

The University of Stirling

Piloting the Digital Experience Insights Service (January 2019)

Evidence informed digital transformation



“The overall impact of running the insights service for our institution is significant. The service has given us a source of evidence which we have used to build business cases, secure investment and lead transformation - safe in the knowledge that transformation is being led by the student voice and the student expectation.”

Project lead: Richard Aird, head of customer service, information services, The University of Stirling

Project aims: exploring student responses and patterns of change throughout a period of digital learning transformation

The University of Stirling is an evidence-informed university and their work over two years in taking part in the digital experience insights surveys (previously piloted as the student digital experience tracker) has contributed valuable data for their digital transformation initiative.

“I would say that it [the digital experience insight survey] is fundamentally part of the strategy and part of the way that we do business.”

Professor Leigh Sparks, deputy principal, University of Stirling

The university took part in the student insights survey pilot in both 2016-17 (554 student responses) and 2017-18 (1589 student responses). The 2016-17 pilot secured insightful data on digital aspects of the learning experience, not just local to the university but across the sector. Taking part in 2017-18 allowed the university to build a clearer picture over the medium to long-term. The university was at the outset of some fairly significant changes in developing their digital learning approach and wanted to see how the students reacted to this, exploring and monitoring patterns or changes as their digital learning transformation initiative evolved.

The initial aim was to gather as much information as possible about students' views of the digital services offered by the university and learn more about how students operate in a digital world. This data would

then be used to identify where improvements to services could further enhance the student experience. Over the two years, a recognition of the emerging value of the data means that it is now contributing to key strategy and investment decisions such as the teaching and learning strategy, the purchase and implementation of a new virtual learning environment (VLE) and lecture recording systems.

Project aims for the second year of engagement with both the student and staff insights pilots were to gather data to inform multiple and interlinked areas of work already underway. These include the next stage of the implementation of a what is still a relatively new digital learning environment, supporting academics aspirations to develop new practice and an appetite to “do things differently” as they explore tools they can use to deliver pedagogically sound student experiences.

“The vision here is to develop a student focused approach that offers choice and empowers users (staff and students) – it is more about building a digital learning landscape and digital eco system than a virtual learning environment (VLE).”

Project lead: Richard Aird, head of customer service, information services, The University of Stirling

The university strategy is ambitious with targets to increase student numbers and open up opportunities to deliver blended and online learning. Higher student numbers could put pressure on space so the university is investigating and monitoring the benefits of practices like flipped learning.

Strategies for engaging students

The university has a cross-service student surveys working group which focuses on student engagement. This is partly to protect students from over-surveying and focus instead on building student engagement through more regular, smaller user experience (UX) initiatives. The insights survey team worked closely with this group to avoid clashes with other important surveys and to align with a larger communications and UX schedule.

The first survey took place in the second semester (spring 2017) and the second survey took place between 20 November and 8 December 2017.

There is a policy at the university not to email 'all students' and so other strategies were employed. The Library have a strong reputation for effective communication with students via social media and created a marketing brand of 'Let's get digital' to support engagement throughout, using distinctive, eye-catching images and focused messages that were changed every few days.

The brand was used in a series of promotional activities such as:

- Pop-up stands in areas of high student footfall
- Use of digital screens around the university
- Notices on the VLE and student portals
- Information in the student bulletin

In addition, students were offered prize incentives of an Amazon vouchers (one with a value of £100 and two further £50 Amazon vouchers).

The project team provided a short link to the survey which meant that they were able to monitor engagement and get some basic statistics on when link was clicked. This enabled the team to respond with targeted social media postings to encourage further participation. This was compared with the communication plan for the survey to identify the most effective channels – in 2017-18, notifications to students via the VLE triggered the most engagement.

Direct mailing from within the survey tool was not used for the student survey but, having experimented with this for the staff survey, the project team will consider using this option in the future.



Examples of student engagement messages using social media (Source: University of Stirling)

Data analysis process

The university now has two sets of data to analyse and will shortly be adding a third set from the 2018-19 survey. In addition to cross-referencing the data against the wider sector, the university is comparing its own data across each survey. With the third consecutive data set soon to be added, a view of the data trends over a more substantial period of time will start to emerge.

Project lead Richard Aird used the service online support and guidance extensively when setting up and signed up to the mailing list to keep up-to-date with new guidance released as the project developed. Richard found the community aspects and the quality of the guides very helpful. He also used the PowerPoint and poster templates provided by the service to present data findings to colleagues.

“The insights service is really simple to implement, However, Jisc are on hand with a great support team. We were able to email them through direct email helpline, we also had access to a forum with access to other institutions who were running the survey so there is lots of support out there for both implementing and running the insights service.”

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Richard has valued the additional insight that the free text comments provided by respondents has given and is identifying emerging themes by cross referencing this with qualitative data from other sources such as the National Student Survey (NSS), Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) and Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES). This is proving to be a useful source of evidence and is helpful in identifying changes and improvements.

“Through the insight service, both qualitative and quantitative data was captured and that really strongly fed back some of the needs and wants of the students at the University of Stirling.”

Astrid Smallembroek, Student Union President, University of Stirling

The benchmarked data has also proven to be valuable to the university, whereby areas for improvement have been identified within a context of minimal deviation from the sector. Richard found that being able to evidence any instances of deviation, where the university was rated marginally higher or lower than the sector, reassured stakeholders that those areas were still viewed positively by students, despite the opportunity for continuous improvement.

Key findings

- 89% of students rated digital provision as good or above. This included software, hardware and the learning environment
- 72% of students agreed that the university supported them to use their own digital devices
- 72% of students rated the quality of digital teaching on their course as good or above
- 60% of students agreed that the software used on their course is industry standard and up to date

A surprising result was how confident students felt in relation to their own digital security and online behaviour: 99% of students believed they behaved in a safe and respectful manner online, 90% felt they had a positive online profile and 93% felt confident in changing privacy settings and managing passwords. This is at odds with support requests monitored by Trish Davey, information centre and digital skills manager at the University of Stirling.

It was also interesting to note that, in common with national benchmark data, students at Stirling turn first to fellow students when they need help.

Acting on the findings

All of the information gained from surveys, student engagement and other related activities is fed into the Digital Learning Project Board which provides the direction, scrutiny and governance around the digital learning agenda at the University of Stirling. This board is currently shaping a new learning and teaching strategy.

In addition to contributing to longer term initiatives the university has acted responsively to address some of the findings. Actions already in progress include:

- Ongoing awareness raising and cyber security training. The **#stircybersec** campaign runs for a month every semester and has an ongoing presence on Twitter and Facebook throughout the year. The campaign is widely promoted via social media
- The creation of a new knowledge base and self-service portal to provide online support and guidance for digital issues. This provides fast access to information in bite-sized, easily digestible, chunks and is available to students at any time and via any device. The approach reinforces the concept of helping students to help themselves. This too is promoted via social media to raise awareness
- Use of a variety of channels and different styles to engage with and respond to students; including the student bulletin, articles on the information services blog and use of memes and little snippets released via social media. ‘We love our students’ is one way of attracting attention that students seem to like

- Sharing with staff how highly students value lecture recording. Lecture recording is compulsory at the university. Having invested in Panopto, a media management system that offers more sophisticated media creation and management options, the aim is to use this to promote and share effective pedagogic use more widely across the institution
- The introduction of a new stakeholder engagement toolkit for all staff to use which promotes use of innovative UX techniques and shares findings from surveys and other activities
- A laptop loan scheme is being planned to supplement desktop provision and address student feedback requesting more computers
- Development of a training module for the VLE to support online learning which draws on guidance in the Jisc NUS student digital experience benchmarking tool. This will also be available to new students on pre-arrival along with additional content designed to support their use of the library as well as the development of information, digital and data literacies and cyber security awareness

Tips for others/lessons learned

- Consider the best time to launch the survey – avoid clashes with national, institutional or student union surveys and be mindful of how it sits alongside project timelines for related initiatives (eg if launching a new initiative such as introduction of a new VLE perhaps allow time for this to bed down before the survey is launched)
- Creating a distinctive marketing brand and campaign was helpful
- Don't be alarmed by anything in your own data until you have seen the benchmarking data. The new addition to the service in 2018 of national benchmarking data really helps put things into perspective. Something that may have been regarded as a 'bad news' story may turn out to be a national or international issue (eg difference in student perceptions of importance of digital skills in work place and how well prepared they feel for this)
- With hindsight, it might have been nice to include a customised question on digital creativity with a view to workplace practice as this is a strong feature of the University of Stirling's digital strategy

“The survey and service work best where an institution recognises and embraces it as a major institutional survey. It is a national survey that is talking to the right stakeholders and will gain internal recognition.”

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Next steps

The data gathered from the surveys is enabling the University of Stirling to start to build a historic picture of the data, and to explore whether the changes implemented are making a difference to the perceptions of their students.

Work is underway to cross reference data from the staff survey with that of the student survey and explore any differences in perception or opinion. At the same time, the university is cross referencing qualitative data from sources such as NSS, PTES and PRES against emerging themes from the insights surveys to gain a richer picture.

The insights surveys are helping the university as they continue to evolve their approaches to digital learning and support their staff to explore new pedagogy and practices as they take advantage of the university's investment in a refreshed suite of digital learning tools.