Student digital experience Tracker

Case study: University of Northampton

Context

The **University of Northampton** is a modern institution, currently based on two linked sites in Northamptonshire. In 2018 the University will move to a new campus in the centre of Northampton, a brand new site with modern facilities and cutting edge technology, located right in the heart of the community.

The University of Northampton was founded in 1975 and gained full university status in 2005; since then it has grown to around 14,000 students taking a wide range of undergraduate, postgraduate and professional development courses. The University has a unique commitment to social innovation and creating social impact: in 2013, Northampton was the first UK university to be awarded the Ashoka U 'Changemaker Campus' status, in recognition of its commitments in this area and the excellent opportunities for students to work, learn and innovate in settings that are driven by social values.

Why the Tracker was used

The University of Northampton's current Strategic Plan (2015-2020) identifies the need for a digital transformation of the student experience, and a new model of learning and teaching puts an emphasis firmly on digital activity in the curriculum. The Learning Technology team already had good longitudinal data regarding improvements in staff digital literacy to support these transformations, but wanted more reliable data about the experiences of students.

There have been a number of focus groups in conjunction with the Students' Union, using the **Jisc NUS TSEP student digital experience benchmarking tool** as a basis for the discussion and action planning. This has led to investment in aspects of the digital estate, including better wifi and a review of the VLE. The Tracker was seen as a further step along this road, allowing a more systematic approach to identifying and addressing issues in the digital learning experience, in time for the move to a new campus in 2018.

Engaging key staff and learners

The Tracker planning process helped the team to focus on its key stakeholders: the University Student Experience Group; The Directors of IT, Library and Learning Services, The Institute of Learning and Teaching; and the Students' Union. The Head of Learning Technology led the Tracker pilot, supported by the Students' Union's Student Voice Coordinator.

Northampton chose to deliver the Tracker to student course representatives (N=389), partly to ensure broad coverage with no bias towards particular areas of study, and partly to ensure that students completing the Tracker were also involved in discussing and following up on the issues identified. They also wanted to raise the profile of the student digital experience by including the Tracker pilot in the training for student representatives. The Students' Union was fully on board with this approach, and it has also been mapped to the University's student engagement matrix which outlines opportunities for student engagement and partnership across the institution.

Implementing the Tracker at Northampton was straightforward with the guidance available from Jisc. Reminders and direct emails were sent out to Course Representatives, in addition to an initial introduction and messages on the VLE. When the response rate was low to begin with, the team sent out nudge messages about the potential to influence planning for the digital environment and learning on the new campus.

What the Tracker found

The survey was distributed to 389 Course Representatives and completed by 111 (28.5% response rate). There were responses from all current Schools and across all stages of study from foundation to postgraduate research. These show that students are using a range of digital devices to support their learning, with 94% using a personal laptop and 30% using one provided by the University. Desktop computers are still popular however, with 68% students using the ones provided by the institution. Forty five per cent of respondents use their own tablet devices for learning and 84% have their own smartphone.

With regards to frequency of access: 87% of students make regular use of the printers and computers provided by the University; 96% make use of the wifi; 93% make use of ebooks and journals; 99% make use of online course materials; 96% review their personal information online (e.g. grades and module choices); and 78% make use of cloud storage (e.g. Google Drive). In the six weeks prior to completing the survey: 97% students had found information online; 64% had worked online with others (e.g. Discussion boards, Facebook or Twitter); and 32% had created a portfolio of their learning.

When questioned around guidance and support: 56% had received enough support on their personal devices; 51% had developed digital skills needed on their course; 54% had received enough guidance on behaving safely and respectfully online; 49% had obtained guidance to create an online profile (e.g. LinkedIn).

"LinkedIn is a huge resource but I was not made that aware of it … I just knew about it because it's an industry standard … a lot of employers will ask for your LinkedIn page"
Comment from a student focus group

Relevant support came from tutors (26 mentions), IT Services (13), online sources (12), peers (10), Library (5), and the Centre for Learning Development (3). When technology was used by teaching staff, 73% students agreed that it helped their learning experience, higher than the sector average. Eighty five percent indicated that they had no problems with the delivery of online assessments, again considerably higher than the norm for HE, while 96% felt that NILE, the institutional VLE, was useful in supporting their learning. Focus groups are currently in progress to better understand the nature of the data since these later findings may be a reflection of the maturity of the University's e-assessment strategy, which was implemented in 2011, and now requires all feasible assessments to be submitted online.

Around half of all respondents indicated that they were unaware of how their personal data was stored (33.6% indicated they hadn't been told; 16.4% didn't know), suggesting that more work needs to be done to communicate this to students and provide further transparency. Thirty per cent felt that they would like more opportunity to be involved in decisions around digital services.

"We've got some wonderful resources but not enough people know about them"
Comment from a student focus group

Qualitative comments were divided into three main sections covering what the University could *start, stop* or *continue* doing. Under *start,* 39 comments were focused on improvements to wifi or IT facilities generally. Seven asked for improvements to Library facilities, 9 for improvements that tutors could make to the local VLE such as timely uploading of content and better use of functionality. Sixteen students asked for tutors to use technology consistently (and competently) across modules. Eight respondents asked for more training (face to face or online) to help them engage with their course. The students within the focus group discussed the idea of a course digital reading list which provided students with the list of key software that they needed to become familiar with and links to relevant tutorials.

"They need to tell you right at the beginning what tools you will need to use and give you the resources to develop those skills. If you're not IT savvy you can go and make yourself IT savvy"
Comment from a student focus group

Stop comments tended to be aimed at infrastructure such as wifi or computer provision (14), poor delivery of material by tutors (8) or the VLE being used inefficiently (3). Approaches which should be *continued* included ongoing enhancements to the VLE (25); good support from the Library (13); and investment in the IT infrastructure (11). Twelve respondents explicitly noted that the University needs to keep listening to student feedback generally and making improvements based on this.

Responses and reflections

In response to these findings, the Student Experience Committee has passed the following recommendations:

1. Ongoing focus groups with students to identify priority areas which need to be addressed as a result of the findings.

2. The Student Experience Committee will consider detailed comments in key areas and respond to students about how these will be addressed.

3. The findings for Northampton should be benchmarked with other institutions to identify areas which are significantly different.

4. The survey should be repeated in 12 months to identify changes which have been made as a result of the actions taken.

The Tracker team have met with Learning Technology staff, the Students' Union and Researchers in Learning Technology to discuss the data, and have initiated conversations with Directors of IT and Learning & Teaching. A report on the data with these recommendations has been passed by the Student Experience Committee. Focus groups are now being held with students to clarify the key findings, which are also being correlated with other internal research projects.

"It is essential that we understand the range of student experiences and the sector wide trends within this."
Rob Howe, Head of Learning Technology

Key lessons

1. Data analysis need not focus on benchmarking with other institutions, but can look at local trends and differences, and probe findings in detail with students who are committed to making things better.

2. Targeting Course representatives in a survey of this kind has several benefits: a higher response rate, a more representative spread of subject areas and stages of study, and the assurance of working with

engaged students who have things to say. Having completed the Tracker, representatives can be engaged in focus groups to understand the findings, in planning a response, and in communicating with other learners about the process. There are some risks, in that student representatives are a self-selected group who may differ from other students in ways that are significant for the findings of the Tracker.

3. Involving the Students' Union in discussions about the digital environment raises awareness amongst student representatives on the benefits technology offers for learning and can lead to better student engagement around digital issues.