The student digital experience in 2020 – some ideas from staff and students

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The following are not intended as detailed predictions but as broadly describing the world which students and institutions may be navigating around the year 2020. These ideas were originally elicited from a group of ca100 staff and students attending the HEI-flyers Change Agents Network meeting at the University of Winchester, using an established scenario-building approach. Ideas were posted on googledocs and subsequently collated and edited by the facilitators. Items in italics are direct quotes from contributed text.

Institutional technologies

- Lectures will be tech-intensive i.e. fully recorded, interactive
- Student data and its management will be key to organisational success: *'Student analytics central to decision making' 'Commercial interest in all digital interaction'*
- Blend of institutional and personal devices, services, licenses: '*universities will provide infrastructure and connectivity only in physical buildings. Students will be responsible for their own licences and devices'*
- Course-specific apps linked to relevant journals and books.

Personal/social technologies

- Wearable technologies esp of a 'google glass' type
- Constant digital interactions between people (with personal devices) and things (with embedded devices)
- 3dprinting revolutionising relationships to 'stuff' – 3D design will become a ubiquitous skill as (arguably) 2D design has become in the facebook/flickr age
- Ubiquitous connectivity and data exchange
- Seamless collaborative environments
- Potential for continuous digital recording of experience ('*pens will record notes*' etc)
- Facebook and email replaced with more audio/video-based social networks

Campus/classroom

- Virtual classrooms but also offline community hubs
- Tech-enhanced learning the norm, including flexible social spaces for informal learning, but also leaky boundaries between real and virtual spaces (which may not be 'owned' by the university)
- Environmental and energy constraints will limit development of real-world campuses and classrooms.

Curriculum

Generally more agile and responsive:

- More individualised: *'Education is adapted to every student's own learning style (education is available in multi formats/styles)'*
- More adaptable to external circumstances and demands: *'Dynamic curriculums taking on board current learning and world needs', 'fluid'*
- More '*authentic*', '*problem based*', '*skills-based', 'aligned with current issues'*, taking on board *'global ideas*'
- More involvement of students directly in curriculum design/development
- Blurring of boundaries between formal/informal so e.g. spontaneous learning events alongside formal curriculum
- Faster feedback due to largely online assessment, and/or assessment may be based more on real-world value and impact of what has been learned

Library/information services
- Constant online presence, accessible in all teaching/learning/research settings: *'resources should be a blink away'.*
- More focus on support for digital/information literacy
- Books → e-books
- Focus of library will be on managing subscriptions and micro-access to content: *'micro payments on a per event basis - papers, journals, lectures', 'individual licences for web'*
- Ongoing tensions between open and paid-for content with universities as key players/gate-keepers – some predicting total collapse of IPR as content is instantly pirated and shared (including by students)
- Commercial providers and/or self-organised groups of learners may be able to mimic library services through public search engines and social media, and collating open or pirated content.
- Students will develop their own personal information environments made up of content gateways, apps, services, feeds etc
- Students will expect seamless access to content from other universities

Teaching/Learning relationships
- Strong feeling that face to face interactions will remain critical to a 'good' HE experience. However, stratification likely here, with many students relying on *'independent learning via technology'* and *'face to face interactions [ ] marketed as a privilege'*
- Similarly there are polarised views about whether staff will be more or less available to student on an individual basis.
- Teachers' skills/training will focus more on facilitation and support of student learning
- Peer-assisted learning more widely practiced
- Wider range of people with teaching/mentoring roles (*'real-world rather than academic teachers', 'bringing in people from industry and other external environments'*)

Student experience
Offer will be more responsive to students e.g.
- *'Quality of education improved and validated by direct/immediate feedback from students during/after lectures', 'fluid, flexible timetables'*

And/or student experience will be more stratified
- *'Segmentation of access within enrolment - differentiation of access to the institution's resources.'*
- Fewer students accessing HE and/or
- Students accessing HE with more support (family, community or workplace)
- Broader age-range at university, more diverse nationally and culturally, f2f students mixing with distance students

Society
Different points of view on the egalitarian potential of digital technology:
- '*access to knowledge quickly, easily and equitably'* (1 group)
- vs a deepening digital divide (other groups): *'Digital underclass: limited connectivity, limited mobility' 'Access to internet based resources is increasingly related to/restricted by income', 'new class divisions between those who have tech and those that don't'*
- More data will be collected on individuals and used by a wider range of organisations in a wider variety of ways.
- Contradictory expectations of how digital privacy issues will play out: *'hyper-surveillance'* vs *'super-lax',* possibly different in different spheres of life, possibly supported by a digital rights act.
- Society-wide focus on digital skills/capabilities beginning in school and encompassing older people

- Political/social action largely takes place online, potentially reducing impact of geographical locale

HE institutions
- More private providers including 'micro' providers, more self-organised learning groups (perhaps accessing open accreditation opportunities e.g. badges)
- More UK students studying abroad including in what are now 'developing' HE systems e.g. China
- Strong competition from large global institutions, UK HE losing ground
- More stratification among existing UK institutions: *'personal attention and support for the elite - development of distributed peer networks for the masses'*
- More local providers (pressures on travel, living away from home)
- New pressures on institutions – environmental, financial, energy-related
- Students will be more able to pick and mix, perhaps making micro-payments for specific content or learning/accreditation opportunities.
- Relationships between students and their universities more distant, contractual and opportunistic, and/or in reaction to this some universities will focus on building loyalty and offering a coherent lifelong experience.

What does it look like when institutions respond successfully?
- Universities upgrade technologies to meet students' needs
- Ubiquitous connectivity ('*free wifi everywhere*')
- Good access to physical resources such as labs, social spaces, workdesks, attractive campus etc – these build identification and brand loyalty.
- All teachers are digitally capable and have adapted their learning/teaching approach
- Students' digital experience at university well aligned with what is needed in the workplace
- Staff-student collaborative development of the curriculum and relevant resources/apps/services
- Students and alumni as change agents: more equitable relationships and more students engaged as partners; lifelong relationships with alumni
- Universities seen by students as potentially regenerative, responding to the social/environmental crisis and providing relevant solutions

What does it look like when institutions fail to respond?
- Students are not involved in decisions about the digital environment e.g. procurement
- Digital offer including connectivity and associated learning spaces not attractive to students → students begin to desert campuses
- Loyalty or longer-term association with the institution not seen as beneficial
- Students question the value of their courses relative to other forms of accreditation/reputation/skills development
- Graduate employability continues to decline: alternatives especially work-based and informal/online learning look more attractive and affordable
- Teaching staff and learning experience are regarded as out of touch
- Universities seen by students as either elitist/unobtainable or irrelevant

→ Declining student numbers and poor retention
→ Institutions collapse/fail