I might have misunderstood something and why, seeing as there may be other people in the class who were making the same errors as me.”

HE student

“Kahoot is a neat little site that refreshes your mind as it is interactive and fun - the quizzes are a more enjoyable way of revising.”

FE learner
Many learners take advantage of the opportunities provided by digital technology to personalise the way they learn.

“I like being able to access Moodle on my smartphone to keep up to date on coursework no matter where I am.”
   FE learner

“I use Facebook to connect with other students in the class so we can schedule study groups or help each other find relevant sources.”
   FE learner

40% HE students
Discuss their learning informally on social media ‘weekly or more’ often.

35% FE learners

59% HE students
Access learning on the move ‘weekly or more often’.

60% HE and FE learners
Use digital tools to make notes/recordings and look for additional resources not recommended by their tutors ‘weekly or more often’.

50% HE and FE learners
About half of FE and HE learners use digital tools to organise their study time ‘weekly or more often’.
Many learners enjoy opportunities for group work facilitated via digital technology

Learners described valuable group learning activities that used digital technologies during class and via synchronous and asynchronous remote activities.

Group learning activities could be instigated by lecturers/tutors (formal learning activities) or by peers (informal activities).

This was one of the most popular themes when learners were asked to describe useful digital course activities.

FE learners are more likely to work online with others ‘weekly or more often’ than HE students (weekly or more: 45% of FE learners and 35% of HE students).

“I like creating group essays on Google classroom.”
FE learner

“My course contained a group project that several students used their own PC to work on, and then brought it together on one PC.”
FE learner

“Social media such as Facebook on group chats allows me to get in contact with my group.”
HE student
Some learners have a strong preference for independent learning

A minority of learners have a strong preference for independent rather than group learning.

“No more group discussions please, as no one really listens in class and things need explaining again.”
FE learner

Learners like being able to review lectures via an audio or video playback

Many learners said that they review past lectures even when they have attended that class. Learners are coming to regard recorded lectures as necessary to their learning, and they expect it to be done consistently.

“I really like Stream capture - even though I attend all of my lectures it is unbelievably helpful to be able to listen to lectures again as it is hard to take sufficient notes during the lecture.”
HE student

Learners like using these tools/apps:

When asked to give an example of a digital tool or app that they found really useful for learning, at least 40 learners mentioned the following products (in alphabetical order, and separate to any mention of their institution’s VLE):

In HE: Duo, Evernote, Facebook, Messenger, lecture recording tools, refme, Scholar, Whatsapp and YouTube.

In FE: BBC Bitesize, Canvas, Facebook, Kahoot, Messenger, MyCity, Padlet, Quizlet, refme, showbie and YouTube.
What do learners dislike?

Learners want reliable, uninterrupted access to course content, and simple interface designs.

Many learners asked for access to course content to be easier and more reliable.

- **20%**
  - HE students
  - Do not have reliable wifi access in their usual place of learning.

- **19%**
  - HE students
  - Do not have access to file storage and back-up in their usual place of learning.

- **31%**
  - FE learners
  - Many mentioned their frustration at being unable to access various sites because their institution blocked access to eg Netflix or YouTube.

- **13%**
  - FE learners
  - Some learners were frustrated that they could not access course content from their home or mobile device.

- **22%**
  - Many learners asked for access to course content to be easier and more reliable.

- **“I don’t want course materials to be restricted to campus wifi only.”**
  - HE student

- **“Please don’t assume wifi is working. It is not always reliable and downtime during project work can be an irritating setback.”**
  - HE student

- **”I don’t want course materials to be restricted to campus wifi only.”**
  - HE student

- **”Please don’t assume wifi is working. It is not always reliable and downtime during project work can be an irritating setback.”**
  - HE student
A minority of learners have negative experiences with technology for learning.

When asked about the effects of digital technology use on their course, a minority of HE and FE learners agreed that they:

- Struggle with feeling more easily distracted: 22%
- Find it harder to manage information: 14%
- Feel more isolated: 12%
- Find it harder to motivate themselves: 17%
- Less likely to attend classes (HE): 16%
- Less likely to attend classes (FE): 9%
Learners want digital systems to complement but not replace face-to-face teaching and access to tutors

Many learners, when asked what their institution should do and not do, requested **BETTER** use of digital systems but **NOT** more of it. Some feared it would be used to replace face-to-face time with staff.

“Don’t encourage or enforce online group work as it is better to meet. There has to be more group activities that require face-to-face contact with lecturers and learning practical skills.”

HE student

“Do not rely too much on digital, when going to class me and my peers actually prefer a traditional lecture.”

HE student
Learners are frustrated by inconsistencies of digital use between staff

Learners mentioned that there were often inconsistencies between how and whether different staff use digital systems such as their organisation’s VLE.

Some learners said that some staff refused to use digital tools or ‘official’ organisational digital systems.

Other learners replied that they were frustrated at the variety of systems or methods used by staff – in particular with ‘death by PowerPoint’.

Some learners also mentioned that they felt staff had not been trained to use systems effectively or did not seem to be getting adequate support.

“Don’t allow academic staff to pick their own ways of using digital resources. At the moment each academic uses the VLE in a different way, making it very time-consuming to keep switching approaches. It’s also obvious that academic staff have not received adequate training in using the systems.” HE student

“Don’t allow lecturers any excuse for not giving students access to resources online. These include ‘lack of experience with computers’, ‘I didn’t get around to it’, ‘I forgot’, ‘I don’t agree with uploading resources’.” HE student
Learners need to be advised and supported on how best to use digital tools and systems in their studies

From learner responses it seems that course staff often assume that learners know how to use digital systems and tools or will quickly pick up those skills without explicit training. But many learners wanted help to use digital tools effectively.

“Don’t assume everyone understands the use of digital tools within learning, we all have different levels of access to digital tools and their uses.”

HE student

“Don’t assume all learners are on the same level of digital expertise. Make sure to attend to every student’s needs.”

FE learner
Most learners feel positive about the use of digital technology on their course… but one in five agree that they are more easily distracted when it is used.

… and one in seven agree that they feel more isolated, find it harder to manage all the information or motivate themselves when it is used.

Several said they were distracted by other learners when their tutors allowed them to play on mobiles or use Facebook during classroom time and practicals.
Only 41% of learners agreed that they enjoyed using the collaborative features of their VLE.

40% gave a neutral answer.

19% disagreed.

We can't be sure if the remaining learners dislike the use of collaborative features or do not have the opportunity to experience them.
Fewer than half of learners (45%) agreed that they made better use of feedback if it was delivered digitally.

- **30%** gave a neutral answer.
- **20%** disagreed.

This suggests that up to half may prefer feedback to be delivered in person (e.g., via tutorials, one-on-one meetings, group discussions, etc.).
Learners see a gap between what they want and what they experience in terms of group work and communal polls or quizzes.

Across learner groups, digital technology is most often used for accessing information and for the production of work in a digital format. It is in these capacities it is valued for its convenience, flexibility, and for fitting learning into busy lives.

However, it is much less frequently used to connect with others or run lecture-based quizzes or polls; despite the fact that learners want their institution to provide these functions.
The use of digital technologies has a minor influence on learners’ decision to attend classes or lectures... but HE students were more likely to be influenced than FE learners: 16% of HE students agreed they were less likely to attend class when digital technology was used on their course in comparison with only 9% of FE learners.

This may be because the continued focus on large lectures in HE and the recent introduction of lecture capture, have made attendance a very live issue. Many student bodies have undertaken consultation in this area, so HE students may be more likely to be more aware than FE learners of concerns about attendance drop-off.
Institutional insights:
Case studies of how UK further and higher education institutions have used and benefited from the student digital experience tracker
University of Ulster: Turning a 2016 low response into a 2017 success

“When the University of Ulster used the first tracker pilot to inform its campus redevelopment, a small population sample led to a low response. How was success achieved a year later?

“I cannot over emphasise how much more credible these results are perceived by senior stakeholders in comparison to local surveys. The tracker has exceeded my expectations in terms of benefits, I have already cherry picked aspects for business cases and papers. Incredibly useful for us and we will definitely continue to participate if there is an opportunity”

Head of the Office for Digital Learning, Ulster University
For the 2017 tracker

» The focus was shifted from infrastructure to academic development and student engagement, for which the tracker was well suited

» Resources were committed to a communication strategy and student engagement:
  › Dedicated tracker website constructed and student-facing social media used to drive traffic
  › Prize draw (iTunes vouchers) held over 10-day period

Tracker promoted by class reps through own formal and informal communication channels, and presented on each of Ulster’s four campuses by student union members

The 2017 response rate

» The level of student engagement resulted in 340 responses

» Based on user levels for Ulster’s Digital Learning Environment, this meant a respectable 5.3% response rate

The 2017 outcome

» Responses were analysed and findings shared across the institution

» Teaching and learning coordinators were tasked with embedding the findings into each faculty, eg by running workshops and initiating local plans

» Work continues to have an impact on digital change at Ulster and beyond

» Tracker team sharing the importance of linking the tracker to practical curriculum interventions and to a credible institutional strategy
Bexhill Sixth Form College: Using benchmarking and comparison features to obtain more valuable insight

“...It is useful to have an indicator of comparative data to get a sense of how the sector looks...Thank you very much to the team for running the tracker, keeping us informed and providing support. I hope it does continue as then we can start to see trends.”

Project lead

Ahead of a new ILT strategy, Bexhill Sixth Form College wanted to benchmark its learner digital experience, to assess its own sector standing and monitor future progress. How did it use the tracker to provide detailed, reliable data?
Benefits of a high response rate

» The survey was administered as part of the tutorial programme, with the support of the learner ILT representatives and teaching staff, and so secured a response rate of 44%

» The grouping question was used to segment the learner responses and the benchmarking facility was used to compare findings with other FE colleges

» The high response rate, together with segmentation and benchmarking, enabled comparisons of data between all sections of the college, as well as with the benchmark average from across the sector

Benefits of detailed, reliable data

» A detailed feedback report was provided to each section of the college and used to support self-assessment on specific issues such as use of the VLE, learners’ experiences of e-assessment and how to work with other sections, to learn from best practice and make improvements. Differences in provision are beginning to be ironed out

» Detailed findings enabled the ILT Strategy group to plan future provision. There were also actions for section managers, teaching staff, and key support areas such as IT, and the study centre

» The tracker highlighted the need for better signposting to college digital services, and for digital issues to be covered more effectively in learner inductions

» Benchmarking confirmed that Bexhill is doing well on e-safety and resource provision
Digital skills are going to be really important in my future career and am glad that staff really got me thinking about it and how I can develop existing skills. The college is taking an active role in supporting students to take responsibility.

Jeremy, student

How did Epping Forest College use the tracker to motivate learners as agents for change in developing digital capabilities?
Tracker project given high profile

» The college ran a Digital Month of learner activities, with the tracker project at its centre and many other creative initiatives running alongside.

» The tracker project was led by the learner voice and learner survey team who had excellent relationships with class reps and curriculum managers.

Widespread student participation

» Student Digital Voice Xperts (DVX) were recruited to work on Digital Month projects and be the tracker face. DVX team involved in prior testing and feedback, college-wide dissemination and targeting subject areas where response rates to other surveys had been low.

» Learners designed striking posters, with separate versions for learners and teaching staff.

» Displays and interpretations of the tracker were installed in the Learning Lounge and as part of learner-led pop-up street events around campuses.

Student-oriented communications

» Participation of learners was encouraged and findings disseminated and discussed through a wide array of learner-friendly communication channels, from college-specific channels to public social media and even haikudeck presentations.

Implementation of findings

» The tracker findings are being used to inform 2020 Digital Strategy and future investments in digital technology for learning.
"We did not want to burden students with yet another institutional survey, so the fact that we could rely on two questions relating to electronic management of assessment (EMA) in the tracker survey was brilliant... We were able to get a sense from 670 students that... the format of feedback mattered less than the quality. This helped us make sense of both student and staff perspectives to support our action planning for electronic management of assessment (EMA)."

e-Learning specialist

University of Liverpool: Countering survey fatigue
Liverpool HE students had just taken part in a Hefce Learning Gains survey and a local referendum on boycotting the NSS when the tracker was launched. How was their survey fatigue overcome?

**Participation incentivised**
- iPad offered in prize draw
- Anonymity of responses assured

**Senior management support**
- Students received a personal email from the pro-vice chancellor for education, backed up by associate pro-vice chancellors in each faculty, to show senior support for the initiative

**Communications created with students in mind**
- Marketing and Communications and the Guild of Students were involved in designing student communications
- Reminders were sent out on social media

**Concrete results communicated**
- A ‘You said, we did’ campaign was run to give students confidence that the university is listening and responding to what they say
- As a result, it is hoped students will be motivated to participate again
- Tracker findings are informing a current VLE review and an e-marking and assessment initiative, both of which will have a direct impact on the student experience
University of Derby: Changing digital practice across the institution

How was the tracker project used to support the University of Derby’s new Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) strategy for 2017-2021, including the curriculum-wide embedding and use of digital capabilities?

“We’re recognised across the sector for delivering a brilliant student experience, and key to this now is the digital student experience”
Pro-vice chancellor
Strong, institution-wide commitment

As all programmes across all university colleges are reviewing their digital practice, there was both opportunity and incentive for institutional promotion of the tracker, as it would provide local data to work with.

The tracker project was championed by the pro-vice-chancellor (student experience), head of student experience and the dean of learning enhancement, and led by the Digital Derby steering group.

Academic and student digital champions were involved in raising awareness.

Quick wins

With a good and representative response rate from undergraduates, Derby was able to identify some quick wins, especially concerning the digital environment and networks.

Long-term value

The value of the student digital experience tracker is emerging over the longer term, as the findings on digital learning are analysed and become embedded into teaching practice.

Recommendations to course leaders, backed up with workshops and development materials, are around more consistent use of the digital learning environment; greater use of interactivity and communication tools; less reliance on PowerPoint; and better student preparation for the digital tools they will use to study.

The results provide necessary evidence to promote and see through real changes in digital practice.

Students will not just be presented with an outcome of survey data but will see the results as part of an enhancement action plan to improve their digital experience at the university.
In 2016 the University of Stirling’s Information Services directorate sought to reduce the number of ad hoc student surveys and consultations and improve visibility of feedback outcomes. How did it use the tracker to enhance feedback and help to shape digital strategy?

“Through pop-up events, social media and innovative new UX methods, we’re securing feedback from a wider range of students. The Jisc Student digital experience tracker complements these approaches perfectly, and we’re using this combined data to drive tangible improvements in direct response to student feedback.”

Head of customer service
**Enhancing feedback**
» The directorate implemented regular use of UX methodologies such as a graffiti wall and love/break-up letters, as well as pop-up consultation events across campus and more use of social media

» Surveys were focused down to those with strategic importance, such as the NSS and the Jisc student digital experience tracker

**Enhancing reach**
» The tracker survey was opened to all undergraduates in November 2016, with incentives offered in return for participation. It collected 554 responses

» Findings were analysed by a working group that included staff with expertise in surveys

**Enhancing visibility and shaping strategy**
» The tracker results provided invaluable feedback from students on how they wanted digital technologies to be used in learning and teaching, how they used their digital environment and how they felt it could be improved

» The results were reported directly to the Digital Learning steering group, which included a representative from Stirling students’ union, and the findings were used to:
  › Inform the procurement specification for a new digital learning ecosystem
  › Provide a benchmark against which the success of that new ecosystem will be evaluated
  › Demonstrate how the new digital learning environment has been directly influenced by student feedback
“Taking part in the Jisc digital student tracker has been a really valuable experience for the Bloomsbury Learning Environment (BLE) consortium. It provided us with a ready-to-use tool, which we’ve used to find out how digitally confident our students are without expending time to develop our own survey. The combined consortium results will enable us to consider new ways to collaboratively address any common gaps in students’ understanding. Individually, our member institutions can benchmark themselves against each other and the wider sector.”

BLE Service Manager

London’s Bloomsbury Group of Colleges took a consortium approach to using the tracker. How did it target different groups of students to develop outcomes that could be shared across the colleges?

* University of London, Birkbeck, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, The Royal Veterinary College, SOAS
A central management and engagement approach was adopted

» The group appointed the Bloomsbury Learning Environment (BLE) manager to oversee the project

» It also established a shared advisory board of representatives from across the consortium, including students from each college

» A common learner engagement strategy was implemented via email, social media, students’ union representatives and student ambassadors. A link to the tracker survey was featured prominently on the BLE home page and student learning technologists were also crucial to getting the word out

A single version of the HE tracker was used across all colleges

» Customisable questions were used to identify which college respondents belonged to and also asked about their virtual learning environment (Moodle), online assessment and feedback.

The consortium approach created efficiencies in data analysis and outcomes

» Using a single version of the tracker created the benefit of a high volume of consortium-wide data, with easy segmentation into college groups for local analysis

» At a cross-consortium workshop, groups focused on their own institution, then on comparisons against the whole consortium and then on comparing combined results with the wider sector

Outcomes are benefiting individual colleges and the whole consortium

» Findings are informing digital capability development in each college and supporting further BLE developments.
Over the two years that the survey has been running we have seen the number of students that engage with the survey and focus groups increase. Aspects of the findings have fed into this year’s Academic Review, a document that makes recommendations for change…"

Student voice co-ordinator (academic)
Tracker findings not in a vacuum

» There was a clear strategic direction towards digital learning, including new build teaching spaces and research to ensure an evidence base for change. Questions already being asked included how to teach in new digitally enriched spaces and what impact new modes of learning were having on the student experience.

» 2016 and 2017 tracker response rates were examined to track work over time.

» Tracker data was combined with longitudinal data from an annual staff survey and ongoing research on the student experience of ABL, including follow-up student focus groups to explore issues in more depth.

» The combined aim was to achieve a balanced view and to design solutions that work for all stakeholders.

Student involvement is key

» The students’ union was a key partner in gathering data and in analysis and follow-up.

» Findings are also used to develop discussions with other institutional teams including IT services and the Changemaker Employability team.

» Actions are then agreed by a working group including students’ union representatives, and teams report progress to the student body via this group, so gaining student support and embedding accountability.

Outcomes are having significant effects

» Thanks to tracker findings, a number of institutional actions have been initiated, from new support for staff digital literacy to improvements in communications, resources and support.

» There is now an evidence base for new campus design decisions, investment in ‘digital literacy for employability’ and a clear indication of the value of digital support services to students.
How to get involved

Jisc will be running the 2018 tracker survey from October 2017. If you are interested in participating please complete the expression of interest form available from http://bit.ly/trackersignup18

Join the tracker mailing list
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