

# EUNIS 2021: How are UK higher education students learning online?

Sarah Knight<sup>1</sup> and Clare Killen<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Jisc, United Kingdom

sarah.knight@jisc.ac.uk, clare.killen@jisc.ac.uk

## Abstract

With the continued pandemic, and the requirement of students in higher education to continue to learn remotely, it is essential that we have mechanisms in place for gathering feedback on their experiences. It has never been more important to listen to the student voice and to work as partners with students to ensure their digital experience delivers what they need and shapes the digital future of the students that follow.

The Jisc [digital experience insights surveys](#) (Jisc, 2021) allow organisations to collect valid, representative and actionable data from their students and staff about the digital environment they offer and to understand how digital technologies are used in learning and teaching as well as across the organisation. This year, organisations have the option to run the surveys annually or as pulse surveys and this session will share the findings from the higher education student surveys with the data collected from October 2020 to end of December 2020.

Over 21,000 students from UK universities have shared their views on their online learning experience. The findings offer insights into how students are navigating digital poverty, their digital wellbeing as well as the support for developing their digital skills and what they need in order to become effective online learners.

This session will provide new and actionable insights for leaders, managers and practitioners on how to ensure they are able to offer a high quality learning experience for all their students whether learning online or as a blended offer. This session will encourage participants to think about how they can gather these insights from their own students and also what they can do in their own organisation and practice

## Extended abstract

### What students want

15 universities and further education colleges ran our survey with their higher education students from October 2020 to December 2020, at a time when different phases of lockdown were in operation across the UK. 21,697 higher education students responded to the surveys and shared their experiences. Their responses provide valuable insights into how they are navigating digital poverty, managing their digital wellbeing, and how well they feel their university or college is supporting them to develop the digital skills they need to participate effectively online.

These findings echo those reported in the recently published review of digital teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic led by Sir Michael Barber, chair of the Office for Students (OfS) [Gravity Assist: propelling higher education towards a brighter future](#) (Office for Students, 2021).

### Challenges and concerns

Despite the unpredictable landscape of Covid, 51% of students still expected their learning experience to be on campus, although the reality was 81% of students were learning solely online. Most students were studying at home (72%) although substantial numbers were also doing so from student accommodation (32%). Around one in ten were using study spaces on campus. Unsurprisingly students experienced a number of challenges including poor wifi connection (61%), mobile data costs (22%), and no safe or private space to study (19%). 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.

These are major concerns given that most students are only studying online. The findings highlight that many students are struggling with issues that are critical to their success as online learners.

Only **36%** of students agreed they were given 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 to and responding to student needs and concerns is clearly having an impact – but there is still scope for greater improvement. Working in partnership with students to codesign their digital experience will encourage more innovation in curriculum development and a greater alignment with student needs and expectations.

### Positive about quality and support

Despite the challenges students are facing, they were positive about the quality of online and digital learning on their course overall. 68% of all respondents rated it as being either ‘best imaginable’, ‘excellent’ or ‘good’. 55% of students said the online learning materials were well designed. 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 despite this being 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. Students highlighted the value of timely feedback on their work in the qualitative responses from the surveys. This is an area where further enhancements can be made.

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’. However, the survey

identified areas where students need further support and guidance. Only 52% of students said they had received support for learning online, with 42% saying they received guidance about the digital skills they needed for their course. 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. To support students to develop the skills they need to become effective online learners, this is a critical area for development for universities.

### **In their own words**

As part of the survey students were asked 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 should do to help them learn effectively online. Their responses provide a valuable check list for staff to enhance their current practice and to support their students to become more effective online learners:

- Get the basics right – wifi (on/off campus), access to reliable hardware and software, clear navigation to learning content, timetabling and session scheduling, audio and lighting of online sessions
- Make learning sessions more interactive (eg quizzes, games, tests), small group tasks so students 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 and in a pedagogically sound way
- Think about the pace of delivery (too fast/too slow) and consider shorter bursts and regular breaks for students
- 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

*“Online lectures aren’t the same as on campus lectures, it’s very difficult to stay engaged staring at a screen for 8 hours a day. The best lectures/tutorials are when they are well organized, to the point and cover everything in 45-60 minutes”*  
*HE student, UK university*

### **The way forward**

It has been challenging for universities to manage the changing landscape caused by COVID-19 and meet student expectations. Teaching staff and learning technology teams have worked tirelessly to design and deliver a comparable online curriculum and to provide an equivalent experience to what students may have expected from a more familiar on campus experience with the introduction of new and innovative ways of communicating, learning and teaching. The interpersonal aspects of learning and the wellbeing of students have been harder to support; although some students report having enhanced access to teaching and tutorial staff and find it less daunting to participate in small, online discussions than in large face-to-face lectures.

Now is the time for universities to work in partnership with their students to codesign a world class digital experience - one in which technology is integrated in a pedagogically sound and inclusive way. We need to develop further opportunities for all students to develop the skills they need to thrive through these challenging times, and flourish in the fast-changing digital world.

## References

Jisc (2021). Student digital experience insights survey 2020/21: Findings from UK higher education (pulse 1: October– December 2020). Jisc. Retrieved March, 10, 2021, from: <https://repository.jisc.ac.uk/8318/1/DEI-P1-HE-student-briefing-2021-FINAL.pdf>

Sir Michael Barber (2021). Gravity assist Propelling higher education towards a brighter future. Office for Students (2021). Retrieved March, 10, 2021 from: [Gravity assist: Propelling higher education towards a brighter future – Digital teaching and learning review \(windows.net\)](https://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/gravity-assist-propelling-higher-education-towards-a-brighter-future-digital-teaching-and-learning-review)

## Author biographies

### Sarah Knight

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



Sarah is Head of learning and teaching transformation within the HE directorate at Jisc. Sarah managed the team supporting the development of the Digital experience insights service ([digitalinsights.jisc.ac.uk](http://digitalinsights.jisc.ac.uk)) which is researching staff and students' expectations and experiences of the digital environment and the team who are developed the Jisc Building digital capability service ([digitalcapability.jisc.ac.uk](http://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 16 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



**Clare Killen**

Clare has 24 years of experience in supporting providers from the higher and further education skills sectors with various aspects of staff development, including in effective use of digital technologies to support educational practices and ambitions. She has led teams delivering national initiatives and provided consultancy services focusing on: whole organisation improvements, transformational change, curriculum design and improving professional practice through peer coaching. Clare has authored

several guides for Jisc on topics such as student-staff partnerships, emerging digital practices and digital capability development.

Clare joined Jisc in 2018 as Content insights manager for the Building digital capability and Digital experience insights services.

Web: <https://digitalcapability.jisc.ac.uk> and <https://digitalinsights.jisc.ac.uk>

Twitter: @ClareJK