

# University of Northampton

## Building the digital landscape

July 2020



*“Everything we do around digital is effectively a piece of a jigsaw that helps us to build the digital landscape. The insights surveys enable us to understand what that bigger picture or landscape will look like and gives us the tools to construct it.”*

ROB HOWE, HEAD OF LEARNING TECHNOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF NORTHAMPTON

### Data informed decisions

The University of Northampton first participated in the student **digital experience insights** survey in 2016 as part of the pilot. It has run the student survey every year since and also the surveys for teaching staff and professional services staff as they were introduced in 2018 and 2019. The insights surveys feed into, and contribute to, a range of connected initiatives that form a wider holistic approach to strategic and operational planning. These include:

- The university mission of ‘**Transforming Lives + Inspiring Change**’ by providing a unique learning experience in a digitally transformed university
- A focus on continuous improvement and the key behaviours that underpin this
- Relocating to a new, purpose-built Waterside Campus where technology is an integral aspect

of the design. This has required cultural change as well as new ways of learning and working

- The development of **active blended learning (ABL)**, a new model for learning and teaching on and off campus using digitally rich environments that integrate ‘live’, real-time sessions with activities that students can undertake at a time and place of their choosing
- **Integrated learner support**: a new and centralised approach to academic and pastoral support that includes employability and digital skills sessions for all students

*“Digital experience insights is like a dandelion seed head – the seeds go off in many different directions and the outputs contribute to many different activities, services and teams.”*

ROB HOWE, HEAD OF LEARNING TECHNOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF NORTHAMPTON

The university has a strong history in work designed to understand and enhance the student experience stretching back to 2005, as well as good engagement with the Student Union. The University of Northampton also has [ChangeMaker Campus](#) status.

All of these things are important – they show the overall journey that the university is undertaking and how they are building an organisational response that helps them to fulfil their ambitions, achieve consensus and common purpose and embed robust data analysis into the decision-making and improvement planning processes.

## Running the digital experience insights surveys in 2020

This year the [digital experience insights](#) survey for students was run between 14 October 2019 and 29 January 2020. Like many universities, approval to run the surveys is subject to authorisation by a surveys group to ensure that there are no conflicts or clashes with other initiatives. The teaching and professional services staff surveys were run between 2 January and 8 March 2020. It should be noted that these surveys were all closed pre-lockdown and that the results are likely to change when the survey is repeated later in the year.

- 682 students completed the HE student survey with responses from each faculty and representation spanning foundation, undergraduate and postgraduate (taught) levels
- 92 teaching staff and 163 professional services staff completed their respective surveys, also with respondents from each faculty and professional services team

The university's marketing team helped to promote the surveys to both students and staff. The student survey was promoted via NILE (the university's Blackboard™ environment), display screens around the campus, through student advocates and the Student Union. Staff received a personal email invitation and the surveys were also promoted via newsletters and the staff Facebook page.

Findings and recommendations from the analysis of all the insights surveys are widely circulated and discussed at key committees, principally the student experience committee which is chaired by the deputy vice chancellor. All faculties are represented at this committee along with student faculty representatives, student union representatives, professional services teams and other key stakeholders. Both student and

staff survey findings are discussed at the student experience committee.

Following consideration by the student experience committee, a short list of prioritised and focused actions was agreed and circulated to faculty heads and task owners. A copy of the summary reports which include comparisons with the national benchmarking data and copies of the data from the surveys was also shared. Follow up support is provided by the learning technology team.

The reports are also presented to the university management team, governors, the digital and IT steering groups and other relevant committees. Some of the findings are used to inform future key performance indicator targets.

## Key findings

### Findings from the student survey

- There was a positive shift in the number of students who rated the overall quality of the university's digital provision as above average (choosing either 'good', 'excellent' or 'best imaginable') compared with previous years
- In comparison with last year's responses, a higher percentage of students reported access to digital services generally (online course materials, access to e-books and e-journals, file storage and backup) although the numbers of students who reported access to reliable wifi, file storage and backup was lower than the national benchmark – these results identifying that better promotion is needed
- High numbers of students used a range of digital devices to support their learning (laptops, tablet devices and smartphones), generally this was on a par with national benchmarking figures. Students also identified different types of assistive software and devices that they found useful
- Satisfaction with the delivery of online assessments was high (94%)
- Findings in relation to how well-prepared students felt for the digital workforce were slightly higher than the benchmark figures and higher than for Northampton's 2018/19 survey
- In relation to guidance and support for digital skills, lecturers on the course were the most cited support option (42%) followed by online information (22%) and support from fellow students (21%). 37% of students said they had regular opportunities to review and update their digital skills
- Not all students were aware of how their personal data was stored and used

- Suggestions for ‘what one thing’ the university could do to improve the quality of digital teaching and learning gave a rich insight into the digital aspects of learning and teaching that students found valuable, the support they would like and the environment they expect

**Staff findings** (*benchmarking data not yet available as teaching staff survey still live at time of writing*)

Findings from the staff surveys identified areas where the staff experience was important not just to the staff but was also likely to impact on the student experience.

*“The student experience is directly impacted by the staff digital experience – you cannot separate the two”*

ROB HOWE, HEAD OF LEARNING TECHNOLOGY,  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHAMPTON

- 64% of teaching staff rated the quality of digital teaching and learning at Northampton as above average (choosing ‘excellent’ or ‘good’ on a seven-point scale)
- 94% of tutors felt motivated to use technology to support their teaching and in terms of general digital capabilities, staff self-rated confidence was high at 90%. This is 14% higher than the target set for 2019/20 and also exceeds the target set for 2021/22. 80% of staff indicated that they were ‘quite’ or ‘very’ confident at trying out new technologies
- 78% of respondents use organisation-owned laptops for work and 46% use a personal smartphone for work purposes
- At the time of the survey (January-March 2020), a substantial number of staff were less confident about their access to, and ability to use, remote access to online systems and services, online communications, reliable wifi and file storage
- With regards to areas where staff went to for support – peers were most commonly noted and online videos and resources were less cited (19%). Not all staff were confident about their legal obligations in terms of keeping student data safe under GDPR, digital copyright and licensing. These findings are not unique to the University of Northampton and align with 2019 benchmarking data – identifying a need for ongoing development and support
- Free text questions identified the tools or apps that professional services staff and teaching staff found useful
- In terms of ‘what one thing’ the university could do to develop the digital skills of staff, the most

commonly cited responses were: providing more support and resolving IT issues, more varied opportunities for development and more time for development, opportunities to profile skills and better communication in relation to the training opportunities available

*“Digital experience insights surveys give you tried and tested question sets that are comparable across similar organisations. The benchmarking data tells you where you are and allows you to compare it with others – it helps to give you a better idea of the areas you need to improve. If you are not using insights, you need to look carefully at how you are getting this information.”*

ROB HOWE, HEAD OF LEARNING TECHNOLOGY,  
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## A valuable ‘temperature check’: supporting a rapid response to Covid-19

The 2019-2020 survey closed just before the Covid-19 pandemic and the forced move to off campus learning. Undeniably, the rapid change and continuation of learning, teaching and assessment online was significantly helped by the work that the university had previously undertaken to transform the model of teaching and learning, analyse and improve the student and staff digital experience, provide flexible and robust support and equip staff with university-provided laptops. The currency of the data from the insights surveys helped to inform the university’s response to the Covid-19 pandemic. It meant that the university had a valuable, up-to-date ‘temperature check’ and an understanding of the technologies that students and staff had access to, the levels of confidence in terms of digital capabilities and the activities and support that students found helpful.

There were still significant challenges ahead and the university provided additional support from student services, technical/IT, library and learning resources and digital skills support teams, as well as curriculum and assessment design and planning. Focus groups with staff and students were used to follow up throughout the rapid response period and progress continues to be closely monitored. There was a natural sharp increase in the numbers of students and staff using the online systems (+500%) and in the support, required to service this. The work

previously done to develop the model of **active blended learning** was very helpful and perhaps ensured there was already a better balance of synchronous and asynchronous, as well as face to face and online, activities in place prior to the pandemic.

### *The characteristics of ABL mean:*

- *Close interaction with tutors, small group teaching and teamwork*
- *Activities that reflect the workplace*
- *A future-focused, digitally rich learning environment*
- *Accessible and up-to-date online resources across all subject areas*
- *Straightforward, consistent and reassuring access to information and resources*
- *A supportive culture of motivation to progress and succeed, with students' personal tutors playing a key role*
- *A focus on academic and social belonging opportunities, including mentoring and peer support mechanisms*

PROFESSOR ALE ARMELLINI, DEAN OF LEARNING AND TEACHING AND DIRECTOR OF THE INSTITUTE OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF NORTHAMPTON

Staff training sessions in planning online delivery were very popular and comparatively easy to update and provide; building on years of investment and exploration of the sort of online experience the university aspired to provide. Liaison with professional bodies ensured their requirements were also met.

The fact that the surveys were completed immediately before the pandemic provides a clear demarcation and an internal benchmark – everything that the university now does to improve and enhance the digital experience will stand clear and will enable the university to compare pre- and post-Covid-19 findings.

## Reflection on findings and improvement planning

The findings for the survey are being used to inform immediate and longer-term action planning.

The university has identified a need for staff and students to be able to self-profile their digital skills levels and to feel empowered to develop these independently as well as with support. Like the jigsaw analogy referred to above, Rob Howe, head of technology at the University of Northampton, explains, there are already many pieces of the digital landscape in place and while the insights surveys provide a broad overview an important next step is to support individuals to build their own personal digital profile and to develop an understanding of what it means to be digitally capable in their role and to fulfil their career ambitions.

There are some areas where students and staff perhaps feel less confident, knowledgeable and/or well supported as might be expected. Information, training, support and advice is available but more needs to be done to promote this.

### Next steps

Findings from the data analysis of the surveys were presented to the student experience committee in March 2020 along with succinct improvement plans outlining the area of provision, actions needed, task owners and timings. Turning the data analysis around quickly (**templates** to support you to analyse and present your data are provided), having discussions with key stakeholders and getting people involved in the action plans is key to building confidence and repeat engagement in the survey processes. The survey findings and responses are also shared via digital signage both on and off campus using a simple '*you said, we did*' format.

In the short/immediate term, the relevant teams at the university are currently working to:

- Continue to enhance wifi provision
- Review the induction process based on the experiences of existing students to make sure it is flexible and appropriate for new intake in September 2020. This may include hybrid inductions and virtual tours
- Better promote:
  - File storage and backup facilities
  - The licensed software available to students and the support to use software on their devices
  - The range of online course materials
  - Mandatory/highly recommended courses for staff on topics such as GDPR, copyright and accessibility
  - Opportunities to engage in staff development
- Emphasise the support to build digital capability and capacity by:

- Continuing to embed digital skills in the curriculum and the integrated learner support to support employability
- Improving access to self-support resources, building on existing provision and creating new content on topics such as staying safe online. There will be a spectrum of support from drop-in sessions to cover the basics moving through to recommendations for online resources such as LinkedIn Learning
- Subscribing to Jisc's **building digital capabilities service** and introducing the **discovery tool** to enable individuals to self-reflect on their digital skills and access curated digital development resources
- Re run the **staff digital experience insights surveys** in the autumn of 2020 when it is expected that staff will begin to return to the campus
- Review the functionality of, and rationalise the tools, software and systems in use at the university
- Improve and enhance the user experience of the virtual learning environment to reinforce its place as a key delivery tool

### Longer-term planning

There are some broader and longer-term challenges that the university is working on including the development of a new vision. Extending thinking around what **active blended learning** could be in the current situation and any additional curriculum design support required will continue. A new model of **active distance learning** is also emerging, designed to reflect the University of Northampton's approach to the learning experiences of off campus students. In addition:

- The university will continue to run the annual digital experience insights surveys for students, teaching staff and professional services staff and plans to offer the new researcher survey being released in October 2020
- Key performance indicators are likely to be reviewed as a direct result of the experiences during the response to Covid-19
- A review of the impact on assessment as a result of the Covid-19 experience is also underway
- There has been a shift in focus during Covid-19 from macro level support to more personalised support. Continuing to explore this and the role of digital interactions is likely to continue

## Lessons learned

- **Cover all bases, involve everyone and respond quickly.** Make engagement as representative as possible, consult widely because digital will impact on all core operational areas and so everyone will have an interest. Collaborate and co-ordinate to provide a cohesive plan of action and have the discussions early so that everyone is onboard. Ensure senior leaders are onboard with benefit messaging
- **Don't let the data sit and get stale.** Be responsive, get the data analysis done as soon as possible and do something with the results. Make it actionable and have a recovery list/improvement plan with clear task owners and timescales
- Promote your responses using **"you said, we did"** and share widely. Use multiple channels – digital signage, your VLE, newsletter, Facebook etc – don't rely on just one
- It is **worth spending time analysing the qualitative data** which offers a deeper and richer perspective

*"The only constant now is one of change. If you don't understand the environment, you will get left behind – it is not enough to do what was previously OK"*

ROB HOWE, HEAD OF LEARNING TECHNOLOGY,  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHAMPTON

## You may also be interested in:

- Presentations that Rob has given at our **digital experience insights** and **building digital capabilities communities** of practice on **22 May 2019** and **21 May 2020**
- **Creating a digitally enabled organisation: the value of a data driven approach** – our **short booklet** that shows the benefits of combining the digital experience insights and the building digital capabilities services to really make your investment count