Toolkit to benchmark the   
online student experience

Higher education (HE) **full** version

**Jisc data analytics**

**August 2021**

# Benchmarking the online student experience: higher education (HE) version

## About the online learning benchmark toolkit (full version)

The benchmark has been developed by Jisc with university students and staff who support the online student experience. Particular thanks go to student panels at the universities of Lincoln, Derby and Glasgow, and to members of the Jisc digital experience insights community of practice for all their hard work and input. A version for further education (FE) and sixth form colleges is also available from the [briefings and toolkits](https://digitalinsights.jisc.ac.uk/reports-and-briefings/our-briefings-and-toolkits/) page on the [digital experience insights website](https://www.jisc.ac.uk/digital-experience-insights).

The benchmark brings together many factors that students say are important to their online experience. These are presented in four categories:

* Accessing online learning
* The online learning environment
* Learning, teaching and assessment
* Wellbeing online

Within each category there are a number of good practice principles. In this detailed version there are indicators of what good practice looks like to students at different stages of development. A simplified version will also be available soon from the [briefings and toolkits](https://digitalinsights.jisc.ac.uk/reports-and-briefings/our-briefings-and-toolkits/) page on the [digital experience insights website](https://www.jisc.ac.uk/digital-experience-insights) with no indicators, so you can develop your own. However, for each principle the columns are the same. Reading left to right, or in the direction of development:

* **First steps** - examples of good practice
* **Developing** - consistency in good practice across the university
* **Developed** - practice is contextualised and specialised to meet the needs of different subject areas and different students
* **Outstanding** - all of the above plus student-led - students have individual choice/adaptability, and/or are collectively involved through representation, consultation and participation

### Using the toolkit

Groups of staff and/or students can use this toolkit in several ways. These approaches can also be combined.

* Identify and describe good practice, to share it more widely
* Prioritise areas for further development, and draw up a plan (what would success look like?)
* Compare the online student experience in different parts of the university, for different student groups, or (by mutual agreement) with other universities
* Track changes over time
* Focus on one or two areas of current interest (eg online assessment, online wellbeing)
* Use in conjunction with the Jisc [digital experience insights](https://www.jisc.ac.uk/digital-experience-insights) surveys: you will notice that the four areas of development map onto the four question themes in the surveys for staff and students, and can be used to support focus groups or to formulate a response to student feedback

There are no hard and fast rules about how practice could and should develop. Universities are different, and all universities develop variations in practice as we learn more about online teaching, learning and student support. If you are doubtful about any of the indicators, swap in your own. You can also add more detail to any area (what would this look like here?) and you can create new principles (rows) to meet your specific development agenda.

Good luck in your development work!

## Access to online learning

| Good practice principle | First steps: accessible to all | Developing: consistent | Developed: flexible and adaptable | Outstanding: student led |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Students can access online learning when and where they need it | * Core systems are available on and off campus, on all device types and operating systems * Simple instructions and short tutorials on use of core systems are available online * Alternatives and back-up plans for uses of technology in teaching, learning and assessment * Suitable study spaces on campus (eg if home study spaces are not suitable); plug and play for students’ own devices, plus secure lockers and charging * Robust, reliable networks on campus and in areas of high student use eg placement sites, halls of residence | * Support for connectivity both on and off campus * Learning platforms optimised for mobile device use * Device loan or purchase schemes available, including assistive technologies, headsets; financial support for students in digital poverty * IT support available for students using their own devices and accessing services off-site * Study materials available in digital/online format with sufficient subscriptions/licences * Consideration for students participating in different time zones | * Core and subject specialist software is available on student devices and desktop, with sufficient licences * Teaching staff are aware of limitations of student access, and can adapt (eg low bandwidth materials/activities) * Systems are in place to identify and support students with specific online learning difficulties * Funding is available to help students with different needs to access learning online | * Surveys or student panels are used to understand what devices/access students have * Students are involved in developing policies and practices around access to online learning * Student reps/student voice representatives are involved in design for online learning |
| Students are prepared and supported to learn online | * Students are introduced to key online systems before they have to use them for learning * Inductions cover all the online tools and environments to be used in learning * Course/session introductions cover specific tools, functions and online activities to be used * Systems are only used when they add to student learning * Students know the potential dangers of content, conduct and contact, can protect themselves online and report any concerns | * Online systems are used consistently * Students are introduced to online teaching and learning approaches, and the purposes are explained in courses of study * Tutorials and workshops are available on how to get the most from online learning, and online study skills * Help resources are available 24/7 * Virtual ‘at elbow’ support is available for technical issues in the online environment * Additional support is available and signposted eg library, learning support, tutor | * Teaching staff highlight relevant online learning skills eg note-making, virtual practicals, recording data * Students with confidence, participation etc as well as technical issues are identified and can access personal support * Support is available in different formats including face-to-face * Opportunities are available to practice use of systems before high-stakes learning/assessment * Opportunities are available to practice subject-specialist technical skills | * Online learning champions are trained to support other students and provide feedback to teaching team * Students can self-assess their online learning skills * Students can share online study practices with one another (peer mentoring or community of practice) * Students help to co-create online induction and support materials for other students |
| Accessibility and inclusion are core concerns in the design of online learning | * Information and course materials are accessible (on a range of devices/platforms and via assistive interfaces) * Platforms used by students meet accessibility requirements * Students are addressed online in the ways that they prefer * Online spaces are inclusive, safe and welcoming: students have support for safe, respectful online behaviour * Learners have access to assistive technologies and support in using them | * Students are informed about the accessibility features available in digital platforms used for learning * All learners are advised of the value of assistive and adaptive technologies * Teaching staff apply guidelines on accessibility when choosing and developing digital content (eg captions, contrasts, Alt text) * Teaching staff apply guidelines on diversity and inclusion when selecting materials and examples | * Course content is available in a variety of media/formats to suit different learners eg screen readable * Recorded sessions are available with captions and/or video open educational resources (OER) are used to add diversity to the materials available * Students can choose tasks and media for assessments, where appropriate * Students can fulfil assessment requirements in different format eg typing/writing/audio | * Students with diverse needs and identities - including diverse learning needs - are consulted over policy, practice and guidelines for online learning * Students’ own experiences are valued and explored in online activities eg digital storytelling * Students can express the struggles they experience and tell their stories in the knowledge they will be heard |

## Online learning environment

| Good practice principle | First steps: accessible to all | Developing: consistent | Developed: flexible and adaptable | Outstanding: student led |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| The online learning environment is reliable and easy to use | * Students have access to a virtual learning environment * Students have access to a video-based environment for live online learning * Students have access to recorded lectures * Students have access to a secure platform for online submission and grading * Students have access to online spaces for informal and formal collaboration * All platforms used are robust in terms of data privacy, safety, security and accessibility * Consideration is given to the limitations of students’ access eg study spaces, bandwidth, mobile data costs | * Platforms are reliable, up to date, and usable on a range of devices and operating systems including mobile * Platforms used are inclusive and cater to the needs of all learners * Platforms are used consistently, with clear navigation and structure and a consistent entry point if multiple systems are used * Other tools, apps and resources are included when they clearly support the learning experience (and not otherwise) * Recorded lectures are consistently available, in a timely manner, and are of good quality * Platforms are supported with training workshops/videos and guidance | * Students have access to specialist software relevant to their subject of study and individual licences where access is critical to their studies * Some specialist software is available on student devices * There are online tools/platforms for activities related to lab and field work, case-based and work-based learning and other subject specialist forms of learning as required | * Students can individually choose online tools for learning and assessment where appropriate * Students can choose, where possible and appropriate, the mode of their participation * Students have opportunities to express the tools and platforms they would prefer to use * Student feedback and representation works: staff and students work together to resolve issues in the online learning environment * Students are consulted about the development, procurement and use of online platforms |
| Online and on-site, live and asynchronous learning are well integrated | * Online students can participate remotely in on-campus learning eg via recordings and/or live streaming * On-campus spaces are optimised for device use and online access eg charge points, flexible study spaces * Online learning systems are compatible and students can share content/data across them easily | * Hybrid and flexible learning is available and well planned to make best use of on-site and remote, live and asynchronous sessions * Hybrid and flexible learning is available with students joining live sessions simultaneously on and off campus * Students can continue work between live and independent sessions eg via collaborative/ learning spaces that can be used for both | * All courses are assumed to offer some elements of hybrid and flexible learning * On-campus spaces are designed to support hybrid and flexible learning eg plug-and-play screens, recording in teaching rooms * Students can use the same platforms for study and interactivity across all their teaching sessions |  |
| Library and information services are fully available online | * Students can access a wide range of online books, journals and other resources relevant to their course * Students have support with their online information skills eg citing and referencing, note making | * Students have click-through access to course materials * Students rarely encounter problems with licences or subscriptions for digital resources they want to use * Support for students’ library and information skills are fully available online eg workshops, videos, tutorials | * Students can access specialist resources and materials * Student-authored materials such as dissertations,  websites, videos, are available as resources for other students | * Staff and students are regularly consulted about online learning resources * Student-led induction sessions for library and information services (LIS) platforms and services * Staff and students work together to resolve issues such as access to e-books and journal |
| Communication about online learning is clear and consistent | * Course information is clear and includes links to platforms and online locations, and a schedule of tasks per week * Students receive regular updates about their course * Clear communication about assessments is given - due dates, process, feedback and grades, as well as any delays and mitigations | * Students receive regular personalised updates about their course and learning progress * Notes and lecture recordings are consistently and predictably available in good time * Students can chat informally about their course within the course environment | * Students can choose how they receive communications and can manage/filter messages * Shared course communications allow all students to benefit from questions, answers, feedback and shared resources, rather than the default being one-to-one | * Staff and students are regularly consulted about communications * Staff and students work together to design effective communications and messaging |

## Online learning, teaching and assessment

| Good practice principle | First steps: accessible to all | Developing: consistent | Developed: flexible and adaptable | Outstanding: student led |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Online teaching is of a high quality | * Teaching staff use core systems proficiently eg virtual learning environment, video-based teaching, assessment systems and lecture capture * Students have timely access to recorded lectures and other teaching sessions, suitable to their subject area * Online learning is planned across the course eg variety of classes, clear timetable and expectations * Students undertake a variety of activities online: interactions with content; discussion and collaboration; practical activities and analysis/problem solving | * Use of learning environments and approaches are coherent within a course of study * Staff use effective measures to support student engagement eg active questioning, live tasks, reflection, quizzes * Some online work is in small groups for close, interactive learning * Some learning is flipped to focus live/synchronous learning on practice, application, review * Teaching staff use online tools, resources and approaches suitable to the subject area, including online practicals, field work, lab work, demonstrations | * Students undertake creative, knowledge-building activities such as coding, digital making, authoring wikis and blogs * Students undertake original research or professional activities suitable to their subject area * Teaching staff adopt good practices in online course and session design * Teaching staff are aware of and respond to different online learning needs of students * Teaching staff can adapt their online teaching to the needs and of the cohort (eg identified through polling, pre-class activities) | * Students plan and lead some parts of online classes eg moderating, co-presenting * Students are regularly asked about their experience of online teaching and how it could be improved - and their input is followed up * Students develop critical and evaluative skills in relation to online platforms and practices * Teachers and students work in partnership to improve current practice and develop new online learning/teaching approaches |
| Online learning materials are of a high quality | * All course information and content is available online via a single platform * Students have access to a range of materials in digital format eg e-books, e-journals, via library portals, catalogues, search engines * Students understand that there are different types of learning content and know how to avoid plagiarism * Online learning materials conform to accessibility guidelines | * Core materials are available as e-books * Reading lists include other digital resources and media * Content is consistently available, navigable, and accessible (eg presented to support dual coding, reduce cognitive load) * Content is well designed, structured and scaffolded to support learning * Students have support for their library and information skills and content management | * Students find, curate and share digital resources as part of their course work, with appropriate attention to intellectual property rights (IPR) * Interactive content is used to engage students eg quizzes, games, simulations, models, virtual environments * Some learning materials are developed in-house for courses of study eg slidecasts, podcasts, videos, infographics * Some content is used and shared as OER | * Students have support for developing their own online content and digital media * Students can suggest digital content purchases/subscriptions * Students are consulted and involved in developing library/content services. |
| Students have opportunities to interact with peers and teachers | * Teaching staff welcome students to the online environment and ensure students feel safe and supported * All students have a tutor they can contact online for support with clear expectations around communications/response * Availability of teaching staff is clearly communicated * Students are encouraged to participate in a range of ways eg chat, mic, camera on (once they are comfortable doing so) | * Teaching staff support students effectively in different groups (large/small), and in live/ asynchronous environments * Teaching staff engage and motivate learners using wide range of methods eg polls, use of audio, chat and text, solo and shared tasks * Attention is given to building online rapport and relationships among learners, eg with shared norms, tasks, rules and goals * Students can interact informally * Student contributions receive a timely response | * Students get a range of formative feedback online, from tutors, peers, reflection, and directly from the tasks they do * Students have input to online classes eg. presentations, screen sharing, introducing activities * Students can interact online in ways that suit them best * Students have access to experts from beyond the teaching team * Students participate in a range of progressively more open networks and learning groups relevant to their subject of study | * There is a student buddy system * Students are encouraged to peer mentor and coach one another through their online activities * Students are supported to set up their own informal groups, teams, networks and spaces for peer support |
| Online assessments are well managed, inclusive and fair | * Students have opportunities to practice with systems for assessment and submission * Students have opportunities to practice new assessment modes before high-stakes use * Submission and grading processes are reliable and trusted by students * Systems are in place to ensure fairness (eg mitigation, measures against cheating and plagiarism) are developmental rather than punitive, and respectful of students’ needs and rights * Students are reminded of assessment due dates and receive timely feedback/grades | * Students participate in a variety of assessments, spaced and paced to help them manage their workload across their course of study * Online assessments are relevant to the learning outcomes and designed to help students demonstrate their strengths * Feedback on assignments is regular and predictable * Relevant mitigations are available eg difficulties with using the online environment for learning and assessment * All of the above are consistent across courses | * Assessments (re)designed to reflect the demands of studying and being assessed online eg digital media production * There is a focus on authentic and inclusive assessment * Students can record and review their achievements eg using an e-portfolio system, blog or online learning record * Use of audio/alternative formats are used for sharing feedback * Opportunities are available online for collaborative, peer and self- assessment, collective feedback * Discrepancies in student performance between online and face-to-face learning are anticipated and recognised | * Students can select from a number of assignments and assessments to showcase their strengths (‘assessment for all’) * Students are involved in improving the assessment process, recognising it is critical to the overall experience |
| Online learning prepares students for working online post-university | * Respectful, professional communication is modelled in online spaces * Students are aware of the digital skills employers look for | * Students can practice with key productivity applications * Students can practice with specialist tools of the subject area and relevant professions * Students can practice online applications, mock meetings and interviews | * Students are given opportunities to train and gain recognition in digital skills * Students can review, collate and reflect on the digital skills they have, eg via an e-portfolio, badged award etc | * Students have chance to work with employers on digital projects * Students have chance to work on real digital projects at the university eg to enhance the student experience |

## Wellbeing online

| Good practice principle | First steps: accessible to all | Developing: consistent | Developed: flexible and adaptable | Outstanding: student led |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Students can access wellbeing services and support online | * Students are aware of online support services and how to connect with them * Students are aware of policies on safe, respectful behaviour online * Prominent signposting is made to support services in online environments * Student data is used transparently and ethically to benefit students | * Mental and physical health initiatives are available online to all * Students receive information about wellbeing issues and potential negative impacts of online learning/working * All staff can respond appropriately to signs of distress that students may express online * Tutors and support services are responsive within agreed timescales | * Students can personalise college/university services and choose how they connect online * A variety of interactive spaces are available to support students with diverse preferences and mental health/neurological needs | * Student feedback is routinely sought, in teaching groups and more generally * Staff and student groups work together to explore solutions to negative experiences and behaviours * Student online champions and mentors are available for peer support * Students devise and lead wellbeing projects to support themselves and other students online |
| Wellbeing is a core concern in the design of online learning | * Support is available for academic skills, time, task and self-management, working with others online * Students are addressed online using their preferred names and identities * Students are under no pressure to turn on cameras or share personal details online * Stress is reduced by providing clear expectations and preparing students for the digital activities and skills they will need * Students can connect with course peers informally online | * Online classes are consistently supportive, welcoming and positive * Students have regular opportunities to check in and reflect on how they feel * Buddy systems and peer groups set up to support those learning online and prevent isolation * Student screen time is considered in course and session planning | * Students have safe online spaces to explore and develop their interests and share peer support * Learning encompasses futures thinking: learners decide what they value and what kind of future world (including online world) they want to live in * Inclusive pedagogies are promoted as supportive of wellbeing |  |