

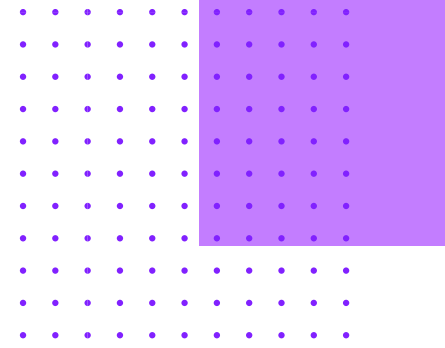
WONKHE

Setting the curve - deploying technology for learning, teaching, and student success

OCTOBER 2023

Kortext 

Introduction



Post-Covid, the strategic imperative for universities to digitally transform has not declined. But rather than addressing the immediate pressures of the need to deliver remote learning at pace, universities have been grappling with the question of how to deploy technology to support their longer term learning, teaching, and student success strategies.

The pace of technology change and the general culture of tech innovation – highlighted by the new availability of next-generation generative AI tools – can foster a narrative that suggests that universities must “keep up” with technology change. If universities are not adopting the very latest cutting-edge tools, runs the argument, then their students must be disadvantaged.

But technology development is not straightforwardly linear – and there are plenty of tools out in the market that can best be characterised as solutions in search of a problem. Universities are increasingly thinking in terms of thoughtful and systematic deployment of technology in the context of wider institutional strategies rather than a pattern of short term investment and dispersed projects. Innovation, in this context, is not the mere adoption of technology but the ability to design novel approaches to learning and teaching – lots of which will be enabled or supported by technology.

This has implications for thinking about how whole-organisation change (or “digital transformation” in the common parlance) is implemented, and how the institution moves on from pockets of good practice or innovation to the embedding of effective digital practice across the whole learning environment. How an institution establishes and communicates its expectations of digital practice, how it builds its digital infrastructure, and how it engages and develops the digital practice of its staff and students are all part of the picture.

In the spring of 2023 Wonkhe and Kortext conducted a survey of 463 academic and teaching and learning support professionals in UK universities. Around half (51 per cent) of respondents were learning and teaching professionals, 38 per cent were academics (with a broad disciplinary spread), and 11 per cent were members of senior teams. 42 per cent were from pre-92 universities, 45 per cent from post-92 universities, and 11 per cent from independent, or specialist institutions or further education colleges. Qualitative responses indicated that a good number of respondents have some degree of personal responsibility for technology enhanced learning or related institutional or disciplinary activity.

Rather than capturing a nationally representative picture of opinion or practice, the survey was intended to collate individual views and insights to inform understanding of how the conversation among educators about the role of technology in learning, teaching, and student support is evolving post-Covid. To support the conversation further, we split the survey into themes and sought insight from experts and leaders of teaching, learning and student support.



The majority of respondents (though not all) were self-professed technology enthusiasts, excited about the ways that using technology in learning and teaching can potentially improve engagement and inclusion for students, build their digital literacy, and prepare them for the future. Most are confident that technology, appropriately deployed, can support institutional goals for student success.

However, there was some concern expressed about whether students fully understand what is expected of them in terms of digital engagement with learning and teaching. Respondents identified lots of good practice in supporting staff with institutional change, but also had lots of improvements to suggest.

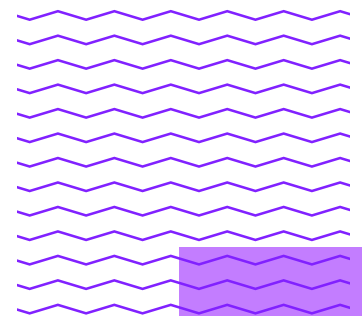
Overwhelmingly, the key message is that decisions about the use of technology must be grounded in good pedagogy.

Deployed thoughtfully, technology has the potential to enhance student engagement and confidence as independent learners, support inclusion, and create a more flexible and efficient learning environment. But digital transformation requires continuous change and development, and these changes create friction if educators do not feel they have a stake in the change or are sceptical of the direction of travel. Students also have variable levels of confidence not only with digital technologies, but with the habits and practices that can unlock the full potential of those technologies to improve their learning.

As the landscape changes, the relationship with technology vendors must also mature to be much closer and more collaborative, bringing together the pedagogic expertise of educators with technological insights to produce products that are both innovative – even potentially transformative – and useful for what students and academics are doing right now.

James Gray, co-founder and chief executive, Kortext

Debbie McVitty, editor, Wonkhe



Educators' priorities for learning and teaching

Most – 79 per cent – of the respondents to the survey, considered themselves to be enthusiasts for the development of digital capabilities to enhance learning, teaching, and student support, rating themselves at 4 or 5 on a five-point scale.

When asked why, answers included enabling more accessible inclusive learning, the potential for innovation (including productivity and efficiency in work and greater flexibility in learning), the prospect of engaging and enthusing students in learning in new ways, the importance of digital skills for graduate employment, and a general sense that embracing digital technology orients individuals and organisations towards the future.

“It has changed my learning experiences and capacity for independent development. I want to share this with my students.”

Academic, post-92 institution

“I believe it’s one of the most important aspects of providing high quality teaching, learning, and assessment. We have a duty to improve the digital literacy of our students to better prepare them to thrive in a digital world.”

Learning and teaching professional, FE college

“I have always been keen to ensure that we provide ways for students to engage, whatever their circumstances. Effective use of digital platforms/software and also providing such to students is a way to do this.”

Academic, post-92 institution

Some explicitly tempered their enthusiasm with the caveat that they are less comfortable with a technology-led approach:

“I’m strongly committed, but wary of digital evangelists who sometimes give the impression that developments in this area are the only ones that matter in terms of education and student support.”

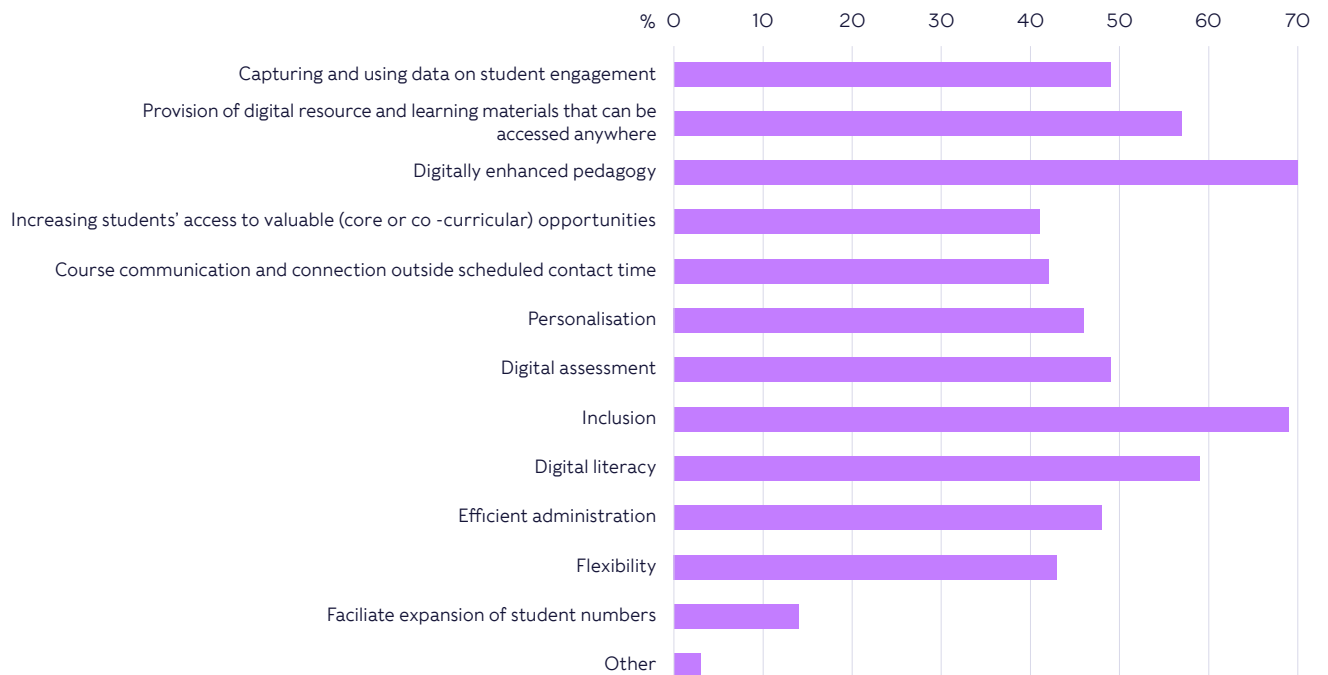
Learning and teaching professional, pre-92 institution

We asked what respondents’ top three priorities as educators were – respondents could select as many from the offered options as they wanted. Digitally enhanced pedagogy was the most popular, selected by 70 per cent of respondents. Inclusion (69 per cent) and developing digital literacy (59 per cent) were also popular choices. These priorities chime closely with why respondents are enthusiastic about technology – to engage students in learning, to make learning more accessible and inclusive, and to prepare students for their future lives and careers.

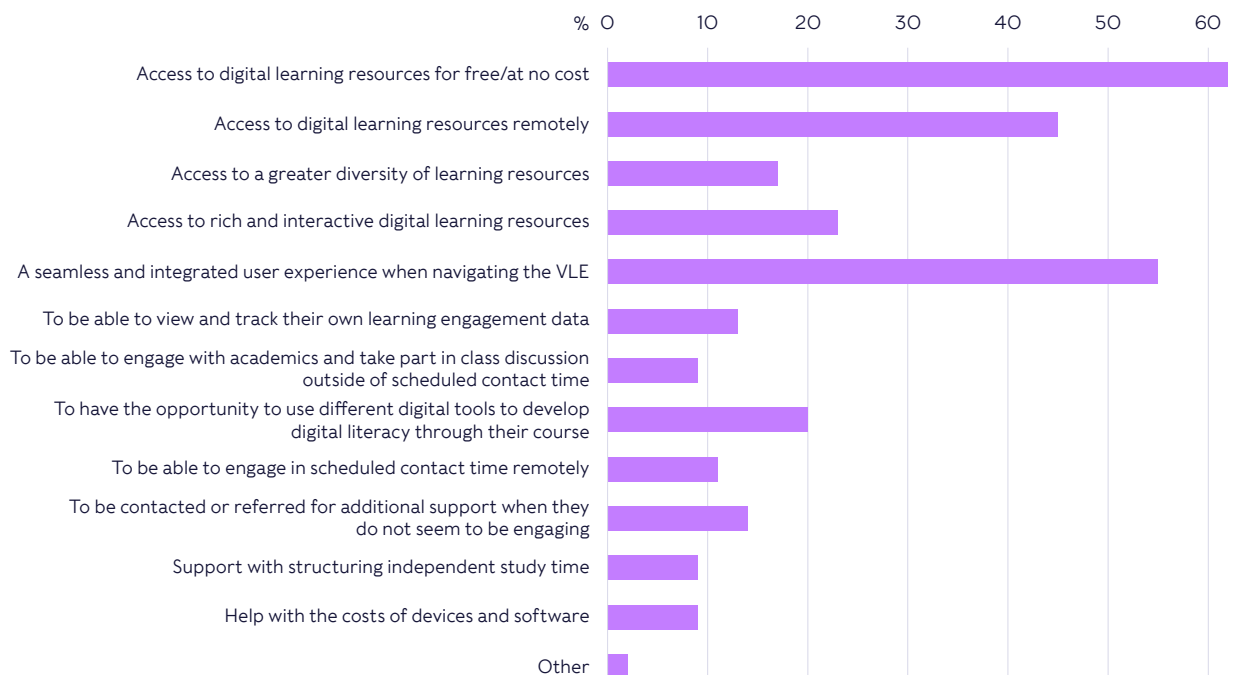
We also asked what, in respondents’ judgement, students most need from digital technologies to support their engagement with learning and academic development. In this instance we forced a choice of three. There were three clear priorities: access to digital learning resources for free (62 per cent); a seamless and integrated user experience when navigating the virtual learning environment (55 per cent); and access to digital learning resources remotely (45 per cent).

These findings suggest that while educators are thinking about how to design engaging and inclusive learning experiences, students’ ability to access learning resources and have a positive user experience is a vital foundational consideration – the hygiene factors that enable the aspirations of educators to be realised.

Thinking about the various uses of digital technology in the context of learning, teaching and student academic support – which of the below are your key priorities as an educator? (%) Labels have been edited for readability – in the survey we gave examples of the concepts.



In your judgement, what do you think your students most need from digital technologies to support their engagement with learning and academic development? (%) Select up to three.



How can technology providers best meet the needs of educators and students?

James Gray, co-founder and chief executive, Kortext

In a world where students need to be able to access learning resources and study at any time, from anywhere, universities need to work out how to enable and support that.

Universities are large and complex organisations, and for more years than I can count they delivered their mission in a very specific way. As the world has changed – the nature of the job market, the nature of delivery of content, and the utilisation of technology – universities are changing too, but I'm under no illusion that the process can be very complicated.

While there's endless sources of insight about change management out there, there is something quite distinctive about how universities have traditionally been constituted that can push against getting effective outcomes. Sometimes procurement processes don't align with strategic objectives; even the way budgets are distributed with everyone working towards similar objectives but with devolved bits of money that don't communicate and that aren't cross-referenced.

Where it works best is where institutions really know what they want to achieve and there's a cross-institutional group driving that agenda forward, with strong leadership – that's a really good foundation for forging a productive partnership with technology providers.

The Wonkhe/Kortext survey finds that inclusion, digital literacy, and leveraging the benefits of technology to improve pedagogy and engage students are priorities for educators. The theme of building student confidence with independent learning also came through strongly – demonstrating that it's not a question of simply providing access to resources, and reducing costs for students, but about ensuring that students are academically supported and engaged outside the classroom as well as they are inside it.

The survey found strong support among the educators who responded for increasing digitisation of learning resources, including ebooks and etextbooks, with 80 per cent of respondents expressing support at four or five on a five-point scale. There was also a clear majority (64 per cent) in favour of using student engagement data for analytics to inform student academic support and enhance pedagogy.

We have recently undergone our own journey of digital transformation, working with our global partner Microsoft to make it possible for us to do achieve things at scale that we have never been able to do before: index all our own content and design a vast and sophisticated data warehouse that can feed into GPT4 generative AI technology to create AI tools embedded in the platform that have trained only on academically legitimate content. Our new Kortext Premium platform includes tools like translation for non-English speakers, and the ability to create summaries, reading lists, checklists, and similar study artefacts from scratch – saving educators and students time and effort. Academics we have shared some of our new functionality with have been genuinely excited to see what the platform can do.

Harnessed together effectively, these general purpose technologies of digitisation, data analytics, and generative AI can create the conditions for students to learn wherever they are and give educators insight about students' learning engagement on a scale that has never been seen before. But the potential of a platform like Kortext is most fully realised when it acts as the enabling mechanism for the course construct created by educators. Good pedagogy and a well-designed student journey frame the intended learning processes and outcomes; Kortext makes it possible.

Going beyond digital in learning and teaching

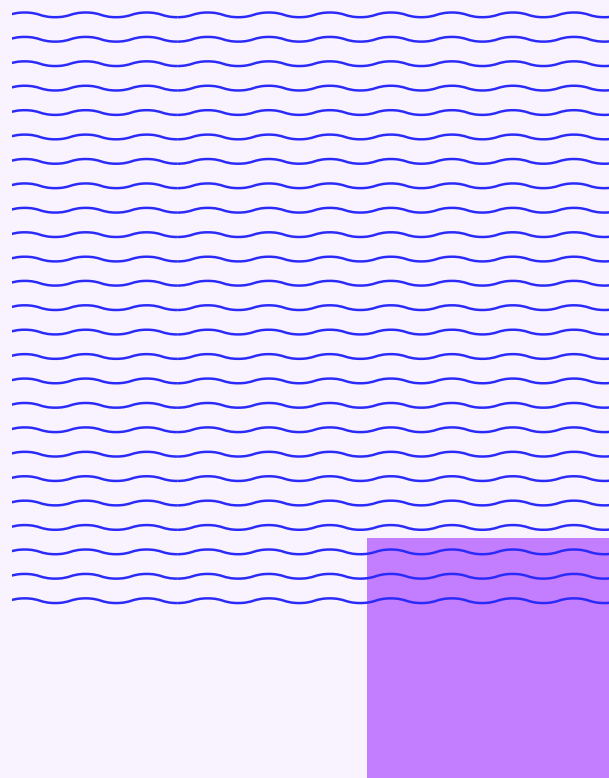
Danielle George, Associate vice president blended and flexible learning, University of Manchester, with Simon Thomson, Jane Mooney, and the UoM flexible learning programme team

Digital technologies for learning and teaching have become a key component of any university's (digital) infrastructure and yet the evolving nature of "digital" sometimes feels like we are always playing catchup. Over the past few years the focus has rightly shifted away from "training" on the specific tools we use to a much more nuanced approach to how they are being used and by whom.

Understanding and developing the digital capabilities of both our staff and students has been identified as a critical factor of success and is a key part of the flexible learning programme at the University of Manchester as we set out to: "create lifelong flexible learning that is inclusive, accessible and international, preparing our graduates for an increasingly digital world that demands agility, creativity, and digital proficiency."

This flexibility requires us to think more deeply about the modes through which we teach and the way in which we use digital tools to design, develop, facilitate and access learning. However, as history has shown, tools alone will not bring the successes we seek and so significant effort is being placed on building staff and student confidence and capability in using new and existing digital tools to maximise success. We need to build this confidence and capability in such a way as to foster an environment where staff and students can adapt to new technologies and identify ways in which they can support their pedagogic approaches.

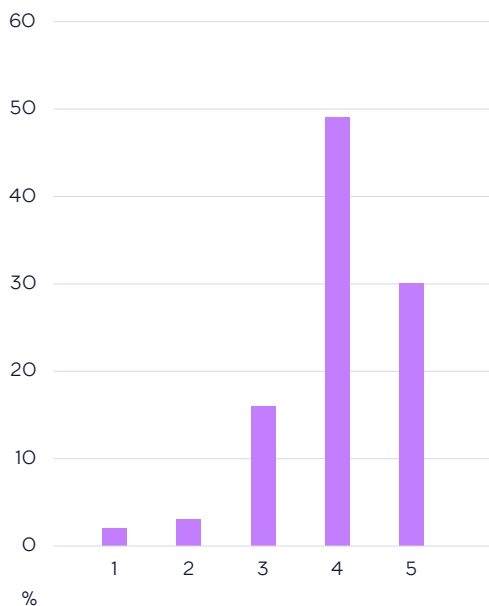
Ultimately, we should be seeking an outcome where we no longer need to specify "digital" as a separate term and that it's all just learning, making use of physical and digital infrastructure to provide learning experiences to the broadest range of students. This post-digital vision can only be achieved through the seamless integration of digital tools and the increased capabilities of our staff and students.



How can technology support institutional goals for student inclusion and success?

Survey respondents were very confident that improving organisational or individual digital capabilities (including technology infrastructure and digital literacies) can contribute to wider organisational objectives for student learning and overall student success. 78 per cent of respondents selected four or five on a five point confidence scale.

To what extent do you feel confident that improving organisational or individual digital capabilities (including technology infrastructure and digital literacies) can contribute to wider organisational objectives for student learning and overall student success? 1= not at all confident 5=very confident (%)



When asked why they had responded how they did, those who were more confident cited benefits such as creating more student-centred learning and co-creation; improving student engagement through interactivity, rich media, and more connectedness; inclusion of a wider range of learners; and the development of skills for future employment and the digital world. Administrative efficiency was also frequently mentioned, offering the potential to free up time for more human-centred interactions.

Universities are thinking in more detail about the student journey in all its dimensions – from application to graduation and beyond, and across the various contact points and services that the university offers. Actively designing this journey so that it is coherent and supported from the students’ side, and streamlined and impactful from the university’s side, typically requires adoption of technology to enable it.

A strand of commentary suggested a desire among some respondents for increased confidence in using digital technologies – some said that if staff were more confident, this would translate to the students. Others emphasised that the benefits of technology for student success would only be realised if technology was deployed effectively, suggesting in some cases a sense of yet-to-be-realised potential.

“Digital skills and capabilities are foundational for enhancing various aspects of education. Effectively incorporating digital tools into teaching and learning processes demands a teacher’s adequate digital proficiency. However, this extends beyond individual abilities. We believe it is crucial to foster the digital competence of our educational stakeholders through regular EdTech training and forums for discourse on technology’s role in improving educational quality. This holistic approach aims to actualise pedagogical innovation across education through technology.”

Member of executive team, pre-92 university

“If students are savvy in the use of digital technologies they are more likely to engage with the platforms we use for teaching and learning but also be more comfortable learning about other technologies used in the degree. They will probably also be more digitally connected with their colleagues and lecturers...and thereby have access to more opportunities.”

Academic, post-92 university

“I feel that students are more likely to be successful if they are active and engaged. I think digital resources can help students to remain engaged and also help them to catch back up if they become disengaged. Digital resources can also improve the quality and quantity of feedback, helping students to better understand where they should target for improvement.”

Academic pre-92 university

“I’m a firm believer that moving towards a more digital offering helps make learning more accessible and if we’re doing that, I think student success will come with it. There will obviously be other challenges as well and we need to ensure equitable access as a starting point.”

Academic, pre-92 university

“Because students who engage in digital resources and learn the capabilities of digital platforms tend to engage more with the teaching and learning team, with their programme, with their assessments, and with other students. I think this is due to the increasing amount of resource which is available digitally, and the mode by which students communicate.”

Learning and teaching professional, specialist institution

Among those who were less confident one or two suggested that enhancing digital capability is a distraction from focusing on more important things like student contact time, but most expressed a sense of pessimism that their particular institution could benefit from enhancing digital capabilities – either because of financial challenges, or a perceived need for widespread culture change that they doubted digital enhancements could fix.

Technology and digital capabilities must serve inclusive curricula and student success

Tony Moss, pro vice chancellor education and student experience,
London South Bank University

Sometimes I think we've lost sight of the goal when we talk about technology. Digital isn't a strategy in itself. We need to think about what accessible and inclusive curricula look like and if there are requirements for digital infrastructure that fall out of that then we need to implement them. Digital capability has to be about selecting the right tools to achieve a goal – and that goal needs to be very carefully defined so that digital can deliver the right thing.

I worry about the argument that post-Covid students want to be able to access learning more flexibly. If that argument is grounded in the assumption that students can learn for themselves then it looks a lot like abrogation of responsibility for designing a learning environment that students are enabled to engage in. In my experience building in too much flexibility can put perverse incentives in place for students to take the “easy” route to learning – watching lecture recordings, joining seminars remotely – these served us better than nothing in the pandemic, but they don't in my view add up to an engaging learning experience.

Students aren't just a collection of demographic characteristics – they are individuals with different needs at different times. We have the will and capability to meet those needs but we can't predict accurately when students will need a support intervention and deliver that in a joined up way.

Technology is often essential for doing what you want to do at scale – we can't know our students well enough on a human level to give them tailored advice. Online tools can sometimes be more accessible for students in need of support than in-person encounters. For example, students who need to disclose information on sensitive topics like mental health struggles can sometimes benefit from being able to do that at a distance.

At London South Bank University we have implemented an online personal development planning tool that serves a range of student success goals. At its most basic it prompts students to tell us if they're having issues – students are asked to complete the tool once a year but they can fill it in any time. There's a direct link to advice and support via the tool, the ability to book a meeting with a personal tutor, and anyone supporting that student, particularly personal tutors, can see the student's data.

But it also generates essential qualitative and quantitative information that can inform decisions about where we focus our student support efforts, grounded in questions that are both meaningful to educational success and actionable. For example, we ask about access to technology at home, the length of the student's commute, and their financial circumstances – which informs the professional teams that deal with those areas.

At an even more macro level it enables us to put large-scale interventions in place and test their impact, such as additional support for employability at level 5, or changes to timetabling in a department. Information that's useful to management is rarely the same as what a course team or lecturer needs to support an individual student – our tool gives us insight that is genuinely useful to everyone.

We had to take staff on a journey with developing and rolling out the tool. If you can explain to people why you're doing something in the first place and the tools themselves are well-designed then people will likely want to use them. Things have to work with the grain of academic staff workflow – but academics are not recruited on the basis of digital savvy and that is simple reality. The key was to spend meaningful time with staff to understand where issues are being created for them with the technology.

When we promote the tool to students we say “Get what you need” – which could be anything from employability development, to financial advice, to academic support. We’re never going to be able to organise the full range of our offer to students in a way that makes sense to every student. This way we tackle the barriers of information overwhelm or lack of confidence or, sometimes, language, to articulate a problem, and actually help the student to understand their challenges, and be proactive about seeking help.

Digital practice – inclusion and technology

Keith McLay, Provost (learning and teaching), University of Derby and John Hill, head of digital learning, University of Derby

Inclusive practice is axiomatic to digital practice at the University of Derby. Our Access and Participation Plan commits to eradicate inequity within the university, and in recent years we have seen some positive impacts as our efforts to develop a more inclusive and accessible space for students has resulted in the elimination of degree outcomes differences for disabled students in 2021-22. This demonstrates the effectiveness of interventions focused on addressing the administrative and technical challenges that disabled students face.

Digital learning baselines set the required standards for digital practice across the institution supported by a robust quality assurance process. This assurance process ensures that the expectations of the digital learning baselines are being consistently applied across programmes and that the enhancements to inclusive practice are delivered. It provides a mechanism for immediate interventions to enhance students’ learning experience, informed by a triangulation of data sources: programme leader self-review, learning technologist review, and feedback from students.

The baselines have delivered a significant step forward from a “threshold standards” approach of minimum expectation, toward a culture of both assuring and enhancing at scale and thus developing the confidence in academic colleagues to innovate and level-up the student experience across the portfolio. The assurance process provides a virtuous circle, identifying themes of support for each annual programme of staff development, feeding back into academic practice in the next academic year. Over the last three years, over 200 programmes have been supported in this manner and we won the Optimising Student Experience category in the [2022 Anthology Catalyst Awards](#).

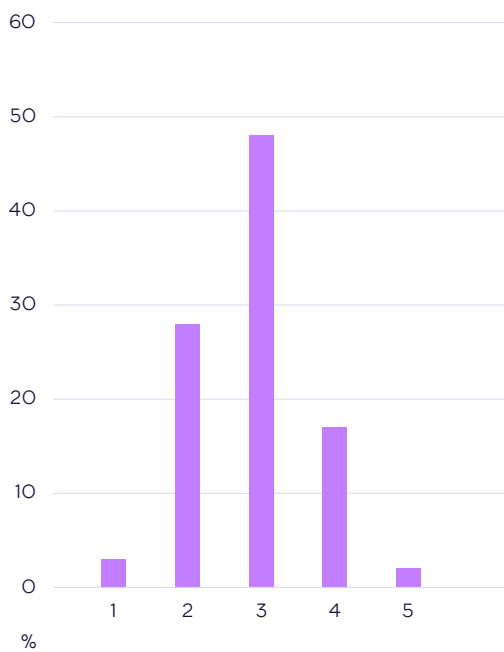
To ensure digital confidence and capability to deliver to the expectations of the baselines, we have put in place a comprehensive annual **academic and digital practice development programme**. The university has delivered four annual periods of mandatory staff development related to digital and inclusive practice. The impact of establishing an institutional approach to continuous renewal and improvement in academic practice is evidenced through the high annual compliance levels. The training offer included an “Accessibility & Me” course with over 1,200 successful certified completions. The staff development approach received a [Blackboard Catalyst Award](#) for training and professional development.

In 2021, the university commissioned the **Digital Accessibility Maturity Model** project as a consultative exercise across key university stakeholders to ensure we continued to challenge ourselves to deliver equity throughout our practice. The process was facilitated by AbilityNet, a charity that exists to create a digital world that is accessible to all. The university achieved a [Gold rating](#) based on the significant improvements made during the 18-month project. The rating was secured for “game changer” achievements, including mandatory digital training, VLE course level accessibility statements and disabled user engagement in digital projects. The evidence impact on practice has included improved metrics relating to accessibility of learning content and student satisfaction.

What do students expect from technology, and do they know what is expected of them?

Respondents to the survey were not especially confident that students understand what is expected of them in their engagement with digitally enhanced learning, teaching, and academic support. When asked to rate their degree of confidence on a five point scale only one in five (20 per cent) rated their confidence level at four or five.

In your judgement, how confident are you that (your) students understand what is expected of them in their engagement with digitally enhanced learning, teaching, and academic support? 1= not at all confident 5=very confident (%)



Asked to explain why, there was clearly variation in the extent to which respondents felt that their institutions had clear expectations of students, the extent to which these had been well communicated, and the extent to which students had absorbed these expectations.

Some respondents said that expectations were very clear and well-communicated:

“It is embedded within my courses from open day to graduation. Students need to be supported in what can be a difficult and challenging journey.”

Academic, post-92 university

“Comms with students about how and why digital tools are used, integrating digital in the curriculum and ensuring it is visible as crucial to subject specific knowledge, useful as a delivery mechanism and also to develop important transferable skills.”

Member of executive team, post-92 university

Others said that they did not think their institution had clear expectations or that there is a lot of variation in expectation by course or in relation to academics’ varying degrees of enthusiasm for digital technology. Where this relates to the subject discipline this is very understandable, but one of the consequences seems to be that where these matters are left solely to course or programme teams to determine there is not consistency of understanding of what a baseline digital skill set for learning in higher education might be or whether there is a core set of digital capabilities students should graduate with.

Another theme was the complexities of digital infrastructure – with multiple platforms and communication mechanisms, the potential for overwhelm is high, and time-pressured students may struggle to give the bandwidth required to navigate these.

“I think all students use digital tools differently with some engaging in the bare minimum in order to complete their study. There are too many resources, which might make it difficult for students to navigate or understand what to use, and how.”

Learning and teaching professional, pre-92 university

“It can be very confusing, and students aren’t necessarily as digitally literate as they are often expected to be. Despite online learning during Covid, they may lack experience in digital environments, and with unfamiliar tech.”

Learning and teaching professional, post-92 university

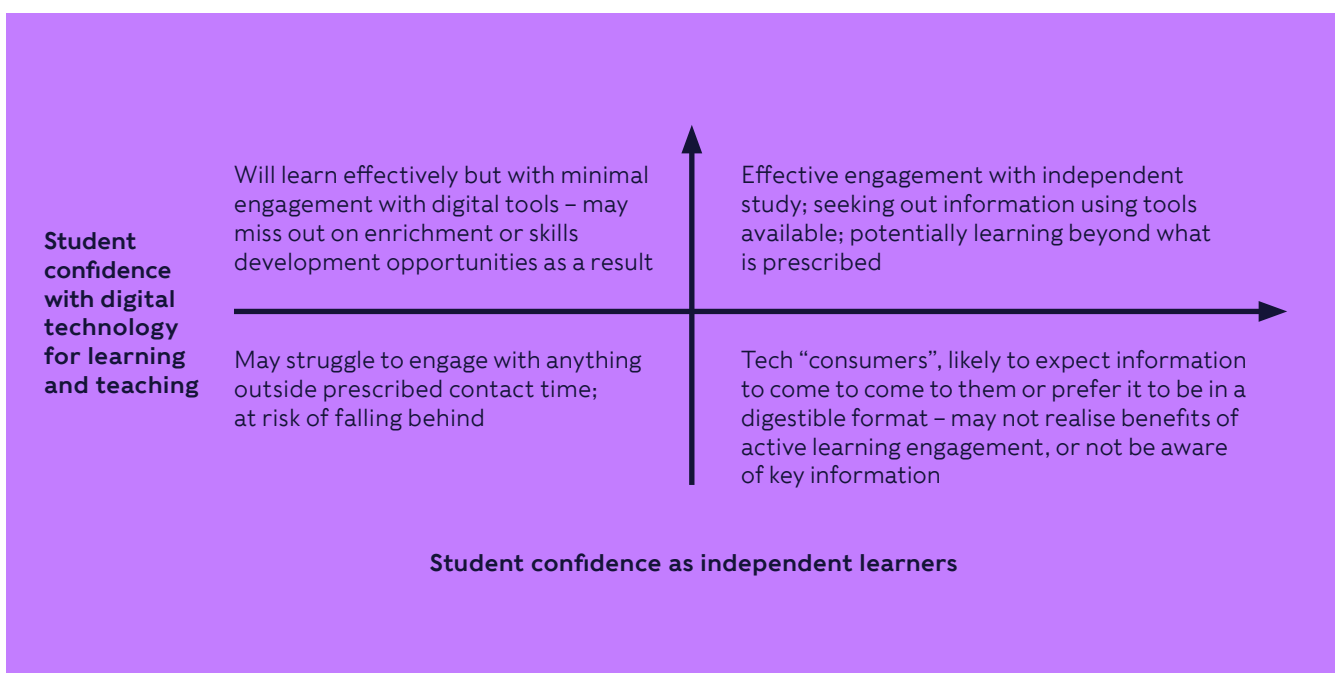
Not embedding clear expectations for students’ digital engagement potentially has important consequences for student success. A lot of responses explored the intersection between a very mixed picture of students’ capabilities and confidence with digital technology, and students’ core motivations and degree of independence as learners. Post-Covid, while academics might use digital tools as part of in-person teaching, arguably the bulk of students’ digital learning engagement is in their independent study. Simply knowing how to use the various tools and platforms available is not sufficient – students must develop the skills to learn independently.

“There is the assumption that the students are young, that they are digitally literate or have the underlying academic skills for more independent or self-directed academic practice. This is often not the case and students, teachers and others need to develop a deeper understanding of what it means to engage with learning via different modes with curiosity and criticality.”

Member of executive team, FE college

For students who are motivated to seek out information, read beyond the prescribed texts, and explore topics that interest them, the digital world offers incredible learning opportunities. For those who are less confident in either digital engagement or in independent learning, they may miss out on some core aspects of their high education experience. And those who are confident in neither are at the highest risk of falling behind, even if they are consistently showing up to scheduled in-person learning.

The below diagram gives a visual representation of how these interrelated skill sets might shape students’ learning experience and what the outcomes might be. Thinking about how these areas of capability interrelate and what support students may need could help to unlock some of the questions about how flexible learning should be, or what students may need to be effective in self-directed independent study.



Students need joined up thinking about how digitally enhanced teaching, digital skills, and the physical campus can support their learning

Bethan Dudas, director of membership services,
Anglia Ruskin Students' Union

The number one technology-related complaint we hear from students at ARU is about academic staff not putting their power point slides up on our VLE. That's when they're not trying to locate a plug socket to charge their device, or battling the occasionally patchy wifi across our several campuses. And these issues are hardly distinctive to our institution.

That's not to say that there's not some fantastic innovation going on. We saw some incredible practice during Covid, for example our school of nursing created a virtual ward to address the shortage of student placement opportunities and give students a lifelike experience of working in the health service. This is one of many examples of digital innovation going on in different subjects and courses. So we know that it's possible to inspire and engage students in learning in novel ways using technology. ARU has also been very effective in tackling digital inequality through our laptop loan and voucher scheme so that no student should ever be unable to complete their academic work through lack of access to hardware.

Yet working in student representation I'm often struck by what can feel like a gulf between the lofty aspirations of institutional learning and teaching agendas and the often mundane realities of students' lives. In engaging with technology we all want students to be digitally capable, benefitting from cutting edge innovations. But frequently overloaded students just want to know they are on track with learning and know they can easily find information and resources when they need them. We need big ideas to help inspire a vision of what the future might look like – but as universities increasingly turn to technology to support learning, teaching, and student support at scale, it's vitally important that students don't get left behind.

There can also be a gulf between how students use technologies like social media in their personal lives, and whether they feel they can mobilise those skills in their learning and teaching. Engagement with social media platforms involves creativity, crafting impactful messages, and moderate technical capability. Yet students don't always see these as transferable skills that they could hone and develop as part of their university experience.

I wouldn't necessarily argue that students' learning and teaching experience should be just like their consumer experiences on platforms like Netflix – it's important that students are able to be thoughtful and critical about how they are using technology to enhance their learning and not merely see their learning as an extension of their lives as digital consumers.

But I do think there should be some joined-up thinking about what's expected of academics in terms of using digital technology in learning and teaching, what skills students will need to be able to engage with that effectively – especially in establishing good practice around building skills for independent learning and their future employability – and the ways that the physical estate of the university supports those aspirations. It's all very well to build use of generative AI into classroom settings – but not if there aren't sufficient charging points in those classrooms to enable students to participate, or readily available sources of advice and support for those students who need a boost to their confidence or skills to engage with digital technologies.

Providing students with access to devices and giving them a crash course on accessing the VLE and other university-mandated platforms is a good start, but universities are going to have to go further, in partnership with students, to really map out a holistic student support journey for digitally enhanced learning and teaching.

Navigating technology change in the academic community

Survey respondents were confident that building organisational digital capability can support wider goals for student learning and success. Yet, there was a consistent concern expressed about the capacity of university staff to engage in capability building – largely related to limited bandwidth and high workloads.

Organisational development isn't just about offering training and development for individuals – building communities of practice, and engaging staff in the wider strategy can help create the conditions for collective development. But individual opportunities for development are a necessary part of the picture – respondents frequently expressed appreciation for the expertise and support of their learning technology teams and the development opportunities they offer.

We asked what, given time and space, respondents would most like to develop in their own professional practice. While between one in five and one in three selected relatively operational options like the functionality of the VLE or other university-mandated systems, or university policy and expectations, the most popular answers related to “general purpose”

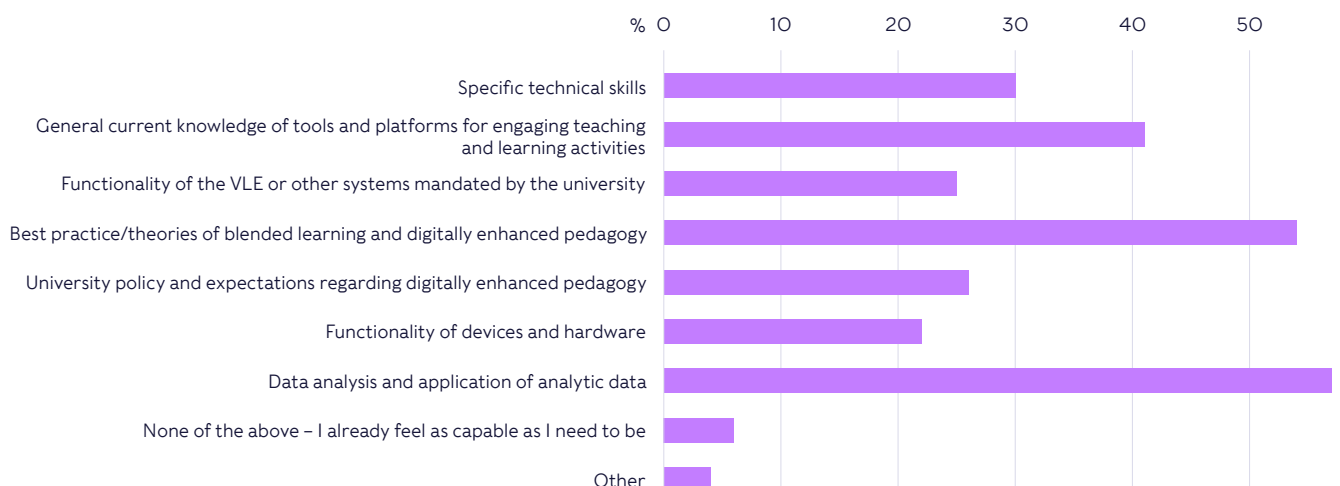
development – general knowledge, theories and good practice for digitally-enhanced pedagogy, and data analysis and application of analytic data.

This points to the difference between addressing specific knowledge of systems and policies, and the development of the kind of widespread digital capability that can infuse effective practice throughout the learning environment – and enable educators to adapt to changing student needs or novel technologies.

The current challenge for educators is the incursion of generative AI tools such as Chat GPT into learning and teaching. The immediate threat to academic integrity in assessment has preoccupied much of the national conversation, but there is also a longer term question about what the technology means for teaching and learning at university, and the extent to which it might profoundly reshape the idea of learning.

Asked how significant on a five point scale they believed machine learning and AI tools will be to changing teaching and assessment, two thirds (69 per cent) selected four or five, suggesting that most educators think it will be significant or very significant.

What areas do you think, given time and space, you personally would like to develop further in your professional practice? Select all that apply (%)



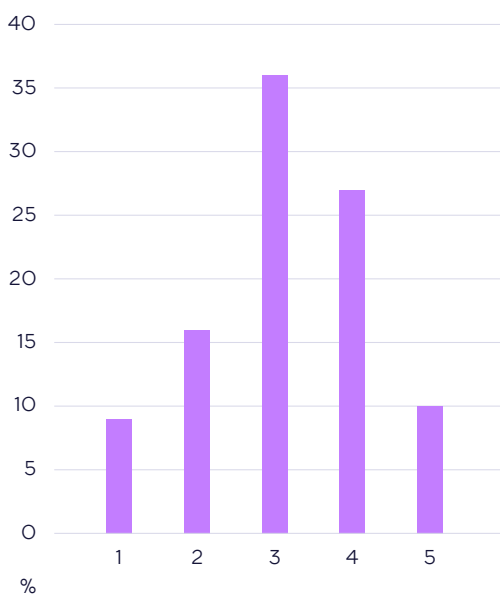
However, they are not necessarily optimistic about the impact of those changes. When we asked whether on balance they feel more optimistic or more concerned about students having access to AI tools, 37 per cent were on the optimistic end of the scale, while 24 per cent were on the more concerned end. The remainder were neutral.

Those who were more concerned in a lot of cases cited worries about academic misconduct – but a wider worry is that generative AI tools will be used as a substitute for deep critical engagement with knowledge, or to “bypass the learning experience” as one respondent put it. The risk of students being “tempted” was a common concern.

“I’m not against AI but I think one of the frustrations of HE teaching is that students often want to get a degree but don’t appreciate the skills they are learning on the course – it’s a lot about the assessment and grades. AI will further diminish independent study skills and time management, etc. due to its ease of use, making students less employable.”

Academic, post-92 university

On balance do you feel more concerned or more optimistic about students having access to machine learning and artificial intelligence tools? 1=more concerned 5=more optimistic (%)



“Technologies change, people (including educators, learners and society) adapt. I don’t know what the future holds, and I’m sure these technologies will make some difference, but I’m not in a position to anticipate what those differences might be yet. I started teaching using OHTs and marking paper submissions. I don’t do either now.”

Academic, post-92 university

Those who were more optimistic took a polar opposite view – they said that AI tools could potentially enhance students’ ability to think critically, be creative, and solve problems. They were also more confident about the possibility of teaching students to use the technology with integrity. There was also a pragmatic acknowledgement that if the technology exists and is likely to be used in the workplace, then universities will need to teach students how to use it.

“The toothpaste is out of the tube – it would be like saying should we tell students not to use the internet for research – I remember when I was a student and some people tried to stop us using word processors to write essays – if the technology is there of course students should use it. Our job as academics is to keep abreast of new developments and adapt our teaching and assessment accordingly.”

Learning and teaching professional, specialist institution

“It is exciting about making a level of academic literacy available and achievable to students or learners who often feel overwhelmed or intimidated about trying to ‘sound’ or ‘write’ in a formal academic tone. It should allow more space to read, to ‘think’, to critically analyse and explore texts, concepts, wider access and sharing of knowledge and understanding, VERY EXCITING.”

Member of executive team, FE college

Those who were neutral generally felt that it was too soon to say, or had a balanced view about the potential for both value and harm arising from AI-powered technology.

Sometimes a good moral panic about technology can help us to examine our preconceptions about learning

Kelly Coate, Provost, Richmond American University London

When ChatGPT came on the scene and everyone realised the potential implications for student assessment the debate immediately took on the contours of a moral panic. In fact, it felt disturbingly similar to previous moral panics about technology.

I recall that even when PowerPoint was introduced years ago, there were academics who refused to use it because they worried it would lead to dumbing down – forcing them to reduce their teaching material to bullet points on slides rather than the fluent and complex prose they had been used to. And when MOOCs arrived there was concern that learning would become too “bite-sized” and easy. Most moral panics around new technologies have also included the fear that students would use them to cheat.

Despite an inauspicious start, I actually think that the conversation around AI has moved on much more swiftly than, say, that on the rights and wrongs of lecture capture. What I see now in the sector is sensible conversations about how we support students to use AI appropriately, and support staff to engage students on these issues.

It helps that perhaps this is not seen as a top-down initiative driven by university management – higher education is part of a national, even global confrontation with a novel technology. And AI is affecting so many professions in such a profound way that academia can't claim to be an exception. There's also the concern in some quarters that AI could mean the end of civilization – which can be a bit scary for some but gives the topic a certain degree of edge – you can't ignore it, and it's something that you have to have an opinion on.

The assumption that generative AI will actively encourage students to cheat is lazy. In my experience students may cheat when they are stressed and overwhelmed, so the more sensible conversations we can have about how AI can support effective learning and the more tools we make available to do this, the more we can be confident that students will be enabled to do the right things.

The learning technology specialists are all over this conversation, running workshops for staff, thinking through how the sector will adapt, sharing practice. Academics have approached academic developers and pitched ideas for new approaches to assessment, some have pitched for education innovation funding – people recognise that the only sensible response is to try new things and experiment. That said, I'm not convinced that a lot of what we are seeing is genuinely novel – it's great when educators can integrate use of AI tools into assessment in interesting ways, but I'm not sure we're asking students to do anything that is substantially new.

I'm also mindful that there is a lot that is beyond any institution's control about how this technology develops – we'll need to watch it unfold and be sure we are keeping up with the conversations. Those begging for clarity about exactly what should be done may need to make their peace with the idea that it's not something they can have.

The bigger challenge, beyond the immediate pressures of integration of AI into day to day learning, is reflecting on how changing technology challenges our values and preconceptions as educators.

For every technology shift there are gains and losses of skills and knowledge – people learn differently now from how they learned thirty years ago because they were raised on the Internet, and you could argue that curation is increasingly a more important cognitive skill than synthesis.

If in academia we value things like authenticity, integrity, and originality, we need to be able to articulate why those values remain important in the age of generative AI. Doing this can only help students to make meaning from their higher education learning experience – in fact, it’s really what we should have been doing all along.

Starting with why – when working with engagement analytics getting the technology right is the easy bit

Jo Midgley, Registrar and pro vice chancellor, UWE Bristol

In common with many institutions, when we started using learning engagement analytics, working with Solutionpath’s StREAM platform, our intention was to support student wellbeing through being able to more accurately identify students who were struggling and contact them with an offer of support. At the scale we are working at, there’s no hope of getting help to students unless we can identify those who need our support, even if they haven’t told us. And we have been able to provide more specialist support for those who might not identify themselves to us as needing it, and support others to persist and achieve more than they might have without an intervention.

After some years of using engagement data, it’s clear just how much potential there is to be more data-informed across the student journey. We’re developing our thinking around digital coaching for example – we have invested in student success coaches for our first year students, and now we’re investigating how students’ insight about their own learning engagement

could prompt them towards seeking help to address the issues that are creating barriers to engagement. We’re also exploring how engagement data can link up more effectively with other systems to show a coherent student journey and identify key touchpoints along that journey. Data is helping us understand how the degree apprentice student experience differs from that of “traditional” students, and in aggregate it’s useful lead data when we scrutinise our B3 student outcomes in the executive team.

But we’ve also learned a fair bit as well – and the most important thing we have learned is that new systems are anything but a silver bullet. Implementation doesn’t lead to adoption, data doesn’t mean insight, and intervention doesn’t mean impact. Technology needs to be part of a systematic, strategic solution to challenges – which means that the goal is not to roll out a system but to, for example, improve retention and success by targeting and supporting less engaged students. The rollout of the system needs to be thought through and resourced – responsibility at UWE Bristol for managing the engagement analytics system sits with a central support team – but the success of the strategy will ultimately come down to whether academic and professional colleagues, and by extension students, understand why it’s being adopted, and what that means for how they engage with it. Data can give us the indication of where to focus attention, and it can help us evaluate the impact of those interventions, but only staff and students can cause the change that we want to see.

Thinking about it this way also helps tackle the perception that the issue is a deficit in data literacy among university staff – the data itself is indicative rather than perfect, and it doesn’t require deep data skills to notice that a student has been flagged as at risk and reach out. Staff and students need support to get to grips with new systems, true, but more than that they need confidence that those systems are underpinning meaningful efforts to build a supportive learning culture.

I’ve also personally reflected on the importance of keeping hold of that “why” as a member of our senior team and in reporting to our board of governors, especially as we’ve faced the

inevitable setbacks. If your expectation is of a silver bullet, then the temptation will always be to move to the next shiny system rather than going through the painful but necessary process of reflecting, learning, and adapting.

Our data-informed approach to student wellbeing and development gives assurance to our board that we're making decisions based on evidence and it gives us accountability in the rare tragic cases where we need to know whether there was more we could have done. I see accountability and assurance as a golden thread running through the whole system – helping remind us all why it matters what we do, and how we do it.

Technology can help us achieve our relational goals

Emily McIntosh, Director of student success, University of the West of Scotland

Post-Covid, the focus of the discussion has shifted away from technology adoption as an end in itself and more towards how technology can help us achieve more relational goals.

Many of us are still working in a hybrid way – and the student learning experience is almost universally hybrid by design. That doesn't mean a move away from in-person teaching, but it does mean thinking more about what connection and community mean when work and learning are mediated by technology.

We are ubiquitously connected through our devices, yet many of us struggle with feeling authentically connected. Gaps in learning exacerbated by Covid are more likely to go under the radar as students sometimes ask if it's an option to dial into their classes, especially as the cost of living crisis continues to bite.

All this means that rather than using technology as an alternative to or replacement for the in-person offer, we need to be actively designing hybrid learning – making much more thoughtful choices about what needs to be synchronous and

in person in the interest of community building and engagement, and what technologies can best support independent learning, especially in the time between scheduled classes.

Technology is absolutely essential to enable access to learning resources – we have a library on each of our campuses, but provision of online resources enables us to build a richer picture of students' needs and the connections they are making.

Again, this doesn't mean a move away from the physical campus into a nebulous digital space – I'm curious about how we can gather better data on the spaces people occupy, both staff and students, and how we can supplement that data with human insight about how those spaces enable or create barriers to connection and belonging.

In practice, this comes down to changing the process of course and service design, enabling co-creation between IT, learning technologists, professional services, academics, and students. The conversation needs to be opened up to more people and focus on both pedagogy and student support. Once we have established what the ethos is, we can look for the technology that can realise it.

There are no shortage of technology solutions out there that make claims about what can be done, but before rushing to purchase and rolling out institution-wide training on a new system it's essential to have lots of conversations with colleagues and students to establish the points of reference that are needed and bake those into procurement.

The best relationships with technology providers are the ones where it's possible to work in partnership to develop and co-design platforms rather than the technology provider designing something with lots of complicated bells and whistles but that doesn't meet a critical need. As universities get more confident about determining what they need from technology, I expect we'll see a shift in expectations of providers – and those that can offer a real partnership and co-creation are the ones that will still be going strong once Covid is a distant memory.

Realising institutional digital transformation ambitions post-Covid

Achieving institution-wide change in higher education is often challenging but digital transformation is especially complex, requiring fundamental reshaping of systems and process, and culture and practice across the organisation.

This was confirmed in our survey, where we asked about the challenges institutions are facing that are creating constraints in the implementation of plans for digitally enhanced learning, teaching, and student support. “The difficulty of achieving institution-wide change” came top, selected by 59 per cent of respondents.

Second was “too many competing priorities/low bandwidth” (54 per cent), closely followed by “financial challenges” (53 per cent) – reminding us that UK universities are often seeking to invest in digital technology at the same time their overall resource is eroding. Only two per cent of respondents said they had no challenges.

We followed up the questions about challenges by asking what respondents think their institutions

are doing well and what they think they could be doing better to support digitally enhanced learning, teaching, and student support.

What respondents say is working well

The bulk of commentary on good practice related to the themes of staff expertise, development, and student support.

Retaining expert staff – central IT and learning technologist teams, but also academic digital innovation leads, digital accessibility teams, helpdesk/drop-in support staff, and (paid) student digital mentors

Efforts to develop staff and share practice – including formal training, bite-sized provision, and less formal peer review and community of practice arrangements

Attention to students’ needs – skills assessment and support, action to tackle digital inequality, embedding high accessibility standards in course materials, solicitation of feedback from students

What challenges is your higher education provider facing that are creating constraints in the implementation of plans for digitally enhanced learning, teaching, and student support? Select all that apply (%)



There were also more specific comments on digital innovations, partnerships and effective change management:

- Innovations or examples of effective practice – including use of VR and AR; creating new microcredentials; polling software and interactive whiteboard used for classroom teaching; additional “digital curriculum” to support traditional learning and teaching activity; hybrid classrooms
- External partnerships with technology providers
- Effective project/change management practice
- Mandating consistency of standards and/or practice
- Building internal student data infrastructure
- Adoption of digital literacy as a graduate attribute

“Coordinated strategy to redraw learning, teaching and assessment landscape aligned with investment in digital solutions and digital skills (staff and students).”

Member of executive team, post-92 university

“The enhanced live text chat and online 1-2-1 support the library put in place during the pandemic has continued (alongside the reintroduction of face-to-face enquiries and 1-2-1 support) and the flexibility is hugely popular with students. This is one of the “both-and” aspects of the “new normal” which students really seem to value and which isn’t unduly onerous for library staff to provide now that we have the tech and the equipment in place.”

Learning and teaching professional, post-92 university

“We have a dedicated teaching enhanced learning team who provide support and develop digital teaching resources. They are fabulous, but a small team. Personal relationships with this team enhance the ability to embed digital technologies.”

Academic, post-92 university

“Using positive digital communities to support learning as well as social interaction. This is in relation to courses and programmes for both staff and student involvement.”

Learning and teaching professional, pre-92 university

What could be improved?

The majority of comments about what could be improved focused on how staff and students are engaged with institutional strategy and practice, and supported to develop their capabilities. There was also a desire for more joined-up systems and a general sense that lots of things needed to be “better” – where people experience technology as clunky or inefficient, it reduces their appetite to use it. Mapping the range of “user journeys” with technology for different staff roles and student demographics could help to address some of these pain points.

More thought given to engaging and developing staff and students –

acknowledging/addressing heavy workloads; more effective communications; more cooperation between academic and professional teams; more critical engagement with academic challenge and more respect for academic “on the ground” insight

Join-up/coordination of systems and strategies –

building up digital architecture; more joined up systems; investment in strategy as a whole rather than just systems; coming to a conclusion about institutional approaches to hybrid work and learning (some are more in favour of in-person, others of hybrid, but most often what is wanted is clarity)

More investment in development and training –

tackling a lack of digital skills; the challenge of training at scale; more tailored/ varied training provision

Retention of core academic values in digital practice –

valuing community, connection, pedagogy, not just efficiency and cost-savings

Better systems – better platforms, better connectivity; better accessibility; better quality data; better physical estate

“Thinking beyond substitution, thinking what is possible with technology rather than simply substituting previously analogue activities in exactly the same form digitally (e.g. considering how assessment can be enhanced, rather than examinations being moved online in exactly the same fashion as in-person exams but just typed).”

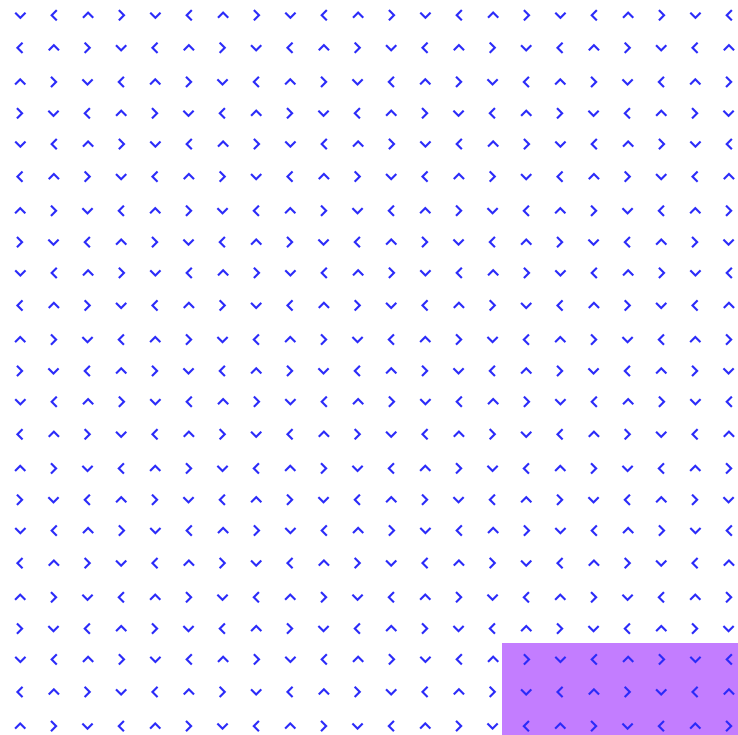
Learning and teaching professional, pre-92 university

“Managing the range of learners from those who want a completely f2f experience, through blended to those who want a largely remote learning experience means we constantly compromise rather than give attention to multiple delivery options, which requires resource, confident agile methods and clear communication to staff and students. We’re in a transitional phase in which there is much to be changed, adapted.”

Academic, post-92 university

“Reduce the number of systems used to maintain records, support students and keep the university running. We have systems upon systems upon systems, and many don’t talk to each other well. Or you have one system, updating another and then that system updating further systems... information is 3rd hand by this point. Something is bound to go wrong.”

Learning and teaching professional, post-92 university



Digital transformation is about people and practices, not just processes and technology

Heidi Fraser-Krauss, Chief executive, Jisc

Digital transformation is all about using technology appropriately to better meet the needs of students and staff. To be successful, it needs a series of deep and coordinated shifts in culture. Taking a strategic, organisation-wide approach to these critical changes is vital for the long-term success and sustainability of UK universities.

While the basis for digital transformation remains a robust, secure digital, data and physical infrastructure, in many ways, these foundational elements are the easiest to get right. Networks, hardware, software – all these can be planned, implemented and managed through tried and tested processes. Once the technology is in place, it will quietly get on with the job, without arguing back.

The hard bit is the values, beliefs and practices affected by digital technology – and this is where we need to direct the most attention. In other words, people, not technology, should be the major focus of the transformation process. As Peter Drucker’s famous quote goes, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” Changing the digital culture across a whole institution is a much more complex proposition than putting in place the technology to enable it.

To help higher education providers address the complexities and scale that make whole institution change so challenging, Jisc’s [Framework for digital transformation](#) offers a holistic structure to guide them through the process. Drawn from the collective wisdom of the sector, this framework encourages a collaborative, whole-organisation approach that encompasses people and practices, not just processes and technology.

The aim is to help institutions articulate a strategic vision for digital transformation and develop actionable plans to achieve it. By highlighting how policies and processes might align to promote cross-team approaches,

the framework reduces complexity, unifies fragmented processes and informs accurate decision-making across the organisation.

As every institution has its own specific needs and culture, the framework is designed to be flexible enough to enable each one to navigate digital transformation in their own way. Some might benefit from simply upgrading existing systems, while others might need to explore completely new ways of using digital to solve complex organisational challenges. For example, the University of Greenwich recently shared [top tips on achieving digital transformation](#) using the Jisc framework, and the University of Northampton shared the importance of building “[a culture of curiosity](#).”

Aligned to the framework is Jisc’s [maturity model for digital transformation](#). Published in September alongside a [digital transformation guide for higher education](#), the model provides a structure to help institutions assess their digital maturity across all areas, benchmark themselves against the sector, and set their own baseline from which to move forward.

The complexities of HE provider activities are reflected in the scale and size of the framework and maturity model. They provide a common approach to recording engagement and producing action plans, and can be tackled in sections by different individuals and teams. Staff can quickly see where their areas of responsibility fall, enabling them to focus on specific areas. Senior leaders can gain an immediate understanding of plans, priorities, and progress, and align them at a strategic level.

Together, these tools help institutions produce an organisation-wide roadmap for digital transformation that embraces not just technology and data but also the overall values and principles that make up their individual digital culture.

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