La Trobe University

Participating in the international student digital experience insights survey (2017-2018)

"The Library invests most of its collections budget in digital resources - understanding how our students experience technology in the university environment is essential to ensuring students can take advantage of our rich digital collection and use it effectively for learning and research."

Fiona Salisbury, university librarian, La Trobe University

Rationale

Participating in the international Jisc **student digital experience insights survey** in 2017 and 2018 provided La Trobe University (La Trobe) with an opportunity to explore student perceptions and experience of aspects of digital provision, digital support and digital practices. Over the two years, the survey has also provided a source of evidence about how La Trobe curriculum improvement strategies are making a difference to the student experience in the digital environment.

Implementation

The student digital experience insights survey was first used by La Trobe in 2017 with a small group of first year students in selected high-enrolment subjects. In 2018 the university planning and institutional performance unit (PIPU) approved university-wide implementation of the survey and 35,000 students were invited to participate.

Despite not offering prizes as an incentive to participate in the survey, a total of 2,440 students (7%) completed the survey. A range of promotional activities were deployed to encourage participation. The most successful promotion was an email sent to all students by PIPU, followed by two reminders at the midpoint and final week of the survey. On the days the emails were sent out, a high volume of responses was received. Other promotional activities included communication via social media, digital signage, posters, flyers, and face to face engagement with students in the Library.

Three additional questions were added to the core survey to determine discipline and campus. Students were also asked a question about the nature and effectiveness of blended learning, as this has been an important part of La Trobe's curriculum redesign initiatives.

Key findings and impact

Findings from the 2018 survey indicate that La Trobe students are increasingly aware of the advantages of blended learning which is part of a suite of institutional strategies to redesign learning and teaching. For example, 66% of students agreed that blended learning was flexible and 61% of students agreed that blended learning contributed to their learning – with students in Health, Law and IT and Engineering most likely to rate blended learning highly.

In addition, 56% of students agreed that when digital technologies were used in their course that they understand things better (compared to 38% of students in 2017).

The survey also provides a picture of the frequency of digital course activities that contribute to these attitudes. For example, 23% of La Trobe learners use educational games for learning on a weekly basis (compared and average of 20% of ANZ students) and 36% of La Trobe students use quizzes to give an answer in class on a weekly basis (compared to 32% of ANZ students).

The vast majority of La Trobe students use digital technology actively and frequently to support their

independent learning. On a weekly basis most La Trobe students find information online (94.5%); watch or listen to learning materials (83%); manage links/references (75%); make notes (72%); and look for additional resources online not recommended by their tutors (68%).

Just as frequency of digital activity is high, students' perception of how important digital activity to successful independent learning is also high. More than two thirds of La Trobe students agree that they are more independent in their learning when digital technologies are part of their course (73%)

An area of improvement highlighted in the quantitative and qualitative survey responses was how to create a sense of connectedness in the digital environment. While the digital environment brings advantages to many aspects of the learning experience it also brings the risk of isolation and lack of connection with peers and university staff. Less than half of La Trobe students felt well connected to others in the digital learning environment.

The library responded to this need for more connection in the online environment by increasing hours of the library online chat service and promoting the visibility of the library chat app on the website. In first semester 2019 this resulted in a 243% increase in the number of library chat sessions compared to the same period in 2018 and an observed increase in the complexity of the nature of queries.

More than 1500 students took the opportunity to provide answers to five free text questions in the survey and to expand on what's working well and where the digital environment could be improved.

The top five themes that emerged from the qualitative data related to:

- Improving facilities and access to the resources
- Providing university support for the use of digital resources
- Providing digital training for staff
- Minimising technical issues
- Providing an open communicative digital space where students could seek help and have their concerns heard

Results from the 2018 survey data report have been used to engage academic and professional staff across the university in conversations about how to improve the student digital experience. A number of customised data reports have been generated to inform the learning management system upgrade project group, to support a review of blended learning in regional campuses, and to inform the Inclusive Resource Development team.

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