



# Digital experiences of taught students at Oxford

Priorities and Recommendations from the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) Digital Needs Interns 2023

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**Written by:** Yining (Evelyn) Tang, Carmelo Radici, Xiaoran (Rachel) Hu, Charlotte Baxter, Samira Mohammed Ibn Moro & Dylan Holmes-Cowan

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# Summary

In 2023, the Centre for Teaching and Learning and the University's Digital Transformations programme employed six interns to investigate taught students' digital experiences at Oxford and their visions for a Digitally Transformed University. This report documents the main findings of this investigation. For more information, please refer to the [slide deck](#).

## Action Required

The recipients of this document are asked to **note** and **circulate** the key findings raised in the paper and **consider** the recommendations to help inform the University's current priorities and/or help shape the direction of work in the future.

## Background

1. Each summer, the Centre for Teaching and Learning's (CTL) [Student Experience Internship Scheme](#) enables Oxford students and staff to work in partnership to co-design and carry out defined projects that provide demonstrable benefits to students' learning experiences at Oxford.
2. In 2023, six student interns took part in a 10-week internship that aimed to investigate taught students' digital experiences and digital needs at Oxford. Specifically, the project aimed to answer the following questions:
  - a) What are taught students' current and past experiences of using digital tools and developing their digital skills at Oxford?
  - b) How do students want to use digital tools and skills to learn, collaborate and participate in a digitally transformed university and beyond?
  - c) What do students need to bridge the gap between their current and ideal digital experiences in Oxford?
3. Relying on previous findings from the work of the [2022 CTL Student Experience Internship Scheme](#), focused on students' academic skill journeys, and the work of the University's [Digital Transformations programme](#), the 2023 internship team decided to focus on the following sub-themes:
  - a) Students' experiences transitioning into the University's digital environments and support structures,
  - b) The digital tools that students use and/or want to use,
  - c) The digital skills that students have and/or want to develop,
  - d) Any digital inequalities that students have faced, and

- e) What students need out of the University's digital transformation in order to thrive in their learning and broader student experiences.
4. To investigate these themes, the internship team used the following three methods of data collection:
    - a) A survey, which received 331 valid responses from taught students across all Oxford divisions and levels of study,
    - b) Semi-structured interviews with 14 students at varying levels of study and across all divisions,
    - c) A Focused Group Discussion with two groups of students: one 'high-confidence' group and one 'low-confidence' group.
  5. The internship team's analysis of the data from the above methods revealed a series of key findings. This report summarises these findings and puts forward a series of recommendations that the internship team believes will help address any gaps, challenges or digital needs revealed in the findings.
  6. This document is complemented by a collection of slide decks (available from [the CTL website](#)) that contain more detailed information on the evidence behind and meanings of these findings and recommendations.

# Key findings and recommendations

This section summarises the major conclusions the internship team drew from the data collection and analysis. Each theme is paired with corresponding recommendation(s).

Note: The findings in section 5(b), on Digital Tools, align with the findings of the 2023 Digital Education Technologies Survey for Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught Students, which was conducted in Trinity Term of the 2022-23 academic year by the teams responsible for running Canvas, Oxford Reading Lists Online (ORLO), Panopto and MS Teams, and coordinated by the Centre for Teaching and Learning.

## Digital Transition

### Findings

1. Digital Transitions to Oxford encompass a diverse spectrum of experiences. Nine of 13 students interviewed indicated they did not struggle to adapt to Oxford's digital environment. Of those who did struggle, the most common reasons were the ambiguous usage of tools and skills for specific academic tasks, such as using reference managers, rather than University-wide tools such as Canvas.

### Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- a) Departments create and regularly circulate course-specific guides on how to use digital tools and develop skills for their course.

For more information, please see the ["Digital Transitions" findings and recommendations slide deck](#)

## Digital Tools

### Findings

1. Many of the students we interviewed preferred to use pen and paper over digital devices to perform a variety of tasks.
2. Students were often not aware whether there was support available for upgrading their devices when they needed to do so.
3. Students have varied experiences of using Canvas, partly depending on how their course has organised/made use of Canvas.

4. Students find it useful to have lecture recordings on Panopto. However, they have not found the quality of recording, efficiency with uploading and the number of recordings satisfactory.
5. Most students have found SOLO very useful (46% found it extremely helpful and 30% felt that it helped a lot).
6. Students are dissatisfied with the number of platforms they must move between and have familiarity with.
7. Microsoft Word, Google Doc and Grammarly are the most popular tools for reading and writing.
8. Zotero and Mendeley are the most popular reference managers.
9. WhatsApp, Facebook, Google Drive and Zoom are the most commonly used tools for communication and collaboration.
10. Google Drive, Notion, SharePoint and Dropbox are the most commonly used tools for organisation and storage.
11. The majority of (67.7%) students surveyed do not use AI tools. Among those who do, ChatGPT is the most popular.
12. Of the 80 students who suggested Oxford pay for any additional software, the results were disparate but centred around note taking apps, AI, Google Drive for cloud storage, plagiarism checkers, and subject-specific software. From this sample, 37.5% of people requested access to paid note-taking apps. 8.75% requested Notion, 16.25% requested Notability, and 12.5% requested Good Notes. 17.5% of this sample size requested access to AI software, in the forms of either ChatGPT+ or Grammarly.
13. Some students outlined that they required software for checking for plagiarism, their subject, or had a number of accessibility concerns which they felt could be alleviated with certain software.

## Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- a) Departments and Colleges designate a person to help with students' needs with upgrading digital devices.
- b) Departments and Colleges clearly advertise the resources/support available for students to purchase/upgrade their digital devices, e.g., included in induction materials delivered in the form of a lecture and regularly shared in student newsletters.
- c) IT Services call attention to ways that students can use two-factor-authentication without their mobile phones.
- d) Departments use the university wide templates of [how best Canvas can be laid out and used](#).
- e) IT Services creates a guide for students on how to navigate Panopto.
- f) College and Department Libraries hold sessions on using SOLO effectively at the beginning of a students' degree.

For more information, please see the ["Digital Tools" findings and recommendations slide deck](#) and ["Digital Devices" findings and recommendations slide deck](#)

## **Digital Skills**

### **Findings**

1. Students are least confident in digitally managing their time and maintaining digital wellbeing.
2. Instead of support from the University or tutors, self-learning and learning from peers are the main ways through which students learn to use digital tools.
3. Students from all divisions find support on coding inadequate and would like to see more coding support provided by their departments and the wider University.
4. Students feel that training in basic digital skills, like using Excel and backing up to a cloud, is lacking.
5. Students are not always aware of the University-provided resources available, partly because they are difficult to locate online.

### **Recommendations**

It is recommended that:

- a) Colleges and Departments integrate digital skills support into the compulsory teaching that all students receive.
- b) A coding section be included in an academic skills hub, created by the Central University, which is accessible to all students.

For more information, please see the [“Digital Skills” findings and recommendations slide deck](#)

## **Digital inequalities**

### **Findings**

1. Financial limitations were a barrier to students’ learning due to their inability to access suitable devices for their studies.

### **Recommendations**

It is recommended that:

- a) Departments and colleges establish digital inclusion scholarships specifically designed to provide eligible students with better access to suitable devices.

For more information, please see the [“Digital Inequalities” findings and recommendations slide deck](#) and [“Digital Devices” findings and recommendations slide deck](#)

# Digital transformation

## Findings

1. The majority of students wished that their tutors would use digital tools in a more consistent and homogenous way.
2. Students do not want full digitisation of tutorials, lectures and generally Oxford experience - they want hybrid.
3. Students want to know how to ethically use ChatGPT, and other AI technologies, to support their studies.
4. Students want to be involved in and notified about recent changes via a centralised platform.
5. Students do not want a 'digital bureaucratic Oxford', where the processes of accessing and acquiring services and resources are unnecessarily tedious because of convoluted signposting and the inconsistent uses of different platforms.

## Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- a) The University provides all teaching staff with access to online resources, tutorials, and video guides that they can reference at their own pace to improve their own digital skills.
  - i. These digital skills support materials should highlight students' digital needs and tailor the professional training program to match the specific needs of teaching staff based on their roles and subject areas. Given the rapidly evolving nature of digital tools, it needs to be ensured that the training program is regularly updated to incorporate new tools and features.
  - ii. Although not all tutors may require the same level of proficiency in every digital tool, they need to be supported whenever in need, so these resources should also be freely and regularly accessible.
- b) The Central University, Divisions and Departments encourage teaching staff to use self-evaluation toolkits (e.g., [Digitally Supported Inclusive Teaching Toolkit](#) or Jisc Digital Capability Toolkit), which help assess the current digital skills and proficiency levels in certain digital tools and identify specific areas where additional training is needed.
- c) The University consider centralising all available resources scattered across colleges, departments and the central university into a the planned Student Hub. This hub:
  - i. should be clearly signposted;
  - ii. should contain resources that are accessible to individuals with disabilities, complying with accessibility standards;
  - iii. have a robust search functionality so that users can easily find what they need;



- iv. should base its evolution on a key feedback mechanism where various stakeholders (particularly, students) can provide input on resource usability and suggest improvements.
- d) Both students and staff be trained on how to use AI as an assistive and not a destructive tool.

For more information, please see the [“Digital Transformation” findings and recommendations slide deck](#)

## Public Sector Equality Duty

Our findings and recommendations recognise the diversity of digital experiences at Oxford. Our research addresses some ways in which the University could have a positive impact on equality through improving access to and awareness of support for all students.

## Further Information

The collection of slide decks of detailed findings and recommendations can be accessed [here](#). Further details are available from the CTL ([contact@ctl.ox.ac.uk](mailto:contact@ctl.ox.ac.uk)).