

Student digital experience insights survey 2020/21

Findings from UK higher education
(pulse 1: October-December 2020)

March 2021

Jisc data analytics

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Contents

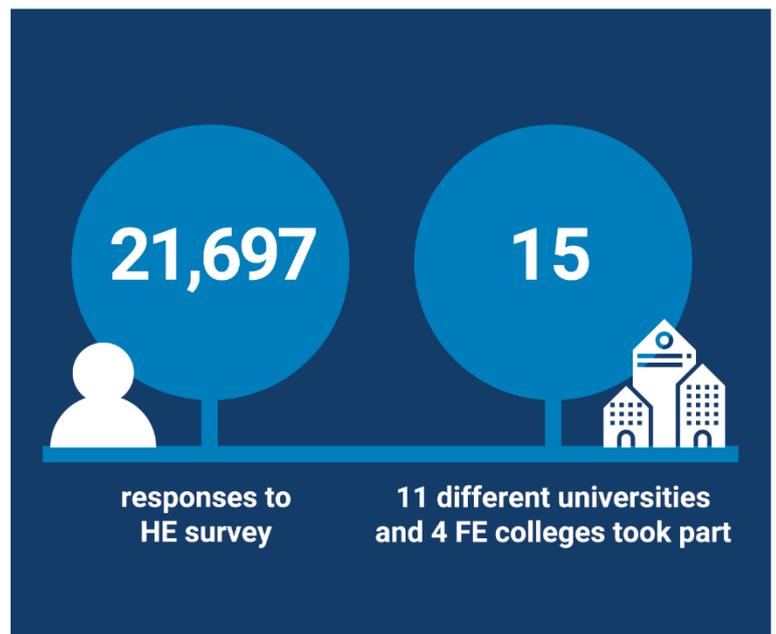
Key statistics	3
Listening to the voice of 21,697 students	3
Theme one: you and your current learning situation	5
Expectations of course	5
Mode of learning	5
Class sizes	5
How long students had been studying with their organisation	5
Use of assistive technologies	5
Where were students doing their online learning? (could tick all that apply)	6
Problems encountered when learning online	6
Theme two: digital platforms and services at your organisation	7
Organisational systems, services and support	7
The learning environment	7
Involving students in decisions about online learning	7
Theme three: technology in your learning	8
Overall quality of online and digital learning	8
Quality of online learning materials	8
Range of learning activities	8
Theme four: your digital skills	9
Overall support for online learning	9
Support and guidance	9
Developing students' digital skills	9
Confidence in aspects of learning online	10
Where do students go for help with online learning? (can tick more than one)	10
Listening to student voices	11
The most positive aspects of online learning	11
The most negative aspects of online learning	11
Improving the quality of online and digital learning and helping students to learn effectively online	11
Get involved	12
Supporting you	12
Let's work together to transform your digital experience	12

Note: survey responses may not add up to 100% due to rounding or questions where learners had the option to select more than one response.



Key statistics

Between October and December 2020, 21,697 students engaged in UK higher education (HE) took part in our student digital experience insights survey, the first in a series of snapshots of the ongoing survey data designed to support universities and HE organisations to respond promptly to the changing situation caused by the world wide COVID-19 pandemic. In total 15 UK universities and FE colleges took part, 11 of these were based in England, 1 in Wales, 1 in Scotland and 2 in Northern Ireland.



Listening to the voice of 21,697 students

This snapshot of data gathered in the 2020/21 survey was taken at a time when students, teaching staff, universities and colleges were continuing to experience the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Different levels of lockdown were in operation across the UK and a month-long national lockdown took place from early November to early December 2020. Universities and colleges had to respond rapidly to a changing environment to support and reframe the teaching and support they were able to offer as well as to address many other operational aspects of delivery. Students were asked to respond to the survey based on their experiences over their previous two weeks of study.

Positive quality ratings

81% of students were learning online, 72% of them from home so it is encouraging that 68% of students rated the quality of online digital learning on their course as 'best imaginable', 'excellent' or 'good' and 62% of them also rated the support they received for online learning equally highly. This is a strong acknowledgement of the efforts of all staff involved.

Student quote:

“Learning online (ironically) has made it easier to get support from staff - they're more likely to encourage us to talk to them and it's a little easier than having to find them physically on campus.”

Curriculum design

Students enjoyed a range of different online activities and were positive about being able to access lecture recordings and participate live online. Analysis of free text responses in the survey was particularly revealing and highlighted how being able to watch sessions again helped students to study in ways that better met their learning needs, improved their understanding and encouraged further independent study. There was frustration when these valuable resources were not made available in a timely way.

Some of the more engaging activities were less well used and there are opportunities to embed activities like the use of small group discussion for peer support and collaboration, quizzes/polls and online research tasks into curriculum design.

Acknowledging issues

Inevitably, some learners experienced problems with access to computers/devices, reliable and affordable wifi and in accessing the systems and platforms used to support online learning or specialist software. Privacy when studying was also an issue for some who said they had no safe or private place to work. These issues were still evident for the small proportion of students studying mainly on site (18%) which is a cause for concern.

Not all students felt well supported to develop the digital capabilities they needed to participate effectively online. Exploring what support is on offer, how well signposted it is and what more could be done is perhaps a quick-win target given that 81% of students said this was their mode of study.

Understanding the extent of the issues for your university or college is a vital first step in formulating an informed plan to address these. This is where having your own data is extremely valuable. Universities and colleges who participated in the survey have a rich data source to draw upon pertinent to their own unique situation – data that can inform strategic planning and resource management.

Working with students to build a roadmap for the future

It is encouraging to note that 36% of students agreed they were given the chance to be involved in decisions about online learning. With such an intense focus on providing a robust and positive learning experience throughout the pandemic it is vital that we listen to, and work in partnership with students. Their thoughts on what has been positive or negative and on what could be improved are perceptive and informative. Engaging students as co-designers of their learning experience benefits all. Of course, likes and dislikes can be reverse sides of the same coin, there is no one solution that fits all. But engaging in conversations with students will result in a deeper understanding of the issues and perhaps yield solutions not thought of before.

This report provides an insight into the current student digital experience, highlights problems that can be overcome and signals a potential roadmap for future development.

Our 2020/21 digital experience insights survey for students is open until 30 April 2021 – it's not too late to take part. Find out more at: digitalinsights.jisc.ac.uk



Theme one: you and your current learning situation



The move to more responsive pulse surveys means that we are asking students to respond to the questions based on their experiences in the two weeks immediately prior to taking the survey. This includes their expectations of what learning would be like and the reality of their lived experience (type of learning, location, class sizes) and whether they have experienced any problems.

Expectations of course

- **40%** – blended online/campus learning
- **51%** – fully on campus
- **9%** – fully online

Very few students expected to study entirely online, the majority expected a blend of online and campus learning but substantial numbers expected to be fully on campus despite the ongoing pandemic.

Student quote:

“I appreciate how much my lecturers and course leaders have tried to create a positive online learning experience.”

Class sizes

Students were asked about the class sizes they had **mainly** experienced (could tick all that apply):

- **0%** – just you (eg one-to-one tutorial)
- **13%** – 2–6 students
- **38%** – 7–16 students
- **42%** – 17–50 students
- **22%** – 51–100 students
- **23%** – Over 100 students

Very few students experienced small class sizes of six students or less. Substantial numbers experienced class sizes of over 50 students. For new students this may have been a new experience and possibly overwhelming; use of breakout rooms in online platforms may address issues such as feeling anxious in a new group, or help to facilitate a sense of belonging and encourage discussion.

Mode of learning

- **1%** – physically on site
- **18%** – a mix of physically on site and online learning
- **81%** – online learning (with other students on course/shielding/quarantine)

The majority of students had been learning online only. Very few had conducted their learning purely physically on site, nearly a fifth had engaged in a mixture of on site and online learning. This is not surprising as by October 2020, concern was being expressed at high rates of coronavirus infection and a second national lockdown of a month was implemented in early November 2020.

How long students had been studying with their organisation

- **51%** – less than a year
- **23%** – one to two years
- **18%** – two to three years
- **8%** – four years or more

Use of assistive technologies

17% of students said that they used at least one of four assistive technologies but only **39%** of those who said they used them were offered support to do so.

- **10%** – screen readers (text to speech)
- **10%** – dictation (speech to text)
- **4%** – alternative input devices (eg switches)
- **8%** – screen magnification
- **86%** – none of these

Where were students doing their online learning? (could tick all that apply)

- 72% – at home, own or family home
- 32% – student accommodation
- 11% – on campus in study spaces, libraries etc
- 3% – off campus in public spaces (eg cafes)
- 1% – I have not been learning online

The majority of students were studying at home although substantial numbers were also doing so from student accommodation. Around one in ten were using study spaces on campus.

Student quote:

“I like that all lectures are being uploaded online as this allows me to go over the lectures at my own pace, in my own space when I’m able to do so. This is important as I am dealing with wifi and connectivity issues which make it near impossible to attend live lectures.”



Student quote:

“The technology can sometimes blip and the lecturer's wifi can crash sometimes meaning that we are losing out on learning time. Also, I miss interacting with people face to face.”

Problems encountered when learning online

- 62% – poor wifi connection
- 29% – access to online platforms/services
- 22% – mobile data costs
- 21% – need specialist software
- 19% – no safe, private area to work
- 15% – no suitable computer/device

High numbers of students experienced problems with poor wifi connections regardless as to where they did their online learning. There was little change when the data was re-evaluated against where learners were studying (physically on site, mixture of blended/on site, entirely online).

Looking **only** at those who have been **mainly learning physically on site**:

- 54% – still reported problems related to poor wifi.
- 25% – no suitable computer/device
- 31% – no safe, private area to work.

It is possible that on campus provision has previously mitigated issues relating to digital access and equity. Connectivity issues may also include poor speed or more users using broadband at the same time. Simple steps like ensuring any videos used are compressed and avoiding use of cameras for large groups can help.

Over a quarter of students had problems accessing organisational online platforms or services and approximately a fifth of students said they needed access to specialist software. Over a fifth cited problems with mobile data costs too, and although the numbers of students who said they didn't have access to suitable devices or places to work were lower, these are major concerns given that the majority of students were only studying online.



Theme two: digital platforms and services at your organisation



In theme two we look at how well students feel their organisation supports them with the technology they need to access online learning: the learning environment, the digital platforms, systems and services and how effectively the organisation communicates with students and facilitates collaboration online. Also important is to what extent organisations involve students in decision-making about online learning.

Organisational systems, services and support

The percentages of students who agreed with statements about technology in their organisation were:

- **55%** – supported to use own digital devices (35% neutral, 10% disagreed)
- **68%** – enabled to access online systems and services from anywhere (25% neutral, 6% disagreed)
- **60%** – communicated effectively online eg email, messaging, notifications (29% neutral, 12% disagreed)
- **47%** – provided a good online environment for collaboration (36% neutral, 17% disagreed)

These findings highlight that many students are struggling with issues that are absolutely critical to the success of online learning. All responses here indicate lower levels of agreement than the 2019/20 survey findings (sometimes substantially so), although, of course, it will not be a direct comparison nationally as different organisations may have participated. Those who did participate may wish to explore their own data in greater detail.

Student quote:

“I like the ability to still collaborate with my fellow students. I enjoy the breakout rooms feature because this is something that we did in in class learning that we are still able to do online.”

The learning environment

The percentages of students who agreed with various statements about their learning environment were:

- **48%** – reliable (38% neutral, 14% disagreed)
- **42%** – well designed (43% neutral, 16% disagreed)
- **45%** – easy to navigate (36% neutral, 19% disagreed)
- **70%** – safe and secure (27% neutral, 3% disagreed)

Students who have been at their organisation for less than a year were slightly more positive about their learning environment compared to students as a whole, although the percentages of those who agreed with all statements except the learning environment being safe and secure are all lower than is desirable at a time when online learning is the primary mode of delivery. Approximately a fifth of students do not find their learning environment easy to navigate.

Involving students in decisions about online learning

- **36%** agreed they were given the chance to be involved in decisions about online learning (36% neutral, 29% disagreed)

There has been a modest, but positive, rise nationally in the percentage of students who agreed they had the chance to be involved in decisions about online learning. The intense focus on providing a good learning experience throughout the pandemic, and the efforts that universities have gone to in listening and responding to student needs and concerns is clearly having an impact but there is still scope for greater improvement. Again, exploring your own local data will provide additional insight.

Theme three: technology in your learning

Theme three explores how technology has been used in learning, the overall quality of online and digital learning and the materials used to support this, as well as the range of learning activities.



Overall quality of online and digital learning

Students were positive about the quality of online and digital learning on their course overall. 68% of students rated it as being either 'best imaginable', 'excellent' or 'good'.

- 3% – best imaginable
- 21% – excellent
- 44% – good
- 21% – average
- 8% – poor
- 2% – awful
- 1% – worst imaginable

Quality of online learning materials

The percentages of students who agreed with statements about the quality of online learning materials were:

- 55% – well designed (35% neutral, 10% disagreed)
- 36% – engaging and motivating (41% neutral, 23% disagreed)
- 45% – at the right level and pace (38% neutral, 18% disagreed)

Although at first glance, the numbers of students who agreed with these statements may seem low, many students (particularly those new to higher education) may not have experienced online learning before. At least a fifth of students disagreed that the learning materials were engaging and motivating.



Range of learning activities

The percentages of students who said they had carried out the following online learning activities **in the last two weeks** prior to taking part in the survey were (can tick more than one):

- 86% – live lecture/teaching session
- 84% – accessed recorded lecture/teaching session
- 81% – accessed other course materials eg notes, assignments
- 64% – submitted coursework
- 52% – online discussion with lecturer
- 49% – received feedback on their work
- 45% – interacted with quizzes/games/tests
- 39% – worked on a group project eg shared report
- 37% – online research tasks
- 18% – virtual lab, practical or field work

High numbers of students had experienced and accessed live and recorded lecture/teaching sessions as well as course materials and notes. Nearly two-thirds had also submitted coursework. Collaborative and engaging activities have been less well used, yet is an aspect of learning that the qualitative data shows that students value. Only about half of the students had online discussions with their lecturers or had feedback on their work at this stage in the academic year. Unsurprisingly, virtual lab, practical or field work has suffered during the pandemic.

Student quote:

“When lectures use the white board features it really helps, allowing you to engage without waiting for a gap to speak in classes of 100+. A few lecturers have provided very engaging material which you can see they have taken the time to create. This makes it much easier to engage online and maintain concentration.”



Theme four: your digital skills



How well supported do students feel in getting to grips with online learning? Theme four looks at the guidance and opportunities students are offered to develop their digital skills and whether they feel these are enough to help them achieve the learning expectations placed upon them.

Overall support for online learning

Students were positive overall about the support they received for online learning. **62%** of all respondents rated it as being either 'best imaginable', 'excellent' or 'good'.

- **4%** – best imaginable
- **19%** – excellent
- **39%** – good
- **26%** – average
- **9%** – poor
- **2%** – awful
- **1%** – worst imaginable

Support and guidance

The percentages of students who agreed they had received support for learning online and digital skills development were:

- **52%** – support for learning online/away from campus (36% neutral, 12% disagreed)
- **42%** – guidance about the digital skills needed for their course (39% neutral, 18% disagreed)
- **25%** – an assessment of their digital skills and training needs (41% neutral, 34% disagreed)

Although the support and guidance requirements are especially important right now, none are new. Now, more than ever, there is a need to address these issues to ensure continuity of learning. Only a quarter of students said they were offered an assessment of their digital skills and training needs, something that ideally should be in place before students begin their studies.

Developing students' digital skills

The percentages of students who said they were offered support or training to develop digital capabilities were (can tick more than one):

- **55%** – learning online
- **52%** – avoiding plagiarism
- **28%** – basic IT skills
- **27%** – behaving safely and respectfully online
- **26%** – specialist software for your course
- **26%** – tracking your progress and achievements
- **20%** – keeping personal data safe
- **18%** – protecting your privacy in online spaces
- **17%** – information and data literacy

At a time when 81% of students say they are learning online it is vital that they know how to behave safely and respectfully online, how to keep their personal data safe and to protect their privacy in online environments.

Student quote:

"Long lectures (3 hours) makes it hard to stay motivated when staring at a laptop screen and juggling poor wifi, lack of privacy and disruptions within the home. These issues make it difficult to concentrate."

Confidence in aspects of learning online

The percentages of students who agreed with questions set specifically in the context of the current pandemic situation were:

- **45%** – the learning expectations placed on students had been reasonable (31% neutral, 24% disagreed)
- **51%** – could access all the university support services they needed online (34% neutral, 15% disagreed)
- **34%** – the concerns of students and their representatives were being heard (43% neutral, 23% disagreed)

It has been a tough year for both students and staff as they have had to respond rapidly to changes, so perhaps the high levels of neutral responses are unsurprising. Of particular concern is that only approximately half of students agreed that they could access all of the university support services they needed online and that high numbers of students disagreed that learning expectations were reasonable or that their concerns were being heard.

Where do students go for help with online learning? (can tick more than one)

- **67%** – other students on your course
- **61%** – lecturers/tutors
- **46%** – online videos and resources
- **33%** – friends and family
- **16%** – IT/e-learning staff
- **10%** – don't need help
- **7%** – library staff

This year, students turned most to other students on their course for support with online learning. This is a shift from recent years when their primary source of support was their lecturers and tutors. Online videos and resources are their third most likely option. Ensure signposting for support from IT/e-learning and library staff is clear, particularly for new students who may be unfamiliar with the breadth of support available to them.



Listening to student voices



Students were asked to say what they thought were the most positive and negative aspects of online learning, how they felt the quality of online and digital learning could be improved and what one thing they felt their universities and colleges should do to help them learn effectively online. Their responses reveal that learning preferences are very individual – what some students really like, others do not.

The most positive aspects of online learning

There were **16,324** free text responses to this question. Students were positive about:

- Replaying **lecture recordings** helps students to **understand** or **catch up** if unable to attend live sessions. Recordings allow students to **manage the pace** (slow down/speed up) and **facilitate note-taking**. They help students for whom **English is not first language** and can be **easier to hear** than sessions in large lecture theatres
- **Live sessions** are more **interactive** and **engaging** than pre-records giving opportunities to **ask questions** and get **timely responses**
- **Online learning** is perceived as **better** by some students. The **flexibility** and **convenience** helps students to **schedule their studies** around **other commitments** in a less rigid way
- **Learning with and from peers is important** to students - **small group activities** work better than larger task groups
- The **effort** that has gone into **curriculum redesign**, **communication** and **support from academic and professional services staff support**

The most negative aspects of online learning

There were **17,463** free text responses to this question. The most negative aspects for students were:

- Students are experiencing **difficulties in accessing lectures** and **online resources**
- **Timeliness, scheduling** and **timetabling**
- **Online learning** is **hard** and **difficult** and can be **overwhelming**. Students report receiving **too much work** and expectations of a **larger volume of independent work** than usual but **without** the benefit of **timely support**
- **Difficulty in concentrating**. Too much screen time, some lectures too long, insufficient breaks, intensesness of delivery mode – causes fatigue and mental health concerns
- **Communication** issues – **interactions** in live sessions can be difficult if **class size is large** and if they don't know other students
- **Isolation** and **loneliness**

Improving the quality of online and digital learning and helping students to learn effectively online

Students were asked what one thing their organisations should do to improve the quality of online and digital learning (**14,792** free text responses) and what one thing their organisation should do to help students learn effectively online (**11,428** free text responses). Students would like universities to:

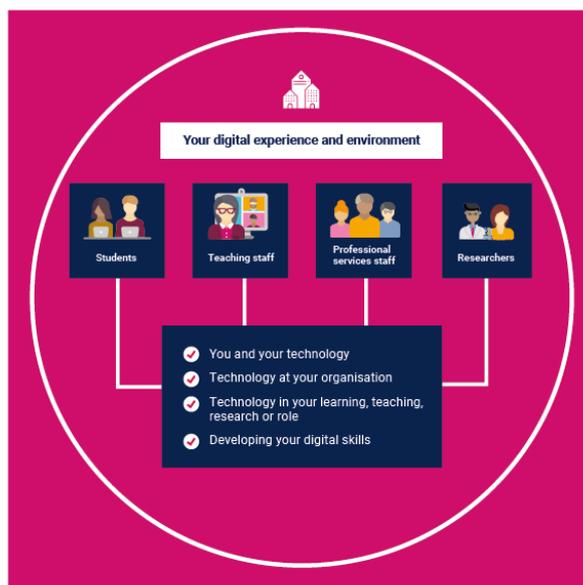
- **Get the basics right** – **wifi** (on/off campus), reliable **hardware** and **software**, clear **navigation** to learning content, **timetabling** and session **scheduling**, **audio** and **lighting**
- Make learning sessions **more interactive** (eg quizzes, games, tests, **small group tasks** so they **feel connected** to each other, their course and their university
- **Record lessons** and make them available soon after delivery to aid personal learning preferences, revision and catch up
- **Train** and **support lecturers** to use online tools effectively in a pedagogically sound and inclusive way
- Think about the **pace of delivery** (too fast/too slow) and consider **shorter** bursts and **regular breaks**
- Create opportunities to talk to/**ask questions** of lecturers and fellow students and give **timely individual** and **group support**
- Offer **timely feedback** on formative and summative assessment activities

Get involved

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

Our 2021 digital experience insights survey for students is open until 30 April 2021 – it's not too late to take part. If you would like to find out more about your students' digital experience or if you are interested in participating in our other surveys for teaching staff, professional services staff and researchers, please contact us at help@jisc.ac.uk putting 'digital insights' in the email subject line.

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



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Let's work together to transform your digital experience

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