
Student digital experience Tracker

Case study: University of Nottingham Ningbo China

Context

The **University of Nottingham Ningbo China** is an overseas campus of the University of Nottingham, situated in the city of Ningbo in the coastal province of Zhejiang, near Shanghai. Nottingham was the first foreign university to establish an independent campus in China, welcoming its first students in 2004. The campus was developed in partnership with the Wanli Education Group and has facilities for 8,000 students. A range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses are available, with all teaching in English. Degrees are accredited by the University of Nottingham.

Why the Tracker was used

Nottingham Ningbo was one of the first institutions to apply to be part of the Tracker pilot. Marion Sadoux, Academic Director of Online Learning, recognised at once that the Tracker could offer *'a more thorough understanding of our diverse student body's use of technology and digital literacy'*. As online and blended learning approaches were becoming more widespread at Ningbo, the University was keen to ensure that existing tools such as Moodle, along with non-proprietary tools available to learners, were being used to best effect. The University was particularly interested in the experiences of Chinese students, who typically have different attitudes and concerns about digital technology to students in the UK. For example, at secondary school they will have had very limited access to the internet and no use of mobile technologies.

Engaging key staff and learners

Marion identified and worked with key staff in the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Office, Library Services (including the e-Learning support team), and with a number of senior managers. Staff with learning and teaching responsibilities was engaged at school/faculty level (Blended Learning Champions), with the support of Faculty

Directors of Teaching. The survey was advertised through Moodle notifications and WeChat groups and by email directly from the VP Teaching and Learning.

A group of Student e-Learning Ambassadors were selected from the Learning Community Forum to help survey their peers. There are specific challenges involved in surveying at Ningbo, where students feel they are already over-subjected to questionnaires and that their feedback is not taken seriously. There are also cultural barriers to offering personal opinions online. The student ambassadors helped other students to complete the survey in face-to-face settings. Large lectures were used as points of contact. Where these approaches failed to reassure students about the anonymity of their responses, print-outs of the survey were used and subsequently entered into the Tracker.

Ambassadors have also participated in focus groups, and next academic year they will be involved in detailed analysis of the Tracker findings. These ambassadors can gain recognition for their involvement through the SACA Nottingham Advantage Award, an incentive which is highly valued for its contribution to building a positive CV.

What the Tracker found

The University found the experience overall to have been a *'useful opportunity to identify issues in relation to benchmarked practice'*. Using the Tracker in BOS was *'very easy'* and the Jisc guidance resources were described as *'excellent'*. The data has now been analysed by School and by year of study. Further analysis is taking place in partnership with students, and each school will receive its own analysis with suggestions of action to take. Overall data has been presented to the Teaching Committee and used to inform the draft of a new Digital Learning Strategy. Attention and resource has now shifted to addressing the issues identified below.

Due to the problem of student confidence, completion rates were not as high as hoped (257). Nottingham Ningbo is in the early stages of planning for digital learning, and many of the school-based structures such as Blended Learning Champions are only just becoming established. For this reason data collection and analysis have been uneven across subject areas – in some places over 10 per cent, in others barely registering a response. It is likely that students who did complete the Tracker are those who are most digitally confident and comfortable. Despite these issues, there were sufficient responses to find some significant differences with the sector benchmark:

1. Ningbo students reported a lower use of online journals, though use increases as study progresses. This may be linked to lack of confidence with Academic English, particularly during the preliminary and first year of study.
2. Ningbo students also report using fewer online materials than average for other UK university students. This is in contrast to their high use of the VLE (not benchmarked) and may indicate either a difficulty to separate these two categories or a lack of links to external online learning materials within the VLE. It could also be related to the high value attached to textbooks and book study in Chinese educational culture.
3. Ningbo students were more positive than the benchmark in believing that *'when staff use technology it improves my learning'*, and in the support they get for digital issues.

4. Ningbo students indicated a stronger than average sense of being involved in decisions about digital learning on campus. This may be attributed to a recent development in the engagement of the Student Union, as well as some radical improvements to the Learning Community Forum.

In the open questions, when asked what the University should *start* doing the key word used by students was 'more'. When asked what should *stop*, the key word was 'nothing'. And 'Moodle' dominated in the free text about what should be *kept*. This suggests that students are fully in support of the direction that digital development is going at Ningbo, though at times they would like it to progress faster. Students are also keen to access scholarly resources using their own tools and know-how, for example via google scholar, which was frequently mentioned.

Responses and reflections

Since taking part in the Tracker project, Nottingham Ningbo has taken concrete steps towards improving the student digital learning experience particularly with improved access to wifi on campus and with the introduction of eduroam. Some School Blended Learning Champions are planning to use the findings of the tracker to develop blended learning projects which will count towards their PGCHE, and in International Studies – where completion rates were 10% - Christane Mueller is analysing the data in detail as part of a postgraduate project.

Marion has presented details of the Tracker to the 2nd UNESCO / Ministry of Education PRC conference on ICT in Education, showcasing its value in supporting student engagement. The pilot process has also been highlighted in a new brochure about eLearning at UNNC.

The survey engaged students with issues of e-learning in a completely new way, and enabled links to develop between the student body, student learning champions, and the IT and e-learning support teams. It built on an earlier project in which Chinese students redesigned Moodle pages to give them a navigational and organisational structure closer to the style that they were used to. In Ningbo, all digital issues have a cultural aspect, and this project has made further steps towards a culturally-sensitive, student-led approach.

"The voice of the students is very important in changing mindsets here. And I think that's of huge value in this survey."

"Thanks to the Student Digital Experience Tracker we can better understand the needs and demands of our students. They have sent us a clear message about the importance they attach to digital skills which they see as helpful to

learning and key to their professional future. This gives us an invaluable basis upon which to think strategically and to further develop our budding community of practice”.

Marion Sadoux, Academic Lead for Online Learning at UNNC

Key lessons

1. In some settings, cultural issues dominate students' experience of digital technology, and may lead to biased sampling (e.g. at Ningbo it is likely that only the most digitally confident and engaged felt able to participate). Solutions include use of paper versions and using student champions to complete surveys on behalf of other students in face-to-face settings.
2. Survey fatigue is an issue at many campuses. The Tracker could be tied in more closely with other surveys. This would also give the message that digital issues are part of the mainstream learning experience. For example, if there are no questions in module evaluation forms about the digital experience, this gives both students and staff the message that it doesn't matter. A separate instrument can pick up added detail, but there still needs to be effort to embed digital issues into other measures.
3. Open questions are very popular and useful. They can be analysed quickly e.g. using word clouds and word counts, and in more detail e.g. using qualitative analysis software, theory building, or with the help of student representatives and focus groups.