Expectations of technology

Learners have high expectations of technology with respect to access, choice and reliability.

"University e-mail I don't really use for people at University, I usually use texting, Facebook or MSN. If they're on-line, on MSN, I know hopefully they'll respond straightaway. You can get an immediate response with phones and Messenger."
HE student, E4L project

"It would be extremely helpful to have a campus-wide wireless network, not just a few hotspots scattered throughout the campus. I should be able to open up my laptop anywhere on campus and connect to the Internet."
ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and IT, 2007

Expectation of VLEs

Learners expect consistency across modules in use of the VLE: most see it as an essential aspect of course admin and communication

"…all my tasks, my deadlines, the module guides, all announcements, everything is on [the VLE], so if I didn't have it I'd be buggered"
HE student, E4L project

"I use [the VLE] more or less every day. I check my email. I check to see if there is any added information that we need."
HE student, STROLL project

"Encourage those [lecturers] not using [the VLE] to see what others are doing and see if it can be helpful and useful and not such a huge change, and make it accessible. "
HE student, Lead project

Expectation of tutors' skills

Learners have high expectations of their tutors' use of technology. They expect use of technology for learning to be appropriate and skillful.

"Even the professor doesn't even know how to use Blackboard, so he puts everything in the same place, because this is the only thing he knows how to do. It just looks ridiculous and he tells you - he doesn't know exactly how to use it."
HE student, E4L project

"Granted, some students need training at using information technology, but it's mostly the professors who need help, not the students."

"Technology seems to benefit me academically only when my professors know how to properly employ the technologies afforded them."

ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and IT, 2007

Keeping the balance

Students stress that learning with ICT should be balanced with face to face and paper-based learning. A minority positively dislike the distractions from study that computers entail.

"It is very useful to have one's own laptop for work and social purposes but it can also be very distracting "

"I would advise [new students] to not get too one dimensional in their study habits and only use IT but use other forms of learning as well."

"I have online pages I read, but I'm still dodging Facebook. I know people who lose a lot of time to these things"

All from the Lead project

"in the end there was no way I could go near [the language-learning software], it was so piggin' boring… What I really wanted was to interact with people"

ACL Student, E4L project

Tutors as mentors

The way in which learners use technology is still led by their tutors and course requirements. Even 'google generation' students are often introduced to educationally important technologies by their tutors.

"Things like [the VLE], University e-mail account and language learning software, they were all introduced to me by teachers and tutors. Friends would introduce things like SMS, YouTube, AQA…"
HE student, E4L project

"I didn't really know how to use the online journals… now I can use them confidently"

"I've gone from using pencils to do my drawings to using different mediums like digital media, photoshop and flash"

"Over the three years I have had to do presentations… so I have had to use different technologies "

All HE students, STROLL project

Playing the game

As the use of technology makes more learning happen in 'public', learners are being socialized to play the academic game in new ways.

"Well we have forums that we have to use! You get assessed on how much you talk on them, so we try to keep to a minimum the other contact, unless we meet in person and the facilitator is there to see that we have done it. … quite a lot of the time you go on there, and someone's just replied to someone who has said "I've done lots of work" - "Well done", just to say that they have had a look at the forum and they have seen the work that is being done!"
Undergraduate, LexDis project

"So I think oh okay, perhaps I should post these concepts on [the VLE] to make my tutor understand that I did make some progress."
International MA student, Brookes

Personalisation

Learners expect to be able to personalise institutional technologies and to use personal technologies in the institutional environment. Disabled learners may be excluded if they cannot do so.

"If we are required to be networked for a computer workshop, for example, there generally aren't places you can plug in a laptop with assistive technology in. So, then you are reliant on whatever assistive technologies are available on the network generally"
Disabled student, LexDis project

"My favourite piece of technology is my voice recognition software…so rather than reading and making notes I am reading and speaking my thoughts about what I'm reading into a Word document"
Disabled student, STROLL project

"My pen tablet [means] I can input images to a computer with analogue pressure, and very good accuracy, rather than using a mouse."
HE student, STROLL project

"75% of students are able to use their own computer on all of their university's systems"
Great Expectations, JISC 2008

Meaningful choices

Learners want meaningful choices from technology. This is not about the look and feel of online services, but about key issues in how they learn.

"Students learn differently and want choice. Such as paper or book, computer or internet, hand out or [VLE]. This would fit the comfort of the student learning style. Variety… with different options for each course, so students can choose which systems to learn from."
Lead project

"I hate sitting in front of the computer when I'm not working because I just get sick of being there 10 hours a day anyway, so really I would much rather be out walking with my MP3 player "
ACL student, E4L project

Googling

The Internet is the first port of call for information: sites such as google and wikipedia are referred to before academically approved resources. '

"well firstly if I want to look anything up… I will usually Google it... Then I would fire up MSN… Finally [the VLE] and all the resources the University makes available online"

"[The internet] is a world of information. You don't have to go anywhere, it is all on one database"

"You can Google it and you've got what you need in a second.'"

Three different HE students, STROLL project

"and they're saying use books, but books cost money so the internet is the main thing that we end up using..."

First year undergraduate economics student: LEX project

Academic digital content

Access to academic digital content is regarded by learners as a unique benefit of attending HE and FE institutions.

"I've been using a lot more journal articles for research data to complement the books that I've been getting from the library. I can access it wherever I am via the Internet. "

HE student, STROLL project

"when we use the search engine for journals and such like, I really did think … yes, this is loads better than going to find a paper journal. The convenience of it, because all you have to do is type in what you like or what you're looking for… It will search 7,000 journals or whatever in a minute"

HE student, E4L project

Underworld

Communication technologies most used by learners are also often outside institutional control (mobile phones, skype, chat): there is an 'underworld' of social networking in support of learning.

"So my [group] we always text each other and say, 'Oh, are you coming in at this time,or we'll meet at this time', and so it looks on the face of it from the [VLE] that we haven't been communicating all year, but we have, it's just outside of that board."

"I use msn for asking someone who knows about what I need to know "

HE students, Lead Project

"My favourite piece of technology is my phone, because I record lectures. I am more likely to watch what I have recorded than to log on the [VLE] and to go through the long procedure of finding something…"

HE student, E4L project

Digital divide

There is evidence that the 'digital divide' is becoming deeper but narrower: a minority of students lack basic access and ICT skills, while an increasingly large majority have a wide range of devices and competences, especially with laptops

"When I started the course I was going through a nightmare. I was not computer literate. If the kids were at school I couldn't turn on the computer."

"I use [computer techologies] pretty much every day of my life to be honest. If I don't use it at University, I'm using it at work"

"I find IT more of a challenge than traditional students who grew up in the Information Age. My IT skills are not as good, yet some instructors take it for granted that all of their students possess equal competence with technology."

"when teachers start making computer-based participation requirements it really puts poor students at a disadvantage. I do not own a computer and I should not be penalized for my inability to buy one."

Skills gap

Despite their facility with personal technologies, learners often lack skills in using technology to support learning. This can be true even after considerable time at college.

there is a definite gap between what we need and what we are given, where we have to find out how to use the technology for ourselves, which is for most of us a case of trial and error.

Adult HE student, LEX project

Online learning has been through trial and error

HE Student, LexDis project

The information literacy of young people, has not improved with the widening access to technology: in fact, their apparent facility with computers disguises some worrying problems

Google Generation, JISC 2008

We didn't get a use of [ICT in school] and never really got taught it. We just kind of went on and got slapped if you went on chat rooms.

First year student, Lead Project

Maturing

Students report an increased use of technology as they mature in their studies

"I have used the internet a lot more this year than last year, especially for finding more academic research."
HE student, STROLL project

"I'd have never ever thought in a million years of using YouTube at A-Level but it's quite useful for my degree and to be fair I didn't use any language software but now I've got online dictionaries and online activities and things."
HE student, E4L

"I use the forums more as exams become closer to develop an understanding by talking to other people, work with friends which is great if either of you is stuck. To teach someone else is just as good as working through papers."
HE student, LEAD project

Different strokes

Learners display enormous differences in past educational experiences, needs, and motivations. These have a profound influence over their preferred strategies for using technologies

"We had extensive computer training at my school from when we were eleven, and we had our own school intranet which was very similar to WebCT... And we were taught how to use all the different things from quite a young age"
First year undergraduate, Lead project

"I prefer to do it by hand rather than on computer ... my computer has crashed about three times since we've been at Uni and I've lost everything that way"
HE student, LexDis project

"I hope that dinosaurs eventually die and the rest see that digitalization is the most important human advancement. It has radically changed our lives"

"IT use in education promotes laziness. The simple feel of paper in your hands and a writing instrument is the fundamental essence of scholarship."

ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and IT, 2007

Attachment

Learners attach emotional significance to technologies, particularly 'their own' technologies, which many perceive as extensions of themselves.

"I use my laptop. I take it away, it's attached to me. I couldn't survive without it."
Undergraduate student, LEX project

"I absolutely love my MacBook"
HE student, STROLL project

"[I] can't revise if I'm not in front of my computer."
HE student, Lead project

"My little memory stick which I can carry about in my handbag [means] I can get things from home to Uni and vice versa."
HE student, STROLL project

"…your own little email account, private messages as well…"
HE student, STROLL project

Social software

Many students make extensive use of social software such as Facebook, including for informal discussions about their learning, but rarely for formal collaboration.

"We have a facebook group from a course… I think it works a lot better than [the VLE] which can be difficult to find things on sometimes."
HE student, STROLL project

"Especially Facebook… I keep in touch with friends who are studying Law at other universities and we have been able to compare notes sometimes."
HE student, STROLL project

"73% of students use social networking sites to discuss coursework with others. Of these, 75% think such sites are useful in enhancing their learning. However, only 25% feel they are encouraged to use Web 2.0 features by tutors or lecturers."
Great Expectations, JISC 2008

Public/private spaces

There are divergent opinions among learners about the use of social networks such as Facebook to support learning, and about how they manage their online identities.

"I think it's great to have tutors/university staff/lecturers on Facebook. After all, it is supposed to be a social community network and I think they [deserve] the right to have their own community or form a network with students (if the students are willing)."

"I think that from the moment one person is present on the internet by giving his/her real name, by having blogs or using wikis for example, he/she is aware of evolving in a public space."

"Facebook and Myspace are avenues to get away from learning not to help learning "

Undergraduate students, STROLL project

Digital conservatism

Only a small minority of students actively investigate the potential of new software or technologies beyond those in general use. Disabled students can be among the most pioneering.

"(Researcher) Have you ever gone off and investigated technologies yourself that you might want to use…? (Student) No, I stick to what I'm told about."
HE student, E4L project

"Some of the newer software that has come out which I'm not familiar with using, if I come to a point when I just can't find out a way to use it I'll just leave it and won't bother with it"
HE student, E4L project

"I use Inspiration only because I have decided that I am going to do as much as possible to further myself in my life. So, I have all this stuff and I'm going to mess around with it."
Disabled student, LexDis project

The technology hurdle

Where technologies require learners to adjust their usual study practices, they can become a barrier. Such technologies require careful introduction and clear communication about the benefits of use.

"I prefer to scribble down things, even if you are going to type them up neatly later, take notes quickly while you think about them… rather than searching through and copy pasting, combin[ing] bits and pieces."
Undergraduate student, Lead Project

"I just don't want books to be on the computer, I don't like that idea at all. Everything else, films and things like that, OK, but books, no, it creeps me out."
First year undergraduate LEX project

"I think that pressuring students to communicate through text/instant messaging is an invasion of personal space and preferences."
ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and IT, 2007

1000 words

Very many learners, particularly younger learners, are used to accessing knowledge via images and video. They can struggle with an academic practice which only values text as a medium for communicating ideas.

"If it was in a podcast [sic: student means videocast] for me it would be a lot more helpful because I'm more of a visual person. I'd rather watch something than read. If it was on a podcast and I was on my way here or on the bus or something, I could watch it on my phone or MP3 player."
HE student, E4L project

"Television and computer… I'm a visual learner and I like to have colour. I definitely understand when I get that kind of thing."
HE student, STROLL project

"(Researcher) Why [do you like watching videos]? (Student) It keeps you focused more. Like I said if you're just listening to somebody talk, sometimes you can drift, but when you're actually watching it, it holds your attention."
HE student, E4L project

Collaboration

Technology-mediated collaboration is increasingly common. Student experiences range from pride in their collaborative work to fear of 'free riders' and frustration at the available technologies

"I use the forums more as exams become closer to develop an understanding by talking to other people, work with friends which is great if either of you is stuck. To teach someone else is just as good as working through papers."
Undergraduate student, Lead project

"Online discussions for me personally don't work well…you can't observe how others really feel about something."
ECAR Study of Undergraduate Students and IT, 2007

"There's no point in collaborating unless you can all get together, and, despite instant messaging, it's still pretty hard to get an idea of what's going on"
Student Expectations Study, JISC 2007