Thema

Report of the Initial Survey of Master's Students Conducted in October 2007

Author: Kate Lindsay, University of Oxford
Project Manager: Elizabeth Masterman, University of Oxford

February 2008
(minor revisions January 2009)

Contents

1   Aims of the Thema initial survey

The aim of the survey was to establish the basic characteristics and disposition of the 67 students participating in the Thema study at the start of their course. The goal was to build an initial profile of these students, a context within which individual case studies could be based, and data gathered through the later "reflective" survey, could be compared to.

The key questions that informed this questionnaire were:

- What are the characteristics of the students participating in the Thema study?
- What experiences do these students have in terms of IT and IT tools?
- What beliefs, preconceptions, and intentions do the students hold at the beginning of their course?

Notes:

1. **Two versions of the survey were conducted: one with the full-time and part-time students who started their courses in October 2007, and one with the part-time students taking the MSt in International Human Rights Law, a blended online and face-to-face course which began in January 2008.**
   This report covers the October 2007 survey only. The data from the second version has not been analysed in report form.
   Aggregate quantitative data is reported in the document
   Initial Survey Quant Data All Students.doc
2. **Data from this report may not be quoted in publications or presentations without the prior approval of the Project Manager.**

2   Methodology

2.1   Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire was split into four sections: "About You", "About your studies", "Your use of technology" and "Social Software".

The aim of the "About You" section was to collect some basic factual and demographic data about the students participating in the study - age, gender,

educational background, employment information, and so on. The second section, "About your studies" moved on to ask the students about their reasons for choosing a particular course, the University of Oxford as their place of study, and whether they had a goal for what they would like to do when they completed their studies. Questions were also asked about how and where students intended to study, and asked them to give an example of a significant learning experience from their past. The third section focused on students' use of technology, specifically what types of hardware they owned, the types of programmes they used, how they rated their IT skills and how they would go about developing their skills further. The students were also asked what they thought would be the positive and negative impacts of technology on their studies. Students were then asked to what extent they agreed with statements concerning the university's technological provisions and services. In the last section questions addressed the sample's use of social software and "Web 2.0" tools, i.e. websites that are characterised by user generated content and often involve collaboration and sharing.

In view of the envisaged number of responses (67), and to aid analysis, primarily quantitative data was collected using a mixture of single- and multiple-choice questions. However, since some questions did not lend themselves to pre-defined choices, and because respondents like to contribute their own text, we also included a small number of free-text questions (questions 18, 26 and 27). Students were given the opportunity to respond further through "additional comments" text fields.

2.2 Pilot Testing

The survey was piloted with three graduate students from the Department of Education, who suggested a small number of changes to the wording for clarification. However, a substantial number of the questions were taken from the baseline survey, and as such were already well tried and tested.

2.3 Administering the Survey

The survey was hosted online using the SurveyMonkey service (www.surveymonkey.com). A briefing email was sent to student recruited for the Thema survey on the 15th October 2007, two weeks after the start of term. Students were asked to complete the survey by the 26th October.

2.4 Data Analysis

Responses to single- and multiple-choice questions were simply tallied either in a "totals" table (single-choice), or a "frequency" table (multiple-choice). Percentages were calculated wherever possible to give a clearer representation of the proportion for each response.

Coding and categorical aggregation were used to analyse the qualitative data gathered in these questions and identify common themes and patterns. Two research assistants independently coded qualitative data (i.e. the open response answers and "additional comments") a provisional start list of codes developed by the project team. Primarily though categories were be discovered through the process of analysis, which saw single categories broken down and combined to form a final set of codes.

For the purposes of this questionnaire the responses from the different courses participating have been merged. Any relevant differences between the courses will be referred to in the discussion.

2.5 Response Rate

With the exception of one student, all participants answered all questions. The respondent numbers by course are as follows:

Table 1.   Respondent numbers

IM	NE	RM	CI	HE	EL	AL	AR	Total
10	10	6*	8	3	5	19	6	67

* One student only responded to questions 1-27

Key to courses:

IM = Integrated Immunology   HE = Higher Education
NE = Neuroscience   EL = E-learning
RM = Educational Research Methodology   AL = Applied Linguistics & Second
                                                                    Language Acquisition
CI = Comparative & International   AR = Applied Landscape Archaeology
Education

3   Survey Results

3.1   Section A: Personal Details

Question 2 asked respondents to list their primary contact email. The results are not shown here.

Table 2.   Q3: Age

Age	Total	Percentage
18-21	2	2.99%
22-24	25	37.31%
25-34	30	44.78%
35-54	7	10.45%
55 or over	3	4.48%
Total	**67**	**100%**

Table 3.   Q4: Gender

Gender	Total	Percentage
Male	20	29.85%
Female	47	70.15%
Total	**67**	**100%**

Table 4.   Q5 and Q6: Previous degree

Previous place of study	Total	Percentage
Oxford	5	7.46%
Other	59	88.06%
Europe (UK)	*15*	*22.39%*
		(14.93%)
North America	*22*	*32.84%*
Asia	*18*	*26.87%*
Australasia	*4*	*5.97%*
No previous degree	2	2.99%
Not stated	1	1.49%
Total	67	100%

Table 5.　　　Q7: Did you have a gap in your studies before you started this course at Oxford?

Length of gap	Total	Percentage
No gap	34	50.75%
1 to 2 years	11	16.42%
3 to 5 years	11	16.42%
6 to 10 years	6	8.96%
More than 10 years	5	7.46%
Total	67	100%

Table 6.　　　Categorisation by research team of Q7: Major activities during students' gap years

Category: Activity	Frequency	Percentage
Working	32	96.97%
Travelling	3	9.09%
Personal/Family issues	3	9.09%
Studying	4	5.97%

Table 7.　　　Categorisation by research team of Q7: Nature of employment to student's education (present and previous)

Category: Nature of employment	Frequency	Percentage
1. Only relevant to previous major	6	18.75%
2. Only relevant to present major	4	12.5%
3. Relevant to BOTH previous and present major	19	59.38%
4. Relevant to NEITHER previous nor present major	2	6.25%
5. Not known	1	3.12%

Description of categories:
1. Only relevant to previous major: jobs in which students can apply the subject knowledge they have acquired from their previous degree
2. Only relevant to present major: jobs which may need the knowledge they are going to acquire in their master course at Oxford
3. Relevant to previous and present major: work that is in a different field from their studies
4. Relevant to neither previous nor present major: work that is in a different field from their studies
5. Not known: Can not identify whether work is relevant or not. To follow up at interview stage.

Table 8.   Q8: Do you have work or other responsibilities as well as your studies?

Paid work / responsibility	Frequency	Percentage
I have a paid job and work 10 hours or less per week	9	13.43%
I have a paid job & work between 10 & 30 hours per week	4	5.97%
I have a paid job and work more than 30 hours per week	3	4.48%
I have children and/or other dependants to look after	5	7.46%
Other	10	14.92%
I have no other responsibilities	40	59.7%

4 people have > 1 other responsibility; 1 case extra curricular, 3 cases caring for dependents.

Categorisation of "Other"
- Extra-curricular activities: 2
- Studying (apart form their Master programme): 2
- Part-time work: 6

Table 9.   Q9: Is English your native language?

	Total	Percentage
Yes	30	44.78%
No	37	55.22%
Totals	**67**	**100%**

Table 10.   Q10: Where are you living while you are studying on this course?

Location	Total	Percentage
In or near Oxford (within 25 miles)	61	93.85%
Elsewhere in the UK	4	6.15%
Outside the UK	0	0.00%
Totals	**65**	**100%**

3.2 Section B: About your studies

Table 11.   Categorisation by research team of Q12: Motivation for studying this subject.

Categories: Motivational factor	Frequency	Percentage
1. Interest in the field	37	55.22%
2. For further studies / research	18	26.86%
3. Desire to try something new	5	7.46%
4. Past experience	29	43.28%
5. Conducive to career	25	37.31%
6. Enhance knowledge in the field	24	35.82%
7. Desire to contribute to the field/community	5	7.46%
8. Integration of different aspects of knowledge	5	7.46%
9. As a gap year from work	4	5.97%

Description of categories:
1. Interest in the field: Students have a genuine interest in the area
2. For further study/research: the course serves as a stepping-stone for furthering their academic studies (e.g. for another degree/doctorate) or for carrying out research in the field.
3. Desire to try something new: students would like to read for something they have not studied before
4. Past experience: students have been directly motivated/inspired by their previous experiences in studying, working, etc and desire to continue
5. Conducive to career: students believe the master course will progress their present/future career.
6. Enhance knowledge in the field: Students would like to learn more about the field
7. Desire to contribute to the field/community: students would like to make use of the knowledge they acquire to contribute to the field or society as a whole.
8. Integration of different aspects of knowledge: students regard their course as an effective way to integrate the different aspects of knowledge they have acquired/will acquire.
9. As a gap year from work: Students would like to take a break after years of work, so as to reflect on their work, learn more, etc.

Table 12.   Categorisation by research team of Q13: Reasons for choosing Oxford

Category	Frequency	Percentage
1. Merits of the course/ programme	21	31.34%
2. Presence of famous researchers/course tutors in the field	12	17.91%
3. High ranking of the course	5	7.46%
4. Quality of teaching	3	4.47%
5. Quality of peers	6	8.96%
6. Course meeting one's interests/needs	20	29.85%
7. Possibility of future research/studies	5	7.46%
8. The best/unique course	11	16.42%
9. Recommendations	4	5.97%
10. Intensive nature of the course	2	2.99%
11. Good prospects/ Conducive to career	5	7.46%
12. Resources/support offered by university	8	11.94%
13. the learning environment	6	8.96%
14. Scholarship/Funding avaliable	6	8.96%
15. Top ranking/fame of Oxford University	33	49.25%
16. Attraction of social or extra-curriular activities	2	2.99%
17. Try studying in a new place	6	8.96%
18. Past experience at Oxford	4	5.97%
19. English-speaking university/ country	3	4.47%
20. Preference for Oxford city/UK	4	5.97%
21. Closeness to current living place	8	11.94%
22. Staying with partners	2	2.99%
23. Dream	2	2.99%
24. Other	2	2.99%

Description of categories:
1. Merits of course/ programme: students mention some of the advantages of the course that draw them to Oxford. This includes the structure, content, setting, ways of teaching or learning, etc.
2. Presence of famous researchers/ course tutors in the field: students have been attracted by some renowned researchers in their field that are currently teaching at Oxford.
3. High ranking of the course: students are attracted by the high ranking/top rating of their course in their field.
4. Quality of teaching: students are attracted by the high quality of teaching in the course.
5. Quality of peers: students comment that they would like to work with other brilliant peers in the course.

6. Course meeting one's interests/needs: students mention that the course content is relevant to their own needs or interests.
7. Possibility of future research/studies: the course will provide opportunities for students to conduct their own research or it pave the way for further studies (e.g. doctorate).
8. The best/unique course: students have compared the course at Oxford and other universities and found the Oxford one is the best. OR students found that similar course is not offered by other universities.
9. Recommendations: Students chose Oxford because they have friends or family members who recommended the course/university.
10. Intensive nature of the course: the one-year course is intensive and students can get the degree within a shorter period of time, when compared in other universities.
11. Good prospects/Conducive to career: studying the course at Oxford will provide good prospects or will benefit their career development.
12. Resources/support offered by university: students believe that Oxford University provides plenty of facilities, resources and support for students.
13. The learning environment: students enjoy the learning environment at Oxford. This may be due to different reasons e.g. beautiful campus, rich intellectual atmosphere, etc.
14. Scholarship/Funding available: students chose Oxford because they have got/expect to get scholarships to cover their fees and living costs.
15. Top ranking/fame of Oxford University: students are attracted by the reputation and top ranking of Oxford University in the world.
16. Attraction of social or extra-curricular activities: students would like to participate in the social activities (e.g. collegiate system, clubs and societies) and sports (e.g. rowing) at Oxford University.
17. Try to study in a new place: students hope to try studying in a new place or country.
18. Past experience at Oxford: students have studied at Oxford and enjoyed the experience a lot.
1. 19: English-speaking university/country: students would like to study in an English-speaking university or country, either because it is their native language or they want to improve their second language (English) proficiency.
19. Preference for Oxford city/UK: students chose Oxford because they love the city (e.g. the historic buildings) or the country i.e. UK as a whole.
20. Closeness to current living place: students are already living near or in Oxford and they would like to save time to commute.
21. Staying with partners: students' partners (e.g. husband or wife) are studying at Oxford and so they chose Oxford to accompany their partners.
22. Dream: students mention that it has been their dream to study at Oxford.
23. Other: students like Oxford for other personal reasons

Table 13.   Categorisation by research team of Q14: What to do after Oxford

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
1. Further studies	39	58.3%
2. Working	41	61.19%
3. Travelling	1	1.49%
4. Not sure/undecided	3	4.48%

Description of categories:
1. Further studies: Students would like to continue their studies
2. Pursue a career/job in the (related) field: Students hope to find a job that is related to what they are now studying, or return to enhance their previous job with knowledge gained on the course.
3. Travelling: Students would travel for some time before taking the next step.
4. Not sure/undecided

Table 14.   Q15: Study hours (full-time students)

Hours	Total	Percentage
10h or less	1	1.67%
11-20h	8	13.36%
21-30h	16	26.16%
31-40h	20	33.4%
41-50h	12	20.04%
More than 50h	3	5.01%
Totals	60	100%

This table excludes the 6 part-time students from Applied Landscape Archaeology course

Table 15.   Q15: Study hours (part-time students)

Hours	Total	Percentage
10h or less	2	33.33%
11-20h	4	66.67%
21-30h	0	0%
31-40h	0	0%
41-50h	0	0%
more than 50h	0	0%
Totals	6	100%

Table 16. Q17: Where do you like to do your private studying?

Location	Frequency	Percentage
Home/college room/student residence	59	88.06%
Library	48	71.64%
Postgraduate study room in my department	15	22.39%
Learning centre or other study facilities within the university	6	8.95%
In my place of work (if in employment/self-employed)	2	2.99%
Cafe, pub or other "public" place	14	20.89%
While traveling (e.g. bus, train, aeroplane)	4	5.97%
Other (please tell us)	0	0%

Table 17. Categorisation by research team of Q18: Significant learning experiences

Category: Attribute that made the learning experience memorable	Frequency	Percentage
Access to cutting edge research	2	2.99%
Being challenged	6	8.95%
Course format - Importance of participation and discussion	5	7.46%
Critical moment	5	7.46%
Critical moment - motivation	2	2.99%
Feeling of achievement	18	26.87%
Feeling of control over own learning	5	7.46%
Feeling of usefulness/applicability of learning	3	4.47%
Fun task	2	2.99%
Good tutor	6	8.96%
Good tutor - explaining concepts, making students grasp material	3	4.47%
Good tutor - inspiring personality	5	7.46%
Good tutor - successful methods	9	13.43%
Hands-on experience	10	14.93%
Hands-on experience - Immersion in culture	1	1.49%
Hands-on experience - Immersion in work environment	3	4.47%
Informal learning	6	8.96%
Interest in subject matter	10	14.93%
Learning by teaching	3	4.47%
Learning environment	2	2.99%

Category: Attribute that made the learning experience memorable	Frequency	Percentage
Personal development	7	10.45%
Project work - employing wide range of skills	2	2.99%
Social experience	3	4.47%
Use of technology	2	2.99%

3.3 Section C. Use of Technology

One student failed to complete section C. Total number of students completing the questions is now 67, 98.51%.

Table 18.   19. How many of the digital technologies listed below do you own at the moment?

	Frequency	Percentage
Desktop computer	15	22.39%
Laptop or tablet computer	62	92.54%
Mobile phone	64	95.22%
iPod or MP3/MP4 player (also mobile phone with one)	52	77.61%
Personal digital assistant (PDA) or handheld computer e.g. iPAQ (also mobile phone with PDA-like functions)	7	10.45%
Digital camera and/or digital video-camera	57	85.07%
Webcam	31	46.27%
Other	8	11.94%

Technologies named in the "Other" category:
- Voice Recorder: 1 (to aid learning disability)
- External Device plugged into laptop: 1
- X-box: 1
- Digital diary: 1
- Portable Dictionary: 1
- GPS/Satellite Navigation System: 3
-

Categorisation of "Other"
- Entertainment: 1
- Academic use: 2
- Personal use: 5

Table 19.   Q22: How well can you use the following software?

Software		By myself		Need help		Never used
Word processor	66	98.51%	1	1.49%	0	0.00%
Spreadsheet	53	79.1%	10	14.93%	4	5.97%
Database	24	35.82%	19	28.36%	24	35.82%
Graphics program	49	73.13%	11	16.42%	7	10.45%
Web authoring tool	17	25.37%	14	20.90%	36	53.73%
Presentation tool	61	91.04%	5	7.46%	1	1.49%
Chat program	58	86.57%	2	2.99%	7	10.45%
Search engine	67	100%	0	0%	0	0%

Table 20.   Q24: Suppose that you need to use an online tool or a computer program in your course that you haven't used before. Here are three ways in which you might learn how to use it. Please indicate on the scale how likely you are to try each one:

								Totals by statement	
Method	Very likely		Quite likely		Not sure		Not very likely		Very unlikely
Try to learn by myself	40	59.70%	15	22.39%	8	11.94%	3	4.48%	1	1.49%
Get together with a friend	20	29.85%	28	41.79%	9	13.43%	7	10.45%	3	4.48%
Rely on the department	13	19.4%	23	34.33%	13	19.4%	15	22.39%	3	4.48%
Computing Services	8	11.94%	28	41.79%	14	20.9%	11	16.42%	6	8.96%

Table 21.   Q25. Here are some statements about what students expect universities
        to provide in terms of support for their use of technology. For each statement.
        Please tick the response that is closest to your own opinion.

Statement									Totals by statement
Statement	Strongly agree		Agree		No opinion		Disagree		Strongly disagree
Should provide technology	21	31.34%	20	29.85%	10	14.93%	14	20.90%	2	2.99%
single wireless network	42	62.69%	20	29.85%	4	5.97%	1	1.49%	0	0.00%
Tutors should use SMS	8	11.94%	14	20.90%	14	20.90%	27	40.30%	4	5.97%
Use personal email addrs	10	14.93%	14	20.90%	21	31.34%	20	29.85%	2	2.99%
Lectures should be recorded	19	28.36%	25	37.31%	9	13.43%	10	14.93%	4	5.97%
Should not block Websites	11	16.42%	21	31.34%	16	23.88%	14	20.90%	5	7.46%

Table 22.   Categorisation by research team of comments given in Q25

21 students gave additional comments to question 25, giving 33 pieces of comments in total. These are distributed as in the follows:

Category	Frequency
Should provide technology	6
Single wireless network	0
Tutors should use SMS	7
Use personal email addrs	5
Lectures should be recorded	10
Should not block Websites	4
Other suggestion	1

Table 23.   Categorisation by research team of Q26: Perceived benefit of technology on learning experience

Category: Perceived benefit	Frequency	Percentage
Access to cutting edge research	1	1.49%
Access to online resources (e.g. journals, library catalogues)	31	46.27%
Backup	2	2.98%
Bibliography software	4	5.97%
Collaboration with peers	2	2.98%
Communication with tutors/ peers/research participants	9	13.43%
Convenience	2	2.98%
Data analysis (e.g. SPSS)	6	8.99%
Data capture for research	2	16.42%
Distributing/accessing course material	11	16.42%
Efficiency	4	5.97%
Effectiveness of work	5	7.46%
Improving the quality of work	1	1.49%
Language aids	2	2.98%
Maps	3	4.48%
Mobile technologies	1	1.49%
Online conferences	1	1.49%
Organising notes and literature	4	5.97%
Other benefits	3	4.48%
Pen scanner	1	1.49%
Presentation tools	11	16.42%
Recording of lecture material - audio/video	5	7.46%
Searching/ accessing information online	17	25.37%
Sharing resources	1	1.49%
Social communication (e.g. facebook)	4	5.97%
Technologies in teaching (including social software)	3	4.48%
Time saving	8	11.94%
Transfer of data between home and work	1	1.49%
Weblearn	6	8.99%
Word processing/ spreadsheets	11	16.42%

Description of categories:

1. Access to cutting edge research: Gaining access to the newest and ongoing research through searches and communication with researchers.
2. Access to online resources (e.g. journals, library catalogues): Gaining access to reading material through university online library facilities.
3. Backup: Backing up work for protection from technology breakdown
4. Bibliography software: Keeping track of readings and making referencing more effective with referencing software.
5. Collaboration with peers: Using technology for academic collaboration with peers.
6. Communication with tutors/ peers/research participants: Academic communication with peers, tutors or researcher in the same field.
7. Convenience: Technology being more convenient to use than alternative methods.
8. Data analysis (e.g. SPSS): Using different types of software for data analysis (e.g. SPSS or NVivo).
9. Data capture for research: Using technological means for data gathering (e.g. voice recorders, transcription software etc.).
10. Distributing/accessing course material: Accessing course material, such as readings and PowerPoint presentations online.
11. Efficiency: Viewing technology as making learning or work more efficient (this is a broad category created to capture students' answers that directly refer to efficiency).
12. Effectiveness of work: Technology aiding effective study practices.
13. Improving the quality of work
14. Language aids: Software aids for ESL students (e.g. electronic dictionaries or online dictionaries).
15. Maps: Map software (such as MapInfo).
16. Mobile technologies: Using mobile phones and PDAs for example to access course information online.
17. Online conferences: Gaining access to online conferences.
18. Organising notes and literature: Using different types of software to organise reading material, notes, data etc.
19. Other benefits
20. Pen scanner: Hardware support for ESL students (such as 'dictionary pens')
21. Presentation tools: Presentation tools – (such as powerpoint) both used by tutors to convey information more clearly and by the students to structure their own presentations.
22. Recording of lecture material - audio/video   Recording lectures for later playback and revision.
23. Searching/ accessing information online: Access to information online – both through academic journal searching, and more generic searches (through Google etc.).
24. Sharing resources: Sharing information online (between students, academic and support staff).
25. Social communication (e.g. facebook): Using the internet for social communication over chat and social networking sites.
26. Technologies in teaching (including social software).
27. Time saving; Viewing technology as time saving through quick access to resources, for planning, library time etc.

28. Transfer of data between home and work: Enabling the student to work in more than one place (e.g. home/work).
29. WebLearn: Usign WebLearn's features.
30. Word processing/ spreadsheets: Use of technology for word processing.

Table 24.   Categorisation by research team of Q27: Perceived negative impact of technology on learning experience

Category: Perceived negative impact	Frequency	Percentage
Danger of insufficient skills	3	4.48
Dependence on technology & de-skilling	7	10.45
Digital divide	1	1.49
email as distraction	6	8.99
Frustration and loss of data	2	2.98
Getting lazy	3	4.48
Imposing specific approaches to studying	2	2.98
Internet as distraction	20	29.85
Offline computer activities as a distraction	1	1.49
Online instead of experiential learning	1	1.49
Other negative effects	12	17.91
Over-reliance on information from web	3	4.48
Physical effects (e.g. RSI[1])	5	7.46
Reading from the screen	2	2.98
Reducing f2f contact	9	13.43
Resistance or incompent use by educators	2	2.98
Social software as distraction	13	19.4
Weblearn	1	1.49
WILF	2	2.98

Description of categories:
1. Danger of insufficient skills: Insufficient technical skills causing the student to fall behind or not be able to orient themselves in a technology rich world.
2. Dependence on technology & de-skilling: Dependence on technology leading to loss of other skills.
3. Digital divide: Some students may be disadvantaged because they arrive from less technological environments.
4. Email as distraction: Using email as a distraction from work.
5. Frustration and loss of data: Danger of losing work because of technology breakdown and frustration with faulty technology.
6. Getting lazy: Using technology as a 'crutch' and doing work in a 'lazy' way .

---

[1] repetitive strain injury

7. Imposing specific approaches to studying: The technology imposing specific work patterns on the student which may not be conductive to learning.
8. Internet as distraction: Spending too much time on the Internet instead of working.
9. Offline computer activities as a distraction: Distracting offline activities (movies, games etc.).
10. Online instead of experiential learning: Using simulations instead of hands-on learning, using email for contact instead of meetings etc.
11. Other negative effects
12. Over-reliance on information from web: Relying on websites leading devolution in the quality of thinking (e.g. not using authoritative books, not being able to discern between good and bad quality information).
13. Physical effects (e.g. RSI): Physical effects of working with a computer (repetitive strain injury, back strain, eye strain).
14. Reading from the screen: Reading from screen being more difficult/unpleasant than reading form paper.
15. Reducing f2f contact: Reliance on technological means (email etc.) instead of face to face contact.
16. Resistance or incompetent use by educators: Danger of tutors using technology in inefficient ways due to incompetence or 'using technology for technology's sake'.
17. Social software as distraction: Spending too much time on social networking sites (such as Facebook) instead of working.
18. Weblearn: Substituting WebLearn for face to face contact.
19. WILF: Surfing the web aimlessly, 'what was I looking for', going off on tangents is easy on the web.

3.4 Section D: Social Software

One student failed to complete section C. Total number of students completing the
questions is now 66, 98.51%.

The following questions asked students the extent to which they used specific pieces of
social software, asking them to agree with the statement that most accurately matched
their experience.

Table 25.   Q28: Websites for storing photographs, images and/or videos and
        sharing them with other people, e.g. Flickr, YouTube

	Total	*Percentage*
I have put my own materials on such sites	25	37.32%
I have looked at other people's material but haven't added any of my own	27	40.3%
I have heard of such sites but have never used one	13	19.4%
I do not know what these sites are	1	1.49%
Totals	**66**	**98.51**

Table 26.   Q29: Podcasts (incl. video podcasts):

	Total	*Percentage*
I have listened to podcasts (e.g. for studies, work or general interest)	30	44.78%
I have heard of podcasts but have never listened to one	23	34.33%
I do not know what podcasts are	13	19.4%
Totals	**66**	**98.51%**

Table 27.   Q30: Wikipedia and other online encyclopaedias to which anyone can
        contribute information:

	Total	*Percentage*
I have looked up information in Wikipedia or other online encyclopaedias	61	91.04%
I have heard of Wikipedia but have not used it	5	7.46%
I do not know what Wikipedia is	0	0.00%
Totals	**66**	**98.51**

Table 28.   31: Wikis (<u>excluding</u> Wikipedia and similar online encyclopedias):

	Total	Percentage
I have contributed to a wiki (e.g. for studies, work or other purposes)	10	14.93%
I have heard of wikis but have not used one	34	50.75%
I do not know what a wiki is	22	32.84%
Totals	**66**	**98.51**

Table 29.   32: Blogs (online journals) written by other people:

	Total	Percentage
I read other people's blogs and add comments	32	47.46%
I read other people's blogs but don't add any comments	23	34.33%
I have heard of blogs but have never read one	11	16.42%
I do not know what blogs are	0	0.00%
Totals	**66**	**98.51**

Table 30.   Q33: Do you have your own blog?

	Total	Percentage
Yes, I write in it regularly and respond to the comments that people make	15	22.39%
I have started a blog but I don't write in it very much	8	11.94%
I did have my own blog but have stopped writing in it	3	4.48%
I have never had my own blog	40	59.7%
Totals	**66**	**98.51**

Table 31.   Q34: Social networking sites e.g. MySpace, Facebook:

	Total	Percentage
I have an account (profile) and use it regularly	44	65.68%
I have an account (profile) but don't use it very much	12	17.91%
I have heard about this sort of site but have never used one	9	13.43%
I do not know what social networking sites are	1	1.49%
Totals	**66**	**98.51**

Table 32.   Q35: Social bookmarking tools e.g. del.icio.us, Furl:

	Total	Percentage
I currently use one or have used one in the past	6	8.96%
I have heard of social bookmarking tools but have never used one	17	25.37%
I do not know what social bookmarking tools are	43	64.18%
Totals	**66**	**98.51**

Table 33.   Q36: Online calendar e.g. Google Calendar, iCal, Yahoo Calendar:

	Total	Percentage
I currently use one or have used one in the past	14	20.9%
I have heard of online calendars but have never used one	39	58.21%
I do not know what online calendars are	13	19.4%
Totals	**66**	**98.51**

Table 34.   Q37: Newsfeeds (RSS) which can be read on Websites, through a
browser and/or through an aggregator (e.g. Bloglines, Google Reader):

	Total	Percentage
I currently read newsfeeds or have read them in the past	14	20.9%
I have heard of newsfeeds but I don't read them	34	50.75%
I do not know what newsfeeds are	18	26.87%
Totals	**66**	**98.51**

Table 35.   Q38: Communication Tools

Tool Type	Level of use							
	Regularly		Not very often		Never use it		Do not know it	
Internet telephony	31	46.97%	15	22.73%	18	27.27%	2	3.03%
Chat	33	50.00%	21	31.82%	12	18.18%	0	0.00%
Discussion forum	10	15.15%	31	46.97%	21	31.82%	4	6.06%
Newsgroup	2	3.03%	18	27.27%	29	43.94%	17	25.76%

23

Table 36.   39: Virtual worlds e.g. Second Life, There

	Total	Percentage
I regularly spend time in a virtual world	**3**	**4.78%**
I have created my own avatar but don't spend much time in the virtual world	**4**	**5.97%**
I did have an avatar but have stopped using the virtual world	**2**	**2.99%**
I have heard of virtual worlds but have never been in one	**32**	**47.76%**
I do not know what a virtual world is	**25**	**37.31%**
Totals	**66**	**98.51%**

Table 37.   Q40: Multiplayer online games that played over the Internet with other people: e.g. EverQuest, Eve, chess

	Total	Percentage
I regularly play at least one such game	2	2.99%
I have tried playing them but I don't play regularly	4	5.97%
I did play such games but have stopped	8	11.94%
I have heard of them but have never played one	45	67.16%
I do not know what multiplayer online games are	7	10.45%
Totals	**66**	**98.51%**

4 Discussion

4.1 Participant demographics

4.1.1 Age

The majority of the Thema sample (45%) are aged between 25 and 34, with 37% aged between 22 and 24. 10% were aged 35 to 54 with 3 students, 4% aged 55 and over. Unsurprisingly, 5 out of the 6 students taking the part-time Applied Landscape Archaeology course at the Department of Continuing Education fell into these latter two categories.

4.1.2 Gender

70% of the sample were female, whilst 30% were male.

4.1.3 Education

Data showed the cohort to be largely educated to a high standard. The vast majority of students (96%) held a prior degree with only 7% of students obtaining that qualification from the University of Oxford. This can be attributed to the fact that 1/3 of the cohort are undertaking courses in the field of Education and their department is graduate-based, not offering undergraduate qualifications. Two of the three remaining students were enrolled in the Applied Landscape Archaeology course in the Department of Continuing Education, where a previous degree was not a prerequisite. One student did not respond to this question.

4.1.4 Language and previous institution of study

55% of students did not have English as their native language, and in correlation to this, results revealed a significant geographical variety in previous place of study. Only 15% of students had obtained their previous degree from a UK university, with 7% obtaining their qualification from other European universities, 33% from North American institutions, 27% from Asian universities, and 6% from Australasian universities. Filtering these results by discipline showed certain courses to have a majority of students from a certain continent. For the Masters in Immunology and Educational Research Methdology, an overwhelming proportion of students had graduated from institutions in North America, whilst the remaining students on these

courses had largely come from institutions in the UK and Europe. Over 50% of the students enrolled on the Applied Linguistics MSc obtained previous degrees from universities in Asia, and whilst students graduated from Asian universities are present on several courses, those in the Neuroscience course came from Pakistan and India, whereas most of those in the Department of Education are from Southeast Asia (especially China, Hong Kong and Taiwan).

4.1.5 Educational background and motivations for study

Qualifications held by the 96% were largely related to their present course, showing a continuing trend in their educational pursuits. Likewise for the majority of students who had worked before starting the master's course, the work that they undertook was relevant to both their previous and present major. However, some students' work was only relevant to their master course at Oxford, but not to their previous degree. After working for a period of time, they had enrolled for qualifications in the field of their employment. This trend is especially apparent in the Applied Linguistics group. Most students had been a teacher during the gap years and commented that they would like to continue with their teaching career after the master course.

Generally students had a very clear notion of what they wanted to do after their course and what they perceived it would lead to. 53% of students stated that they aimed to find employment in a relevant field to their course or return to their previous job with a greater knowledge assimilated through their studies, 61% commented that they would, or were considering, furthering their studies by taking another course or embarking on a DPhil. In summary the students participating in the Thema study were likely to enrol in the master courses to progress their academic qualifications and professional knowledge in the field with the aim of engaging in related employment or further study upon completion.

When looking at student's motivations for studying a particular course this trend was is further highlighted. 27% of students were using their course as a "stepping stone" to further study or research in the area, whilst 37% were motivated to enrol to specifically enhance their career prospects:

It is the area in which I have been working for over 15 years now. I felt that it was time to "grow" by learning more about my field. In addition, I felt that obtaining an advanced degree would potentially increase employment prospects in the future. One possible career goal of mine is to lecture at university, and of course a PhD is generally necessary for such employment. (AL14)

I am pursuing a career in transplant cardiology. Prior to embarking on a DPhil I felt it would be beneficial to improve my scientific knowledge so that I can have a more holistic approach to research in my academic career. Immunology is a very exciting, interesting and quickly evolving subject that has applications to every aspect of medicine. (IM14)

Likewise 43% of students commented that past experience, mostly drawn from their previous degree or employment, had captured their interest in the field and given them the incentive to pursue their education further:

Throughout my undergraduate studies, I have had the opportunity to teach in various different teaching posts. It was through this experience that my curiosity for different educational systems around the world emerged. (CI02)

In terms for choosing the University of Oxford as their institution of study, not surprisingly, most students chose Oxford because of its fame and reputation as one of the top ranking universities (49%) in the world, the reputation of the course itself (33%) and the presence of course tutors and lecturers who are renowned in the field (18%).

To be perfectly honest, it was Oxford's reputation that first attracted me to the university. The ultimate choice, however, was mostly due to its MSc programme per se, which has clearly been carefully structured with excellent course tutors. (AL14)

Other students mentioned that they did not want to "pass up the opportunity" to study at Oxford (Neuroscience student), that they wanted to study at a "top university" (Comparative Education student), and that because the "Oxford name is known around the world" it would give them an "edge" when applying for jobs elsewhere (Higher Education student). However, apart from the fame of the university, many students looked carefully at the course itself, choosing it on it's own merits (e.g. the structure, the organization, the setting, the comprehensiveness of the content, balance between content and practice, etc) in relation other university courses. In other words, the course met their perceived needs at the time of selection:

> I compared several programmes of study offered by several British Universities and I found that the MSc offered by Oxford University was the one that best met my interests. (AL13)

Many other reasons were cited for choosing Oxford, for instance the intensive nature of the course allowing them to complete in a year as opposed to courses abroad which may take 2-3 years, the desire to study abroad in a "new" place, and the proximity of the university to their home, however it was the Oxford brand and the course characteristics that were the leading factors. Interestingly most students did not mention the university's facilities or services as being a key factor in their decision to come to Oxford, when resources were given as a reason students merely commented that they perceived the university to be very well resourced in terms of "academic community" and "libraries", only one student mentioned that at the time of selection they expected the university to have "excellent IT facilities". Whether resources, and more applicably IT resources, do in fact play a significant factor in learners' needs and experiences will be an issue that is returned to throughout the duration of this study.

4.2 Other responsibilities

33% of students undertook some form of paid work alongside studying for their masters degree, 3 students seemed to be engaged in full-time employment (over 30 hours a week), with the remaining students undertaking less than 20 hours per week or working paid as claimed (irregular work). 5 students from the cohort had the extra role

of caring for children or other dependents in addition to their studies. Not surprisingly it was the students enrolled part-time on the Applied Landscape Archaeology course who had the highest proportion of responsibilities other than their studies.

4.3 Expectations for study

Overall, full-time students expected to study the equivalent hours they would expect to work in a full time job (31-40 hours per week), however some differences between courses were revealed. Generally, students in science related courses (Immunology and Neuroscience) expect to engage in more study hours than the students in the Department of Education. The mean hour range for Immunology was 31-40h, whilst for Neuroscience it was 41-50h. The mean hour range for students in Education is also 31-40h, but the range here is more diverse than students in immunology. The students in Applied Linguistics expect to study the least with mean hour range of 21-30h.

Unsurprisingly, the six part-time students expected to work half the number of hours, responding that they planned to fit their study around their other responsibilities, before and after working hours, lunch breaks, or whilst their children are at school. Time to fit in study could be considered to be significantly more difficult for part–time students because of the extent of their other responsibilities, as outlined in the previous sections. A particular focus will be paid as to how their experiences of digital technologies do and could benefit this group of students.

Whilst 72% of students stated that they would study in the library, 88% also stated that they liked to study at home or in their student residence, the first indication that the vast majority of students have ready access to the technological resources they need to carry out their studies (i.e. a computer and internet access). Interestingly, 21% students also stated that they liked to study in public places such as cafés, pubs and parks, whilst 6% of students planned to study whilst travelling, and 4% in their place of work i.e. places outside of the university, possibly effecting their choice of technology.

4.4 What makes a significant learning experience?

For question 18 students were asked to describe a significant learning experience and what, to them, had made it memorable. Most students described their learning

experiences in detail, and explained well what made their experience so significant. The answers varied widely. Some students described particular projects they had worked on, people who had taught them, or teaching methods they had found particularly significant in their learning. Some students describe particular formal learning situations that they had been in at school or university, whilst others referred to more vocational learning or voluntary work. Some students described overcoming personal hurdles and developing "life" skills, such as communication or presentation skills. The responses of the students varied widely, however some underlying themes emerged that were common across a number of students experiences. These are discussed below.

Firstly, for over a quarter of students a feeling of achievement was a key characteristic of their significant learning experience. 27% of respondents commented that the fact they had felt that they had a "achieved something" had made the experience for memorable for them, especially if it involved overcoming hurdles or working through a particularly challenging task. Obtaining good results, reaching a goal, and being recognised for it made the experience of learning significant, as one student stated:

> My most significant learning experience so far has probably been the research I conducted for my Bachelor's thesis in educational policy during the Summer of 2006. I was awarded a fellowship by my University to conduct original research according to a plan that I had developed - a plan which was still a bit sketchy at the time I left for Europe, where the research took place (France, Italy, Sweden and Finland). When I arrived and starting collecting data, I sort of made it up as I went along, trying to see who I could get to talk to me and give me an interview or some perspective on my research question. I think what made it so special was the sense of entrepreneurship and self-sufficiency I gained while conducting the research. I took a lot of risks and put myself out there, and I ended up getting more done than my professors thought was possible for an undergraduate. (RM02)

Many students associated their significant learning experiences with high quality teachers or tutors, especially in the situation where they had difficulty grasping a particular subject. They remembered teachers because of their ability to make them understand what is being taught, helping them improve, and as an inspiration to learn:

> Looking back into my past, I feel the most significant learning experience was studying physics in High School. I have a deep interest in Maths and physics. But what made it special was our physics teacher, Mr. Obaidullah Bhatti. His way of teaching made us enjoy the subject. He taught us how to break a complex problem into small and simpler ones and solve it in a logical way. I believe the way of thinking developed during this period helped me throughout my later studies even though were not related to physics. (NE02)

The importance of a good teacher to build a significant learning experience reverberates throughout the results of this survey. Teacher-student interaction is generally seen as a critical factor in creating a positive learning experience, a factor that can not be replaced by technology. 3% of students did comment that technology itself had been a deciding factor in their recorded learning experience, but for one student this was heavily tied to the teacher himself:

> …he presented his lessons through digital means (computers, PPT, websites). This was a good learning experience because it was completely innovative for Greek standards, when, at the same time, other professors were still using the blackboard. Maybe this experience was for me a first, and probably subconscious stimulus, to follow the course of e-learning. (EL05)

The opportunity to engage in practical, hands-on experience played a significant role in other students learning experiences. 15% of students regarded a learning experience to be remarkable when they could apply what they have learnt to practice, for instance conducting research, field work, working on internship programmes, etc. As one student commented:

My neurosurgical internship was the single-most fascinating educational experience I have ever had in my life. I underwent the intensive and exhausting programme during Fall 2006. Being immersed in the culture of the operating room was not only inspiring, but the hands-on applications and remarkable outcomes were captivating. Seeing how profoundly people's lives were enhanced after surgery made the experience incomparably rewarding. (IM03)

In summary, a wide range of attributes were put forwards by the students to characterise what it was that made their learning experiences so significant and memorable. As well as the four major themes outlined above students also referred to being in control of their own learning, personal development, the learning environment, and the perceived impact or usefulness of their experience as being key factors to make an experience significant. In general most students enjoyed actively participating in their experience, and achieving a specific goal at the end.

4.5 Access to technology

An overwhelming majority of students (92%) owned a laptop computer, those students who did not have a laptop owned a desktop computer, thus 100% possessed their own computer. The majority of respondents also reported that they had no problem accessing a computer, or the Internet at home or in their student residence. Alongside their own computer 95% of students owned a mobile phone, 85% had a digital camera/video camera , 78% had an ipod or other form of MP3 player, and 46% a webcam. A smaller number of students owned a PDA or other form of hand held computer (10%). Only one student owned a device to assist with a learning disability, a voice recorder.

4.6 Existing and developing technology skills

100% of students reported that they could use a search engine without any assistance, and 99% word processing software. A high proportion of the cohort were also confident in using presentation software (91%), chat programs (86%), spreadsheets

(79%), and graphics programs (73%) on their own. A lesser number of students were confident that they could use slightly more specialist programs such as databases (36%) and web authoring software (25%).

Overall, the majority of students responded that they were confident that they could use the software and programs required by their course, with 36% stating that they were very confident and 52% that they were fairly confident. However, 12% of students were concerned about their ability to use the tools required by their courses, largely due to a lack of previous experience with these tools. Specialist data analysis tools were often mentioned by students enrolled on the Neuroscience and Educational Research Methodology courses (e.g. SPSS) to present a "learning curve" and a challenge. Those students taking the E-learning masters expected that they would have to acquire a number of new IT skills because of the technological nature of the course:

> Well, as far as I have understood until today, my course involves many tools and technologies that I did not even know they exist (such as podcasts, LAMS, blogs, Wikis, moodle etc). Even today I am not quite sure how all these tools work and what's their purpose, but I hope I will know by the end of the year. (EL05)

In general students who felt less confident about their IT skills were optimist in their ability to learn the relevant skills needed for their course, perhaps resting their assumptions on prior positive experiences of learning in general. 70% students felt that if they had to learn a new technology or tool for their course they were most likely to do so on their own, whilst 30% said they would work collaboratively with a friend. Some reported that the would seek help from their department and a number of students identified different sources to help them acquire the skills they needed including courses available at the University Computing Services and the Libraries Services. Practice in acquiring new IT skills seems to be interwoven with students experiences of learning in general, and how they would go about solving any particular learning-based problem.

4.7 Expectations of IT provision

In terms of hardware and wireless network coverage students' expectations were reasonably high. 61% of students supported the statement that the university should provide free hardware to students who do not already own their own computer should their course require it, whilst 93% of students felt that the university should provide a single wireless network. Some students commented that providing hardware would work to ensure "equity" amongst students, especially concerning those from lower income families. However, others commented that this was not a black and white issue, money to buy computers would mean increasing costs elsewhere, for example tuition fees. Significantly no further comments were made concerning the provision of a single wireless network and with such a high percentage agreeing with the statement, it seems that this service was considered essential.

When asked about other provisions and services the students' responses were more diverse. A lesser percentage of students (33%) agreed that tutors should send them course information and contact them via SMS. A number commented that such communication blurred the boundary between formal and informal conversation that they would expect when undertaking their studies, and this did not make them comfortable:

> I think allowing tutors and students to communicate via text messaging would represent an invasion of privacy for both parties. (NE11)

> Communication tends to be excessive and intrusive nowadays. Too much communication kills communication! (CI03)

> I would not find the SMS serious or even legitimate because I find it overlaps with the privacy of both tutors and students. (AL13)

Similar concerns were raised for the issue of using personal, as opposed to institutional, email addresses for university communication: "it's better to divide your personal correspondents to the ones from university" (AL09). Students' opinions were

spit with 36% agreeing that they should have the option to use a personal email address and 31% disagreeing on the matter.

More students responded positively to the notion of making recordings of lectures available for download (65%), however a number of students commented that such a service would encourage "passive listening" during physical lectures and remove the incentive to attend them.

When asked whether they thought that the university should block certain websites 28% of students thought that in some cases this could be legitimate. But again opinion was split with 24% undecided and 48% of students believing the university should not do this.

The answers to these questions provide an interesting insight into what the cohort expected the university to provide in terms of technology and services. When it came to physical hardware and network facilities, students generally agreed that these should be provides, however in the case of communicative technologies and delivery services opinion were more diverse. It is suggested that the students were not so much in favour of using the communicative technologies primarily used in their private life for formal study purposes. Not enough comments were given to assess the students' responses at a deeper level, but this is a topic that merits further research throughout the Thema study.

4.8 Positive and negative perceptions of using digital technologies in study

Accessing, searching, and retrieving information was the biggest benefit that students associated with the use of technology for their studies, as one student succinctly summarizes:

> All of our course outlines, timetables, lecture notes, reading lists, and
> resources are available on Weblearn[2]- an online secure site through the

---

[2] WebLearn is the University Virtual Learning Environment (https://weblearn.ox.ac.uk)

university. It makes communicating information and sharing resources extremely effective since anyone in our course, including the administrator, can provide or receive up-to-date information at any time of day. Research, especially using academic journals, is much more effective online because I don't need to travel from library to library to obtain what I need to read. The Internet is also a quick tool to double-check information. If something presented by a lecturer is unclear, I can simply look it up using a search engine, and once I find a reliable website, clarify the information (this is much quicker than looking through books in a library.) (IM07)

A number of other students commented that digital technologies would enable course materials to be placed online, thus making them more easily accessible. Nearly half the cohort (46%) commented that one of the most beneficial aspects of technology was the ability to access resources, such as journal articles and library catalogues, that they needed for their study, anytime, anywhere: "It is sometimes difficult for me to get to the library so the online resources have been invaluable to me" (AR4). In relation to this students felt that the Internet provided them with enhanced opportunities to "gather" information more easily for their research, assignments, and further reading. Digital technologies provided them with a way to search for and retrieve information that would otherwise be difficult to access.

Presentation, word processing, reference management and data analysis tools were particularly noted as being beneficial, aiding students in the formatting of their work and communicating their ideas better. E-mail was also mentioned by 10% of the cohort as aiding "quick and easy" communication with course tutors, lecturers, administrators and peers (IM14). In general digital technologies were perceived by a number of students as a means to "save time" (12%).

Students' negative perceptions regarding digital technologies were predominantly driven by their experiences of being "lured" (IM02) away from their studies by e-mail (9%), Facebook (19%), and other web sites of interest (30%). In other words, nearly 50% of the cohort commented that the more social aspects of digital technologies were a distraction that prevented them being as "productive" as they might like:

Social websites such as Facebook and even email can be very distracting. I need to go online to access my lecture notes, etc. but often end up wasting time using the Internet for procrastination before I access the material I came for. For instance, my homepage is generic provided by one of the large internet corporations. It contains daily news updates, so when I log on, I am automatically tempted to check the news, weather, and so forth. Even if I were to set my homepage to a work-related site, I would still check my email or Facebook. I found in the past, when certain sites like Facebook were blocked on computers at school/in the lab, I could be more productive (IM06)

In an educational environment where student to tutor ratio is relatively high like Oxford, 13% of respondents commented that digital technologies could pose as a negative impact to face-to-face communication:

I'm a bit wary of WebLearn which is a problem because my tutors really use it to communicate. I'd prefer more face-to-face or even direct-email communication […] it's easier to opt out of actual talking with people, which is where a lot of learning and exchange of ideas happens. (RM01)

This opinion conflicts with the perceived benefits of making materials available online discussed above. However, analysing these comments in depth reveals that students seemed to place their concerns primarily in the category of replacing the type of more spontaneous interaction developed through one-to-one and group discussion as found in a tutorial or a seminar group. Respondents were wary of technology that attempted to replace interaction whose purpose was to build and contest knowledge as opposed to disseminating information. This type of communication, via the mode of technology, was perceived as having a negative impact on the quality of their learning, technology being no substitute for face-to-face interaction.

Many other benefits and negative impacts of digital technologies were put forward by the cohort in addition to the above, as can be seen in tables 23 and 24, however the themes discussed above emerged as the most significant. Interestingly, overall the

benefits discussed by the students all perceived digital technologies as enhancing and supporting existing practices (e.g. accessing course materials, accumulating information, writing assignments, analysing data etc.). These are benefits that could easily be embedded within their study practices and would not pose as a form of disruption or involve taking on new ways of navigating learning. On the other hand the negative impacts were seen as things that would disrupt such practices (the dislocation of formal study by social services provided by the Internet, learning how to communicate and the acquisition of knowledge through different forms of interaction etc.). The theme of technology supporting information acquisition as opposed to knowledge acquisition is worth exploring further throughout the Thema study if we are to learn more about how to embed more collaborative, Web 2.0, and immersive technologies within formal learning practices.

4.9 Use of social software

Social software was widely used amongst the cohort with the vast majority of students having experience of using, or being familiar with, most of the technologies listed.

38% of students used a website/websites to store and share photographs, videos etc with other people. A further 40% of students regularly visited such sites but did not actively contribute their own material. Similarly, 35% of students had their own blogs, with 23% regularly updating their postings and 45% adding comments to other peoples posts. The vast majority of the cohort (95%) had an account on a social networking site such as Facebook or MySpace, with 67% accessing their sites on a regular basis. Podcasts were also popular, with 45% having accessed and listened to podcasts. Use of Wikipedia was also common amongst the respondents, with 92% of students accessing information, however wiki technology itself was less used with only 15% having contributed their own material and 33% responding that they did not know what a wiki was.

Online chat tools were popular amongst the cohort with 50% responding that they used such a tool regularly, and 32% less frequently. Similarly Internet telephony systems such as Skype were widely used, especially by international students, with 47% connecting on a regular basis and 22% on an occasional basis. Discussion forums were

less popular with only 15% of students accessing them on a regular basis and 37% less often. Likewise, few students (3%) subscribed to newsgroups.

Students were less familiar with the more organisational Web 2.0 tools such as social bookmarking software , online calendars, and RSS feeds. 65% of respondents had not heard of social bookmarking tools, with only 10% of students ever having used one. Whilst 80% of students had heard of online calendars, only 21% of this group had actually used one. Similarly whilst 73% of the cohort had heard of RSS feeds, only 21% accessed them.

From these results it appears that social software and sharing materials online is firmly embedded within the technological practices of the cohort. Such technologies were primarily seen as an easy and effective platform to "connect with people" (AL19), and keep up with "other peoples' lives" (AL13) especially if those people were geographically dispersed. Social software was generally seen as just that, "social", and tools that could arguably be more embedded within formal teaching and learning practice (social bookmarking tools, wiki technology etc.) were not as popular.

A number of students who were resistant to using these technologies cited issues of "privacy" as their main concern, not wanting to expose their personal lives though the mediums of words or pictures, to the world at large. Some students who did share their photos, videos or writings online also voiced concerns over privacy, a number imposing some form of security measures over their postings (e.g. restricting access to friends and family), by taking on a pseudonym, or simply by not advertising their sites, as one student commented about his blog:

> […] while this is a public journal, I do not have a link to it posted on my facebook profile. While I am happy for friends to read it, I don't like the idea of people I vaguely know finding it and reading it and not telling me they are reading it, if that makes sense. It's sort of hypocritical since I read journals of people I don't know very well without telling them...but I like to know who my readers are, and to feel like they are friends that support me, not acquaintances that might read and judge/gossip. (RM02)

Additionally, issues of the validity of information, intellectual copyright and how easy it would be to have your contributions stolen by others concerned some of the respondents, linking their perceptions of social software with their more academic practices:

> I feel that there are issues of both intellectual property rights and the "free-for-all" nature of these sites. I tend to use sites for which the content is managed, at least slightly; e.g. Wikipedia, respected news media, trusted blogs, etc. (EL04)

The key exceptions were experience with virtual worlds and multiplayer games. Whilst 9% of students had created an avatar, they reported that they rarely visited their virtual world with only 3 students (6%) visiting regularly. The majority of students (48%) responded that they had heard of virtual worlds but had never been exposed to one, whilst a significant percentage (38%) replied that they did not know what a virtual world was. Similarly, in the case of multiplayer games like EverQuests or Eve only two students reported that they regularly played such games, with 18% of students responding that they had tried them but no longer played regularly or had stopped playing altogether. Slightly more students had heard of multiplayer games (68%) with only 10% admitting that they did not know what they were.

From these results it appears that more immersive social software is not popular with the cohort. There were few additional comments supplied by the respondents who answered these questions thus at this stage of the research it is difficult to ascertain the reasons why. However, from the few comments that were given, there is a suggestion that it is the juxtaposition between having real life and a virtual "second life" that plays the deciding factor, the latter as a "waste of time" (RM02, AL19). It seems that students are only willing to take so much of themselves into the virtual world when they have the demands of a physical life, study, and relationships to address: "I don't have enough time to fit in this world" (AR5).

5 Summary

The Thema initial survey identified the demographics of the study cohort and began to explore students' perceptions of digital technologies at the start of their course. In summary the initial findings were:

- The cohort consisted of 67 students with a strong educational background who have primarily selected courses at the University of Oxford because a. of the university's reputation and b. it met their requirements for study.

- In general the cohort entered their masters course to progress their knowledge in a particular field and to advance their career. In some cases the masters course was seen as a stepping stone to further study (e.g. a DPhil). Students generally

- The cohort expected to dedicate a significant amount of time to their studies, largely the equivalent to that of a full time job (part-time job for the part-time students).

- Students' experiences of significant learning moments in their life were largely defined by a feeling of achievement, high quality teaching, and the application of their study to practice.

- All students in the cohort owned their own computer, the vast majority owning a personal laptop. The vast majority of students also owned mobile devices such as mobile phones, digital cameras/video cameras, and ipods.

- Students expected the university to provide them with a single access point wireless network to enable them to access the Internet from anywhere in the university. They also expected course materials and podcasts of lectures to be made available to them for download.

- With a few exceptions the cohort were generally confident in their IT skills. If faced with a problem, students would primarily seek to solve it themselves as opposed to seeking external help or working collaboratively with others.

- A concern over the distinction between private and public, and the personal and social defined a number of students' opinions regarding the use of a variety of software and communication tools.

- Students perceived the ability to search, access, and retrieve information anytime anywhere as the main benefit of digital technologies.

- Students perceived a lack of face-to-face communication afforded by technology as problematic to their study.

- The cohort perceived the distraction of digital technologies as having a negative impact on their stuy.

- Social software was widely used amongst the cohort, especially social networking sites such as Facebook and communication tools such as Skype or Instant Messenger.

- Web 2.0 tools such as social bookmarking, RSS feeds, and online calendars were less widely used and the use of more "immersive" technologies such as Second Life and online games were unpopular amongst the cohort.

- Digital technologies were generally utilised to enhance learning through supporting everyday practice (access to information, communication, etc.) rather than to extend or create new learning practices.

In addition to the findings above the initial survey brought to light a number of themes and questions that merit further research throughout the Thema project and could be explored at greater depth during the collection of case studies and the retrospective survey. These are:

- Perceptions of the boundaries between private and public, personal and social acting to define students' perceptions of and use of digital technologies for study.

- The use of digital technologies for building knowledge as opposed to accessing information.

- Do students' expectations concerning technology at the start of their course remain the same throughout the academic year, what are the moments that shape or challenge these expectations?

- In what scenarios, if any, will students find the use of social software conductive to their study?