

SEEING THE UNIVERSITIES' DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT THROUGH THE EYES OF STAFF AND STUDENTS, NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL INSIGHTS

¹Ruth Drysdale, ²Sarah Knight

¹Jisc One Castlepark Tower Hill Bristol BS2 0JA UK, Ruth.Drysdale@jisc.ac.uk

²Jisc One Castlepark Tower Hill Bristol BS2 0JA UK, Sarah.Knight@jisc.ac.uk

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Do we really know how students are using technology to support their learning?

Universities' make large investments in digital environments as well as the physical campus, but how is this evaluated to enhance the overall student experience?

With emerging initiatives like intelligent campus and learner analytics, we need to ensure students and staff are aware of and engaged with the digital environment. In part, so they understand and consent to how data about them could be captured and used. Universities increasingly partner with students when developing the digital learning environment, so it better meets their needs and facilitates the digital skills development for the modern workplace. Understanding how students use technology and their attitudes towards its use in learning is a good place to start. But do we really know how students are using technology to support their learning?

Whilst engaging students in the development of their digital environment is impressive, it is not often informed by local evidence. Jisc's digital student project (Jisc, 2014-16) highlighted that consultations with students were often poorly designed, and that national surveys did not provide a coherent or detailed enough picture of the student digital experience. The Jisc student digital experience insights survey (Jisc, 2016-19) was developed in response to this need (previously known as the student digital experience tracker).

The survey instrument

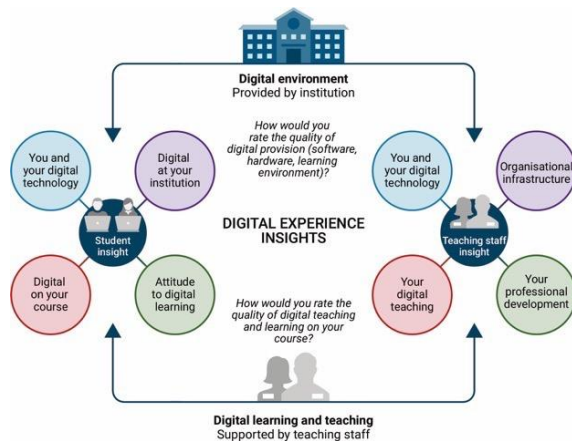
In 2018, 83 UK institutions took part in our third digital experience student survey, gathering more than 37,000 responses. 12 Australian and New Zealand Universities collected a further 21,095 student responses, throwing up some interesting comparisons. Jisc also piloted a complementary teaching staff survey in 2018 to gain insights into their attitudes about their digital teaching environment. These student and teaching staff research-based questions provide evidence that is locally actionable and support meaningful comparisons within and across organisations to impact their digital strategies.

Background

As governments launch digital economy strategies (for example Gov.au, 2019), universities are under increasing pressure to ensure that students receive a digitally rich and challenging experience. Universities in the UK have responded to these challenges by engaging with students in new ways, to understand what they want from a digitally-informed curriculum, and how the digital environment at university can support them in developing habits of independent, lifelong learning to thrive in new digitally enabled workplaces.

The survey

The student digital experience tracker was first developed by Jisc (UK) in 2016, building on findings from a programme of student-centred research (Jisc 2014-16). This found that few institutions were collecting evidence from students about their experiences of digital learning, despite decades of investment in digital infrastructure, and many initiatives to embed digital experiences into the curriculum. Those that were engaging, did so with one-off surveys that were not always well designed, and did not allow for comparisons or year-on-year tracking. University leaders wanted up-to-date information about their own students - and they wanted to know that it was reliable, credible, and actionable.



The survey has been developed and validated over a three-year pilot cycle using a co-design approach. It has involved over 100 institutions and 72,500 students and staff.

The student digital experience insights survey (Jisc, 2018) is already the second largest international survey of its kind. It differs from other surveys in that universities own the process, and share ownership of the data, and in the emphasis on student involvement throughout.

Figure 1: The themes addressed by the digital experience insights survey (Jisc, 2018)

2018 survey findings

Findings from the UK were published in a report (Newman, Beetham and Knight, 2018), with a national launch by the Government Minister for Higher Education, reflecting the importance attached to student digital outcomes in the UK.

Key findings presented and discussed in the report include:

- Students' choice of and access to digital devices for learning
- Student satisfaction with a range of digital services, and with digital infrastructure overall
- What students think of virtual learning environments and online assessment
- How students respond to different digital activities on their course
- What helps students to feel engaged, independent, connected, in control of their learning
- The apps and tools students use, and why
- Who students turn to for support with their digital skills
- How students would like their digital experience to be improved
- How well prepared students feel for the digital workplace

Additional reports on the findings from UK teaching staff (Jisc, 2018), Australian and New Zealand student survey (Beetham, Newman and Knight, 2019) are available via the service website along with briefings for senior managers and case studies on members' experiences and how they are using the data gained to enhance the digital learning experience which are available from the service website at <http://digitalinsights.jisc.ac.uk>.

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Authors biographies



Ruth has been part of Jisc's digital student experience team since 2009 and researches students' expectations and experiences of the digital environment in further and higher education. Ruth now also manages Jisc's new Digital experience insights service (digitalinsights.jisc.ac.uk). This is a collection of student and staff surveys that investigate participants' experience and attitudes in relation to their digital learning environment. Prior to Jisc, Ruth worked in various commercial organisations (responsibilities included developing CRM applications) and the IT department for University of West of England as a manager for their strategic student experience programme.

Ruth has a masters from Open University in Software engineering and BSc Hons. Biological sciences.

Sarah Knight

<http://linkedin.com/in/sarahknight2>



Sarah is Head of Change: Student Experience at Jisc. Sarah manages the teams supporting the Digital experience insights service (digitalinsights.jisc.ac.uk) which is researching staff and students' expectations and experiences of the digital environment and the team who are developing the Jisc Building digital capability service (digitalcapability.jisc.ac.uk) to support the development of staff and student digital capabilities.

Sarah has established the Change agents' network (<https://can.jiscinvolve.org>), a national network to support staff-student partnership working on technology enhanced curriculum projects. In recognition of Sarah's work and influence on research into students' experiences of technology, she held the vice-chair position of ELESIG (<http://elesig.ning.com/>) from 2017-2018. ELESIG is a community of researchers and practitioners from higher, further and skills sector education who are involved in investigations of learners' experiences and uses of technology in learning.

Sarah established and runs the Jisc Student Experience Experts Group, an active community of practice, which provides valuable consultation and dissemination opportunities for Jisc.

Sarah has worked for Jisc for 15 years and during her time at Jisc has led large transformation projects on curriculum design, digital literacies and learners' experiences of technology. Prior to Jisc Sarah worked for Becta developing staff development programmes for college staff and Gloucestershire College as Information learning technology co-ordinator.

Sarah has a Master of Science degree in Chemistry and is a Certified Member of the Association of Learning Technology (CMALT).

Twitter: @Sarahknight