Engaging with learners about their digital experience: the Digital Experience Tracker and beyond

About this guide

This guide is designed to help you ensure students are fully engaged with the Digital Experience Tracker. It suggests ways you can build on that engagement to:

- create an on-going dialogue with learners about their digital experience;

- develop partnership and collaborative enhancement projects;

- enrich your tracker findings with evidence from qualitative/participative approaches.

This guide has six sections:

1. Why engage learners?
2. The ethics of learner engagement
3. Encouraging completion of the tracker survey
4. Beyond the tracker: qualitative and participative approaches
5. Beyond the tracker: continuously enhancing the digital experience
6. Responding to findings and building partnerships for change

1. Why engage learners?

A survey allows you to reach out to a large number of learners with a relatively small investment from each of them, and provides clear evidence for action. Running a survey with a high profile campaign sends out a message that you care about an issue - in this case about the quality of their digital experience.

We hope the tracker will be part of a real dialogue with learners, leading to changes they can see. This is easier if *some* learners are more deeply involved in the process. You could start with student digital ambassadors or the students' union/guild when you are looking for learners to get involved. There is almost no part of the process that learners could not lead or support, but obvious tasks include:

- designing a promotional campaign (more about this next)

- helping other students complete the survey live (e.g. in common rooms, library areas etc)

- taking part in focus groups or other qualitative methods

- helping to interpret the results

Learners can also be involved in practical developments to make the digital experience better, once you have decided what needs to happen next.

2. The ethics of learner engagement

For any survey of students you need to consider the ethics of their participation. **Research ethics** is not usually a consideration if you are collecting data from your own students to improve their learning experience. However, if you plan to publish or present the results of your survey, or use them as part of a research project, you may want to consider this issue. Your institution will have a ethical approval process and can advise you. (In designing the tracker survey we have conformed to the **Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research from the British Educational Research Association**.)

It is much more likely that you will need to consider **survey fatigue**. We thought hard about the ethics of developing a new survey tool when most students are regularly surveyed about other issues. Our **FAQ about the rationale for running the tracker**, plus the **history of its development**, explain why we feel this is worth doing. Institutions that have run the tracker have found the information valuable and actionable, and say that it was not being gathered in other ways. We are also offering the tracker at a quiet time of year for other (UK) surveys, and in a broad enough window that we hope you can find a time to suit your learners. Student cynicism about surveys can be countered by involving students throughout and ensuring that their feedback gets a suitable response.

You will also need to be clear about **data privacy and security.** Individual student responses remain anonymous, and your organisational data can only be accessed by your lead contact and the Jisc BOS team. We do not release any summative data unless there are enough participating institutions in each benchmarking group to be sure no single institution can be identified. Jisc's data protection statement is online here: **Data protection: your responsibilities and ours (v17-18)**. You can find out more about how **BOS keeps your data safe** here.

Finally, please consider the **personal benefits learners will gain** from being involved with the tracker process. If they are working as change agents they might be paid for their time, or receive special training, or gain a useful skill, endorsement, or qualification. If they are taking part in a focus group they might get some nice food or a voucher to take away. Students are often highly motivated to improve things for others, but there should be tangible rewards for their time and commitment.

There is more advice about engaging learners in the Jisc Guide to **Enhancing the Student Digital Experience** and on the **Digital Student website**. Both include institutional case studies and examples.

3. Encouraging completion of the tracker survey

In your **planning process** you will have considered how you will distribute the survey. If you are going for a selected sample of learners, you need to get close to 100% completion from that sample – for example by supervising live completion in class. If you are promoting the survey to your entire population, you must achieve a large enough completion rate for your sample to be representative. In this case you can use methods such as email, a web page, a link within the Virtual Learning Environment and social media to promote the survey URL.

Generally we recommend a window of around two weeks to collect learner responses. If responses are still building after this time you can extend the deadline, but too distant a deadline will encourage learners to put off the task. It is important to issue regular reminders, which should include new information such as emerging findings.

In the past, tracker institutions have worked with students to design a promotional campaign. This has included social media memes, flyers, video clips, postcards, e-posters and more. You could start by asking student ambassadors and the Student Union or Guild (who should be on board with the project before you start!). Or create a project for students on a media course.

We have produced **7 detailed case studies and 14 shorter, practical examples** from universities and colleges that have been involved in the tracker pilots. Many of these deal with learner engagement. What follows are a few tips that have been distilled from those examples.

Engagement ideas from Universities

- Emphasise benefits to students, e.g. link between digital experience and graduate attributes, employability and lifelong learning; focus on opportunities to effect real change.

- Ease of completion: emphasise that it is quick and easy to complete: make available via mobile e.g. within institutional app, or on web site, desktop, or within VLE.

- Generate a campaign or initiative around the tracker, with a launch and plenty of visually arresting campaign materials.

- Digital communications: use student-facing media e.g. social media, emails, VLE notifications, texts to mobile devices. Consider visual elements e.g. a logo, a video clip. Use student designers where possible.

- Print communications: poster campaigns, slogans, 'you said, we did', attractive logos and infographics – again consider student-led design. Repurpose any print resources for social media.

- Live or timetabled completion: use drop-in sites where students can complete the survey e.g. in the library, at help desks, at a student hub, in course sessions; pre-load the survey onto tablets and have student/peer guides out and about, helping and encouraging completion.

- Work with student representatives e.g. student union, course reps, digital champions, existing change agent programmes; students trust these routes and expect their feedback to count.

- Ensure staff responsible for the overall student experience are fully involved and can see the links between digital and other issues. Persuade teaching staff of the value so they encourage completion.

- Offer incentives: free food, vouchers, institutional merchandise, prize draw for tablet or other tech. [In our FAQs we offer some tips for collecting ID so that you can choose winners without compromising anonymity.]

Engagement tips from FE Colleges

- Emphasise opportunity to improve specific features of their experience e.g. the VLE, communications with college, access to support, delivery of course content.

- Emphasise ease of use: link to tracker within college app; make available on campus pre-loaded onto mobile devices.

- Offer opportunities to complete survey in drop-in sessions and open access areas e.g. library, refectory, learning centre.

- Communication: keep this snappy and positive; consider student-generated communications.

- Embed into on-going processes e.g. learner voice, induction, course feedback.

- Emphasise benefit to students of enhanced digital skills e.g. employability, lifelong learning.

- Encourage tutors to make time for completion during classes or tutorials.

- Incentives: vouchers, prize draws, free food.

Engagement tips for online learners

- Emphasise the benefits to other online learners and the chance to enhance the online experience.

- Link to the survey within the learning environment.

- Encourage participation via social media; use emerging findings to engage commitment. Online learners are often interested in the process of online learning so emphasise the opportunity to reflect on it.

- Persuade teaching and support staff of the value of the tracker and encourage them to refer students.

- Offer incentives such as institutional merchandise, a digital accolade or badge.

Some **suggested text** for communicating with learners about the tracker:

The Student Digital Experience Tracker is a new national survey to find out more about how learners use digital technologies and how this affects your learning overall. We [or institution name] have chosen to use the tracker because we know digital issues are important to you. The tracker will allow us to:

- *Find out how you would like digital technologies to be used in learning and teaching*

- *Understand how you use our digital environment and services and how we could improve them*

- *Target resources towards the issues that matter to you*

- *Get you talking about digital issues and developing your digital skills*

[Online version:

The Student Online Experience Tracker is a new national survey to find out more about how your experience of online learning. We [or institution name] have chosen to use the tracker because it covers issues we know are important to you. The tracker will allow us to:

- *Know more about how you study and learn online*

- *Understand how you use the online learning environment and services and how we could improve*

- *Target resources towards the issues that matter to you*

- *Find out what helps you to succeed.]*

Reminders and prompts are important while the survey is live. You could pick on a feature of the live data and use it to pique learners' interest. '*So far, 60% of students in our live survey say that they can access university computers most of the time. Do you agree? Tell us what you think…*'

Remember that **visual communication** is often more persuasive and appealing than text alone. An image of learners in your setting, using technology together, sends a powerful message about what you are trying to achieve. There is a suitable image included on the first screen of the tracker.

Create a sense that the tracker is an **event or initiative** rather than just a survey. This might mean a launch, 'live' activities to support completion of the tracker, updates on progress and a public report-back event at the end.

You can download some Jisc-branded **promotional materials about the tracker** and you are also free to reuse and repurpose text from **tracker-related posts** on the digital student blog.

4. Qualitative and participative approaches

The tracker is a concise question set which has been developed for ease of interpretation and use. Although it will give you reliable data from a large sample of students, it does not provide the detail you might need to understand (for example) what learners dislike about the VLE, or why learners in different subject areas have different experiences of the digital classroom.

So you may want to supplement the survey with qualitative and participative approaches. These could include:

- focus groups and consultation events (may be conducted online with online learners)

- interviews, or simple vox pops (short video interviews)

- elicitation or observation techniques (used to understand in detail how a learner interacts with a particular system)

- learner journeys or learning logs (usually produced by learners over a period of time, for example using a blog or video log)

Interviews and elicitation/observation methods require quite a lot of researcher time and expertise. If you have that available among staff members or students, you are doing well! The rest of this point concerns focus groups, consultation events and learner journeys, which are a realistic option for most teams.

- Consider running events that **combine information and consultation:** tell learners why you ran the tracker, what you hoped to achieve, and what some highlight results have been. Then invite them to help explore the results further, and decide on strategies for change.

- Remember to **involve learners from a range of different groups**, as far as possible. Groups that may have different digital experiences include international, older, work-based and disabled learners.

- In focus groups, be very clear before you start what **four or five questions** you want to explore. You could use specific findings from the tracker and look for more detail or explanation. You could find out which of the issues identified by the tracker are really important to learners.

- Open discussion can be valuable to get learners talking, and it is sometimes easier to record a plenary session than small groups. But learners often come up with more varied and precise responses if they are allowed to work in small groups. So try to spend time on **focused activities** leading to outcomes that can easily be recorded. Having learners write down their key points is the simplest way of doing this, but there are more imaginative approaches, e.g. a card sort or priorities sheet (see below). Try asking learners to: write a postcard from three/five years in the future; design a poster or app (paper prototype only) to support their digital learning; build a model with lego or cardboard and photograph it; video each other describing 'what one thing' would improve their digital experience. It is particularly easy to record an online focus group, and this may be the only possible approach with online learners. Outcomes should be meaningful without too much further processing or analysis.

- A **card sort** has learners working in small groups to put a series of written items in order, for example in order of priority or importance. There are materials available from the **FE Digital Student study** which describe how to run a card sort, and similar materials for **HE students** and for **Skills providers**. Items for sorting are suggested in the table below.

- A **priorities sheet** is simply a list of suggestions, or actions, that participants prioritise by adding coloured paper dots or pen marks. Participants should have a limited number of dots available to distribute. It helps to have the suggestions pre-printed, ideally on A3 paper, or written on flip chart paper, so several people can work on them at once. If you are working with online learners then a poll with multiple response options can be used.

- Ask learners' permission to take **photographs and/or video** of any live event(s). It will be valuable evidence of learner involvement and will also provide reusable materials for further campaigns around the digital experience. See for example the **Learner Voice videos** from our FE study.

- **Learner journeys** are an alternative approach to focus groups: they follow a group of learners over time and in some detail. Learners reflect on issues in their learning experience using a blog, written responses to prompts, or video/audio recording. They may be prompted with specific questions to consider, for example by email or by Skype interview. Learning journeys are powerful resources for learners themselves as well as giving researchers a deep insight into how learners experience issues in their course and learning environment.

- Our question-by-question guide to **Responding to your findings** includes more ideas for taking your investigations further.

5. Responding to findings and building partnerships for change

- If you have followed a good communications strategy and achieved a good response rate to the tracker, you have already given your learners an interest in the results. You can use whichever methods have proved most effective – personal contacts, email, social media, print, location-based actions and campaigns – to get learners involved in the response. Pick out one or two headline findings and ask learners to help explore them and suggest strategies for change.

- Learners have many skills and ideas for improving their digital experience. Jisc runs an annual **edtech competition** for the best student technology developments, and some institutions are running similar competitions for themselves. Students with less technical skills can be engaged in developing guidance materials on digital issues, creating video clips, running a social media site, or gathering student views.

- Jisc has produced a Guide on **Developing successful student-staff partnerships**. It also runs a staff-student **Change Agents Network** and has developed a series of **Case studies** in student-led digital change. If you do not already have a student change agent network or a group of digitally-aware student/learner representatives, these are good places to start.

- There is a detailed online Guide, **Responding to your findings** which looks question-by-question at your responses and how to interpret them, locally and in relation to the national benchmark. This includes ideas for responding to each issue, which you can share with learners and other stakeholders as you build partnerships for change.

6. Continuously enhancing the digital experience

The tracker project can kickstart or add new energy to discussions about the digital experience, and can demonstrate to senior managers that learners care about digital issues. Hopefully you will be keen to run the tracker again in the future and assess any improvements.

But there are other things you can do to continuously assess and enhance learners' experiences of the digital environment. For example:

- Invest in on-going **student change agent** or partnership projects in which ideas for change are brought forward by learners themselves. Partnership projects have been shown to support effective uptake and use of technology and to help both staff and students to develop their digital skills.

- Make sure all learner-facing services are using **digital networks and media** to engage. There is guidance from Jisc about **engaging learners via social media**. Twitterfalls, padlets, idea clouds and other simple tools can be used quickly to gather ideas and post responses. There is no formal sampling involved, and there is no opportunity to benchmark or baseline for future years, but informal feedback can be a very visible and valuable aspect of service improvement.

- **Train student representatives** – union officers, course reps, peer mentors etc – to understand how digital issues affect the learning experience, and how they affect different groups of learners. The digital experience will become better integrated into established processes of learner engagement.

- **Join up your systems for consulting** with students to ensure existing data is re-used intelligently and learners are not subjected to unnecessary surveys. (There is more about joining up data in our *Guide to Analysing and Interpreting your Data*.) You can now write customised questions within the tracker, which means you could ask about a number of local issues at the same time as you are benchmarking responses to our core questions.

- A **'ladder of engagement'** model can be useful in identifying where your institution is up to in its approach and in moving from consulting with students to empowering them.

- Also consider using the NUS/HEA **student engagement toolkit** and associated resources

Further resources

Links

- **Digital student postcards** on 'Finding out more about students' experiences' and 'Engaging students in developing the digital environment'

- JISC **Change Agents Network (CAN)** and **Summer of Student Innovation (SOSI)** projects

- **HEA Students as Partners** initiative, **NUS Student Partnerships** manifesto and **The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP)**

- Survey evidence from the original **HE study** and **FE/skills study**

- Jisc **Developing Digital Literacies institutional audit tools** and **other survey/audit/self-assessment tools** for use by individual (staff or students)

- TSPARC project **'ladder of engagement'** model

A checklist for engaging learners 'beyond the tracker':

1. *Explore what learners actually do* with digital technologies as well as what they say . This requires more subtle, participative and qualitative methods e.g. observation and elicitation, guided focus groups.

2. Acknowledge the importance of *demographics* – the different experiences of students from different backgrounds. Ensure diverse student groups are represented when eliciting data e.g. mature, users of assistive tech, work-based, overseas etc.

3. Similarly acknowledge the importance of *subject/discipline* – encourage local (course, faculty, department) engagement with learners and ensure voices from different subject areas are heard.

4. Have an *on-going institutional forum for learners' ideas* that different professional services, departments and initiatives can use to explore specific issues. This allows students to see all sides of the conversation and get feedback on how their ideas are being taken forward. Third-party services e.g. Padlet, twitterfall, virtual suggestion boxes, instant polling can be used for quick feedback. Jisc is supporting the development of a student-led app, Unitu, which helps to close the feedback loop.

5. *Ensure students are informed* about what is being done to address their concerns, for example using 'you said, we did' posters. Involve learners wherever possible in defining the problems and finding solutions.

6. *Student representation*: ensure the student union has an officer with a TEL/digital brief; ensure digital strategy meetings include student reps; link up student reps e.g. library user groups, IT user groups, so they learn from one another. Involve learners in working and steering groups on digital projects.

7. *Employ learners* in TEL teams or on TEL projects e.g. creating resources and course materials – videos, animations, etc – developing apps and interfaces on the digital environment. This provides useful experience of employment for the students as well as valued outcomes for the institution.

8. Engage *students as co-researchers and co-developers*, collecting feedback, carrying out interviews, identifying and finding solutions to issues in the digital environment.

9. Students should be *resourced*, *recognised and rewarded* for engagement. Develop their skills and ensure there are rewards in terms of digital identity and reputation (open badges, entry on their HEAR record, routes to a graduate award, opportunities to be entered for a specific prize). Student bursaries can work as well as hourly payment, giving students more responsibility for specific deliverables.

10. Organise a *student digital conference or event:* hackathon, digital festival, digital week, lunchtime showcase, digital identity session to recognise and celebrate students' contributions in this area.

11. *Normalise engaging students in dialogue* about their digital learning experience as part of routine course feedback and continuous improvement e.g. simply asking students in class for feedback on how they approached an activity that involved digital media or resources.