

TACKLING EQUITIES AND INEQUITIES ACROSS THE SECTOR: THE DIGITAL CONUNDRUM?

2nd November 2021

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There has been much discussion about digital equity during the pandemic, and a horrific figure from the Office for Students (OfS) (2021) report was 104,000 students in England with no access at all to the internet. Faculty share stories of students (and staff) sitting on the top of their staircases with their mobile phones, and trying to gain access to meetings, workshops and classes. 52% of students surveyed by the OfS report their learning impacted by slow or unreliable internet connections; 71% reported lack of quiet study space, with 22% severely impacted; and 18% impacted by lack of access to computer, laptop or tablet.

Digital health and wellbeing have come to the fore, and the Students Minds Charity, in their 'University Mental Health: Life in a pandemic study' (2021), highlight narratives of loneliness and isolation. Although 10% of those surveyed report enhanced wellbeing, the burden falls across particular groups, with the Citizens advice survey (2021) identifying those individuals from low-income households, ethnic minorities as well as those with disabilities being disproportionately impacted, through inability to pay for their internet.

These are some of the challenges that all stakeholders in Higher Education need to consider and step up to. However, some radical rethinking of 'the measure and tick-box culture' much reported across the sector may offer some alternative solutions. The much-contested Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data, recently refined to include regional salary variances, which makes some adjustments in measuring graduate 'success' still makes no allowance for background – and this still has a significant impact on earnings (Kernohan 2020).

Could we, just possibly, think more creatively, and instead of measuring what students earn, consider foregrounding how they are prepared, in their institutions for the jobs of the future – the seminal work of Frey and Osbourne (2013) set out the trajectory for the future of employment, predicting high skills and the loss of manual work in the United States. The McKinsey and Company (2021) report on the need for digital fluency, software use and development and understanding digital systems as part of a quadrant alongside self-leadership, cognitive skills and interpersonal skills.

Universities can, and should, embed digital skills throughout their curricula, and thus enable students to develop these skills in a supportive environment, taking into account their individual circumstances, and offer alternative solutions success in the digital world – whether by a library computer lending laptop scheme; reframing assessments; supporting the creation of digital artefacts or indeed, build in an e-portfolio of a digital nature as a showcase to potential employers.

Regional variations for LEO show lower salaries for those living outside the South-East – it hardly takes a Government database to tell us this. But showing the potential of our students for digital employment positions of the future, through their success at University is a measurement worth having. The (previous) Joint Information Systems Committee) Jisc have a well-established and researched Digital Competence framework (DIGICOMP) and participating Universities offer their students access to the ‘Student Digital experience insights survey’. In 2020/2021, 38,917 students from 41 United Kingdom Higher Education Institutions, large and small, took part. Now that is something worth measuring, evaluating and monitoring.

About the Author

Debbie Holley is Professor of Learning Innovation in the Faculty of Health and Social Sciences at Bournemouth University. She is a National Teaching Fellow and has research interests spanning digital competence frameworks, blending formal and informal learning through embedding virtual reality, augmented reality and mixed realities in the curricula. She is currently working with European Union experts to revisit the EU Digital Competencies on digital health and wellbeing. She tweets [@debbieholley1](https://twitter.com/debbieholley1). Personal pronouns she/her/hers.

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