

Canterbury Christ Church University

Engaging with students to build a better digital environment



“The data we have from the insights service makes a significant difference to where we are moving digitally as an institution. This lends a credible voice to decisions being made and provides us with a level of confirmation that we are taking actions that are of direct benefit to students”

Project lead: Duncan Maclver, technology enhanced (TEL) manager, Canterbury Christ Church University

Project aims: improving the student experience of blended learning

A commitment to develop ‘increasingly flexible modes of delivery, including through part time and blended learning’ is a key strategic objective for Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU), as illustrated in the CCCU Strategic Framework 2015-2020 and the [Technology Enhanced Learning Strategy](#).

The aim of participating in the open pilot of the insights service was to gather detailed data on what students want and need in terms of their digital environment and the digital aspects of their learning experience. The data will enable CCCU to make improvements and to take the blended learning agenda forward in a way that works for their students.

The university has four main campuses around south east England with Canterbury being the main campus and smaller campuses at Medway, Broadstairs and the Salomons Centre in Tunbridge Wells – a centre for professional and post graduate studies. While the university has a strong focus on student IT support it is possible that smaller campuses may feel overlooked and so the project team wanted to capture the opinions of all students and reach as many students as possible.

A small working group was set up to manage the preparation for, and the running of, the survey. This included representation from professional services and academic staff. At the time, it was not possible to include student representation on the working group but this is something the team would like to include in any future activities.

Strategies for engaging students

Project leader, Duncan Maclver, worked with the Jisc insights service team to send individual emails to students from within the university’s own system. This was to ensure the invitation was recognised by students as an authentic CCCU initiative and to gain traction and engagement. Duncan feels this had a large impact on the successful response rate of 11% of the student

population (1,452 individual responses). The initial email invitation was followed by a reminder sent out two weeks later and there were noticeable positive spikes in students responding to the survey in the days immediately following the email notifications.

The survey was open to all students, including those studying at partner institutions. The survey officially ran for four weeks in the run up to Christmas with a closing date of 19th December 2017, to coincide with the Christmas break. Unofficially, the survey remained open over the holiday period. A prize draw was offered with prizes of shopping vouchers, an Apple iPad and an Amazon Dot donated by suppliers. This had a noticeable impact on students and made a significant, positive difference to the marketing campaign.

An innovative campaign using tray inserts and table top advertising placed in the canteen outlets at CCCU encouraged students to take part in the survey. Other communication channels used included digital notices on the virtual learning environment (VLE) and on all display screens with posters sited around the campus.



Table topper artwork

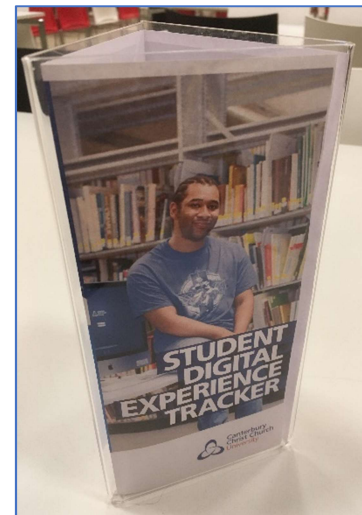


Table topper in situ



Tray inserts used in canteen outlets



The IT team had been involved in setting the survey up and were also active in promoting it to students through the helpdesk and hub; helping students to find the link and encouraging them to complete it there and then. In addition, all staff were made aware that the survey was taking place via the main staff communications channel, Staffnet, and were asked to promote it to students.

Staff engagement in promoting the student survey was beneficial as it meant that they were on-board when it was time to launch the staff version of the insights service which achieved a 45% response rate and secured 313 staff responses.

Data analysis

Using the university's student records system to send individual emails to all students allowed the project team to draw on the university's own records to feed into the survey data. This has enabled the university to filter the data gained from insights on a large range of demographic variables (eg gender, ethnicity, registered disabilities, year of study, faculty, campus and registration through CCCU partner institutions).

Comparisons show that the data from the insights survey predominantly reflects the university's core student data profile, confirming that the results were valid and representative.

The university added a customised question to the survey to support the Student Communications Unit at CCCU who were interested in developing their student communications strategy. They wanted to know preferences for how the university communicates with students for a range of purposes. There has been an assumption that the university sends out a great deal of emails and that the students would like the university to communicate using other channels – the communications team were interested in getting a broader picture and in finding out if this assumption was correct. The project team constructed a matrix question spanning digital channel preferences for purposes such as student courses, programmes, administration matters, facilities, responses to student feedback, support services, wider opportunities etc. Eight options were listed for each purpose; university email, text messaging, web, student portal, virtual learning environment, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Data from the survey were downloaded from the Jisc online service platform and analysed using Microsoft Excel. The free text responses were categorised and analysed. The university's Student Survey Unit provided valuable guidance and expertise on data analysis processes. The project team also found the [resources](#) from the insight service team to be helpful and the support to be responsive.

Key findings

- Student responses indicate higher than expected access to personal devices: 81.7% have access to smart phones and 52% regularly access university systems and content via a mobile device – only 14% say they do not. This represents a substantial shift in behaviour and important information for those who design online content and systems. Requests for improvements to the VLE featured in responses to 'what one thing the university should do to improve'.
- It was interesting to note that only 22% of students had access to a laptop but that few students knew about the iBorrow laptop loan service.
- A significant number of responses to the 'what one thing should the university do' question was to request improvements to training and guidance for students. This aligns to data that shows that about two thirds of students understood that being digitally capable was important to their future careers but a substantially smaller number felt adequately prepared. Although this is in line with national benchmarking data the difference in figures really helps the university's focus on driving forward pedagogical models for blended learning and curriculum development.

- Also high up on the list of things that students would like to see is more lecture recording. A project to extend use of lecture capture is already underway so this data is both interesting and reassuring as it validates practice that is currently being trialled for wider roll-out in 2019.
- In terms of how students would like the university to communicate with them, email far outstripped all other options but the VLE and student portal were also strong preferences. All other categories were rated low in preference (below 10%) except in the case of wider opportunities where 30% of students would like the university to use Facebook.

Acting on the findings

The findings from the insights survey have been presented to the Technology Enhanced Learning Advisory Group (TELAG) and made available to all colleagues within the university. The core report prepared by the project team includes an 18-point action plan. While the TEL Advisory Group will oversee progress, the actions are 'owned' by a variety of people and teams, including the IT team, working groups, the CCCU student union, faculties and programme teams.

In the short term, a number of actions have already been taken as a result of the survey:

- The Student Communications Unit are using the rich data gathered from the customised question included in the survey to redevelop their communication strategy
- The VLE home page has been redesigned to make it more mobile friendly and to provide parity of experience for users accessing content via desktop and mobile devices. Module templates for VLE spaces have been developed to make navigation via mobile devices easier and more consistent
- The IT team are reviewing the iBorrow service and the marketing of the scheme to raise awareness and to review whether the current service adequately meets students' needs
- From a service level perspective, the data from the student insight survey showed lower satisfaction of wifi coverage on one campus than the others. Ubiquitous wifi coverage is important from a health and safety perspective as mobile phone signals in the area are not strong and are frequently unavailable. The IT team are undertaking a site-wide review of wifi coverage across all campuses, addressing variances in out of the way rooms and places.
- The disability demographics are being shared with the Student Disability Unit for further analysis and to identify any actions that may benefit students. The TEL team at CCCU adopt a culture of inclusivity, taking the approach of extending technological solutions that are found to be helpful to the whole community.
- Students are used to watching recordings on-demand in other areas of their lives and regard lecture recording as a standard technology. Staff are already involved in preparations to introduce more lecture recording in 2019 and students are responding positively to a pilot and asking for more. As a result, plans to expand use of lecture capture are being brought forward by six months.

“Some of the things that we were able to act on quite quickly were around support for bring your own devices. Since the insights service has been run we have analysed the data and we have been able to do quite a lot in the BYOD space, introducing power sockets and charging stations where students want them, charging lockers so students can leave devices to charge while they go and grab some lunch. We have also done quite a lot around putting docking

stations in so that students, if they do bring their own laptops in, they can dock and work in an ergonomic environment.”

Gareth Stears, head of user experience for IT, Canterbury Christ Church University

Tips for others/lessons learned

- Promoting the survey via internal addresses ensured that students recognised this as an important internal survey that was directly relevant to them
- Engaging students via multiple channels is vital in raising awareness and getting students to respond
- Running the student insights survey just before Christmas avoided a clash with other national surveys and mitigated any potential student ‘survey-fatigue’
- Ensure the data analysis is completed in time to feed into business planning processes and funding cycles

Next steps

In the longer term the data from both the student and staff insights surveys will feed into a range of other initiatives.

“One of the crucial elements of the insights survey is that we passionately want to use evidence-based decision making in informing what we do to enhance the overall students’ experience and also the staff experience as well.”

Professor Helen James, Senior Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education, Enhancement and Student Experience), Canterbury Christ Church University

These include:

- A digital capabilities working group was established in 2017 with the intention of improving digital capabilities for students and staff across the institution. The data from both the student and staff insights surveys will inform and help to drive the digital capability agenda
- A separate project at the university is underway to improve the management of student information. Updating the student record system will enable CCCU to gather more data and engage more meaningfully with learner analytics
- The university has been running a series of [ABC curriculum design](#) workshops based on the UCL Digital Education model for online and blended learning
- The benchmarking data is important and useful to have. It is encouraging to see areas where the university is doing well and helpful to have data to initiate and inform dialogue with senior managers where there are areas to improve. More important to CCCU is how the data looks internally.
- Data from the staff insights survey shows that staff perceptions of the quality of digital provision and support for digital development is positive but also reveals that staff need support, training and time if digital capabilities development and practice is going to be a core element of teaching and learning practices at CCCU.

The digital experience insights service has proved so valuable that the university intends to run this on an annual basis.

“For me, the key thing is making sure that our students have a voice and for our students to be involved in the direction that our digital services take. We can tell you what our students are saying about digital at CCCU because we have a really good data set. This is not something we have ever had before.”

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At a glance

- The approach taken by CCCU is making sure the democratic student voice is heard in full – all students on all campuses have an opportunity to let the university know about their needs and expectations and how well these are being met
- Working with the student records team at CCCU enabled the project team to direct mail all students from an authoritative source and to secure a high student response rate. It also means that the team have access to a wider data set and can filter on a range of variables (gender, ethnicity, faculty, campus, registered disabilities etc.). This has validated the robustness of the data and provided a rich insight.
- When analysing the data, the project team were supported and advised by the university’s survey team
- Prompt analysis of the data has allowed associated teams such as IT and the communications team to identify and action a series of ‘quick win’ activities as well as to feed into institutional planning and funding cycles in a timely manner
- In the longer term, use of strategic mechanisms to disseminate the data analysis to senior managers is aiding holistic planning and informing future investment and decision-making