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

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## 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 ongoing dialogue with learners about their digital experience;
- develop partnership and collaborative enhancement projects;
- enrich your Tracker findings with other data and evidence from qualitative/participative approaches.

There is more help with 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.

The rest of this guide has five sections:

1. Encouraging completion of the Tracker survey
2. Responding to findings and building partnerships for change (to be read in conjunction with the guide *Understanding and responding to your findings*)
3. Beyond the Tracker: triangulating with other data
4. Beyond the Tracker: qualitative and participative approaches
5. Beyond the Tracker: continuously enhancing the digital experience

## 1. Encouraging completion of the Tracker survey

### 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 to the digital environment, promise quick responses that will take effect before students move on.

- Digital communications: use different student-facing media e.g. social media, emails, VLE notifications, texts to mobile devices. Emphasise visual communications – consider getting students to design these themselves.
- Print communications: poster campaigns, slogans, 'you said, we did', attractive print materials (infographic style) – again consider student-led design.
- Live or timetabled completion: set aside spaces where students can complete the survey in the library, at drop-in desks, built into course sessions, at 'pop-up' venues; pre-load the survey onto tablets and have student/peer guides out and about, helping and encouraging completion; have a campaign or event around completing the survey.
- Work with student representatives e.g. student union, course reps, digital champions, existing change agent programmes; ensure students trust these routes and know their feedback will count.
- Ensure staff who are responsible for the overall student experience are fully involved and can see the links between digital and other issues.
- Persuade staff of the value so that they in turn can persuade students, perhaps make time available for the Tracker at end of a session.
- 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, desk top, or within VLE
- Offer incentives: free food, prize draw for tablet or other tech, vouchers, sweets, institutional merchandise.

### Ideas 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 and adverts
- Embed into ongoing 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

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

*We're carrying out a brief survey to find out more about your digital experience. By 'digital experience' we mean how you use digital technology on campus and in your course of study, and how we support you to build digital*

*know-how and skills. The survey takes no more than five minutes to complete. At no point will we ask for your name or any details that could identify you. Your answers will be used to [insert specifics here e.g. improve the VLE, improve our digital campus, improve your course, improve how we communicate with you, help us to understand and meet your needs...]. We know these are issues that matter to you and we want to get them right. As a thank you for taking the time to complete it [insert specifics of any incentive or reward].*

*Please complete the survey by [details of how and where to complete it] before [close date]. We look forward to sharing the findings and working with you to make things better!*

Include information about who is carrying out the survey and about how learners' responses will be kept secure and confidential. If you are able to involve learners in distributing the Tracker and persuading others to complete it, consider writing all communications as if they came from one learner to another.

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.

**Reminders and prompts** are important while the survey is live. A good strategy is to invite and inform at the same time. You could pick on a feature of the live data and use it both to interest learners in the issues and to imply that other students are having their say (so they might be missing out). *'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 at...'*

We will collate and share communication materials developed by our pilot sites so that others can benefit from their ideas.

## 2. Responding to findings and building partnerships for change

If you have followed a good communications strategy, as above, and achieved a good response rate to the Tracker survey, 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 follow up on the survey with an invitation to get involved in the response. Again, try using one headline finding and inviting students to help explore and explain it.

Different demographic groups should be represented wherever this is possible: learners at different stages of study, disabled learners, international students, digitally pioneering as well as digitally disadvantaged students, and the 'mainstream pragmatists' will all have different things to say.

We do not have reliable evidence about how learners' digital experiences impact on their overall experience and satisfaction with learning. But when we talk to learners, we find that digital issues do matter to them – especially feeling that digital technology is being used appropriately and thoughtfully by teaching staff, and knowing that they are well prepared for the workplace by using up-to-date software and techniques. Talk to learners about what aspects of the Tracker data are interesting to them, and explore those in more detail. Ideas for doing this are explored in point 4.

Learners often have relevant skills and interesting ideas for improving their digital experience. So it makes sense also to involve them in suggesting solutions and prioritising next steps, and then in putting these ideas into practice.

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. Even if you are in the early stages of engaging students with digital issues, the Tracker project will bring more on board.

There is a detailed guide to *Understanding and 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 part of your building partnerships approach.

### 3. Beyond the Tracker: triangulating with other data

You are likely to have other data about students' digital experience which you can look at alongside responses to the Digital Experience Tracker. For example, in **Higher Education**:

- The National Student Survey (NSS) asks students to respond on a five-point likert scale to (qu 17): *I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to.*
- The UK Engagement Survey (UKES) does not ask explicitly about the digital experience, but could soon offer a complete **optional module on learning with technology**, developed with EDUCAUSE.
- The (International) Student Barometer ((I)SB) asks about students' satisfaction with 'Technology', 'Virtual Learning and the 'online library'.
- The Postgraduate Experience of Research and Teaching surveys (PRES and PTES) run by the HEA include a question about *access to general IT resources*, and questions about research and teaching resources without specific reference to digital resources.
- All of these surveys ask for free text responses about the factors that have made students more or less satisfied with their overall experience. You may be able to access these comments as a data file and to run keyword searches for any that refer to digital issues: or someone else at your institution may already have coded the responses.
- You may run your own institutional surveys, either regularly or one-off, with reference to students' digital experiences. For example you might survey them about the digital technologies they are using, their experiences of using the library or IT services, their views on the VLE, or as part of an externally funded project with a digital agenda.
- You may have taken part in UCISA's **2014 Digital Capabilities survey** and so have some background evidence about your university's approach to staff and student digital skills.

- You may have gathered evidence for QAA review that relates to **student engagement**, or to students' **digital literacies** and confidence.

#### In FE and skills:

- The FE Choices/Learner Satisfaction Survey (LSS) asks broad questions about (Qu 1) satisfaction with teaching on course and (Qu 4) satisfaction with support received, but with no opportunity to provide free text responses.
- You may run your own provider surveys, either regularly (e.g. in conjunction with FE choices) or as a one-off in relation to specific issues in learners' digital experience.
- If you have used the Coralesce Ed-Tech self-assessment tool, you (or another member of staff) will have made an assessment of your college's digital policies, practices and culture. This provides useful background evidence against which to view your learners' responses.
- You will have considered how learners' views are represented in your Ofsted inspections and reports.

In both HE and FE/skills you will have **feedback from learners** and their representatives, whether they are course reps, learner voice reps, dedicated digital change agents, or regular students providing course feedback. You may have learner representatives on user groups for the library/learning resources and IT.

(When you review general feedback on the learning experience, you should remember that learners do not often focus on their digital experience unless they have a specific problem. So picking out the few points that seem to be relevant may not give you an accurate picture. It is better to formulate some questions you can ask learner representatives to encourage them to explore digital aspects of the learning experience. For example you could ask about how digital issues contribute to learners' overall feelings about their course, their teaching and assessment, their career development, the campus environment, their sense of belonging etc. There is more about this under point 4.)

You may also have **data from a variety of learning systems** that tells you for example:

- how often and for how long students are accessing specific systems or resources
- whether learners' patterns of access correlate with issues such as attendance, progression, learning outcomes and satisfaction
- how use of IT systems differs across different subject areas and modes of study

Be careful about how you use system data – or learner analytics – in conjunction with data from the Tracker. The Tracker is not designed to match up a specific set of responses with a specific learner, so you will not be able to associate learners' responses to Tracker questions with their activity in learning systems. But you might be able to compare groups of learners if you have partitioned your Tracker data in a similar way to your system data, e.g. by School/Faculty or by mode of study.

**Triangulation** is a way of creating a 'rich, robust, comprehensive and well-developed' explanation for evidence from multiple sources (see '**Triangulation**' from the Qualitative Research Guidelines project). Triangulation does

not mean treating your evidence as one set of data. It's important to respect the different contexts and methods of collecting data, and to analyse findings for each activity separately. But triangulation can allow you to:

- identify common themes;
- add detail or explanation to findings from one method (e.g. the NSS or LSS) using findings from another method (e.g. the Tracker);
- generate a hypothesis from one set of data and test it against another.

A key reason for developing the Tracker was that universities and colleges told us that they were not collecting reliable or detailed data using other methods. So it's fine just to rely on Tracker returns to tell you about students' digital experiences. It may well be the best evidence you have.

## 4. Beyond the Tracker: 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 such different experiences of the digital classroom.

So you may want to supplement the survey with qualitative and participative approaches to understanding the digital experience of learners. These could include:

- focus groups and consultation events
- 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 in response to specific prompts, for example using a blog platform or video clips)

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 point 4 concerns focus groups, consultation events and learner journeys, which are a realistic option for most organisations.

- Consider running a number of events which **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. If you only work with course reps, for example, you are likely to get a highly engaged group of learners who have some time available and who want to use it to make things better. They are an important asset. But they may not

include more vulnerable or disengaged learners, whose experiences you also need to explore and understand.

- In focus groups, be very clear before you start what **four or five questions** you want to explore. You could focus on questions – and responses - from the Tracker, for example those that require more detail or explanation, or that you are most interested to improve. You could introduce questions that were not included in the Tracker but that you feel are important. You can download our original list of 36 questions [here](#) if you need ideas.
- Open discussion can be valuable to get learners talking, and the advantage of plenary discussion is that you can record it for analysis later. But learners often come up with more varied and precise responses if they are allowed to work in small groups. So try to spend most of the 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 after a big programme to improve the digital learning experience; design a poster or app (paper prototype only) to support students; build a model with lego or cardboard and photograph it; video each other describing 'what one thing' would improve their digital experience. Activities that are creative and fun get much better engagement. Outcomes should be useful and 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 these printed up A3 at least, or written on flip chart paper, so several people can work on them at once.
- Whatever approach you take, get permission to take **photographs and/or video** – 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 which follow a group of learners over time, usually in considerable 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.

## 5. Beyond the Tracker: 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 ongoing student change agent or partnership projects, where ideas for change are continually 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 union reps, course reps, peer mentors, and other learner representatives 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 processes of consulting with students, e.g. about library services or the VLE/LMS, to ensure existing data is re-used intelligently, different questions are asked, new methods are tried, and learners are not subjected to unnecessary surveys.
- 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

A checklist:

1. **Explore what learners actually do** with digital technologies as well as what they say they do. 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 a range of student groups are included when eliciting data e.g. mature, users of assistive tech, work-based, overseas etc. Students participating in different ways constitute very different user groups.



3. Similarly acknowledge the importance of **subject/discipline** – encourage local (course, faculty, dept) engagement with learners and ensure voices from different parts of the institution are heard.
4. With learners' full permission, capture information about their digital practices by tracking their interactions in **learning systems** (see Jisc's ongoing work on learning analytics).
5. Have an **ongoing institutional forum for learners' ideas** which different professional services, depts and initiatives can tap into 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.
6. **Ensure students are informed** about what is being done to address their concerns and feedback, for example using 'you said, we did' posters. Involve learners wherever possible in researching the problems and finding solutions.
7. **Student representation**: ask the student body to consider appointing a TEL/digital officer; ensure digital strategy/planning meetings include student reps; link up student reps e.g. library user groups, IT user groups, so they can learn from one another. Involve learners in working and steering groups that actually get things done.
8. **Employ learners** in TEL teams or on TEL projects e.g. creating resources and course materials – videos, animations, etc – developing the digital environment. This provides useful experience of employment for the students as well as valued outcomes for the institution.
9. Engage **students as co-researchers and co-developers**, collecting feedback, carrying out interviews, identifying and finding solutions to issues in the digital environment.
10. 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 or sometimes better than hourly payment.
11. 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.
12. **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.

## Exemplars

- **Staff-student partnerships in app development**
- **iChamps at the University of Southampton**
- **Students as digital change agents**

- **Student Ambassadors for Digital Literacy**
- **Incoming student surveys – big data, local responses**
- **Connect, create, collaborate – UCL’s digifest**
- **Students have their say on Information Systems development**
- **Developing staff, developing courses, developing students**
- **Students supporting students with study strategies**
- **Borderless practices in journalism studies**
- **Students get clued-up at LMU**
- **University of Lincoln: a research-engaged and collaborative community**
- **University Nottingham: how students are making a difference**
- **Blackburn College: creating a culture shift**
- **Barnet and Southgate College: Digidesk**

## Further resources

- **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