

## The game has changed and a digital mindset is now essential for the new 'normal' in Higher Education

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A few months ago, we conducted some analysis in partnership with [Anderson Anderson & Brown Consulting](#), looking at digital developments within Universities both within the UK and internationally. The purpose behind the research was to get beyond the 'smoke and mirrors' that typically position *digital is the answer* (never mind the question) to identify which initiatives and which institutions have made a positive difference to their staff and student experiences. The driver for conducting the research was to test the growing evidence that investing in digital capabilities offers significant opportunities for transformation in higher education institutions; of particular interest to me as the CTO at the University of Glasgow. With the COVID-19 crisis casting a dark shadow over all aspects of our lives, we have been reflecting on our findings and questioning where universities now stand and what role could digital play in our new 'normal'.

**The pace of digital adoption has accelerated significantly during the last few weeks.**

Enabled by ever improving digital technologies, the way we work, conduct business and spend our leisure time has been rapidly transformed during the last few years. Can you believe it has only been 10 years since the first iPad was launched? The pace of change due to the adoption of digital solutions has been unprecedented and this has been significantly accelerated in the past few weeks due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Within only a few weeks, our work and social lives became almost entirely digitally enabled, making daily use of video conference and group collaboration platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. We were not alone at the University - the number of active Microsoft Teams users increased by 12 million users in only seven days.<sup>1</sup>

At the time of our research, evidence suggested that the Higher Education sector was lagging behind when it came to digital transformation compared to other sectors. For most institutions, it was clear that the need for digital transformation was essential and many had referenced this in their university strategies, developed distinct digital strategies, and some had even created new senior leadership positions such as Chief Information or Digital Officers (CIO or CDO) to leverage the potential of digital. Furthermore, most universities had some experience of digital teaching. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and the enforced lockdowns created unprecedented demand to move teaching and assessment online and to do so incredibly quickly. It is massively positive that universities responded

so well to this demand. This does not mean that ‘digital transformation’ took place or that consistent and sustainable change was delivered within institutions; for that we have to dig a lot deeper.

For centuries, universities have rooted their narrative of ‘creation and sharing of knowledge’ in their physical campus presence. Undoubtedly, students’ expectations and needs have changed and will continue to change with the emergence of new technologies.<sup>2</sup> However, the more traditional aspects of the ‘on campus’ university experience, such as the building of strong social relationships, experiencing a new location and direct engagement with lecturers and tutors, are still highly valued by students. Participating in groups and societies, living on campus with other students and developing a network that will be of value throughout life are all critical components of the student experience.

However, students (and often their parents) have developed a much stronger awareness of, and increased expectations about getting ‘value for their money’ from degree programmes and want certainty that the level of service they receive will enable student success.<sup>3</sup> Whilst students may still desire aspects of the traditional university experience, they expect digital technologies to be a fully integrated part of that experience.<sup>4</sup> According to a longitudinal study on technology acceptance in university settings, students embrace and gain positive learning experiences from using learning technologies such as interactive quizzes and screen sharing during class settings.<sup>5</sup> Digital transformation requires institutions to adjust their business models and practices to create a more student and technology-centred narrative of higher education that is sustainable in the longer term.

As we start to consider coming out of this crisis, my belief is we must look forward to a new ‘normal’ and a highly unpredictable one at that. Whilst this is undoubtedly a difficult challenge for some, I don’t see any merit in hoping we can simply return to our previous ways of working. The game has permanently changed. I’m seeing positive signs of this in the actions and behaviours of many of my colleagues at Glasgow - many examples of change delivered in next to no time and a sea change in terms of willingness to consider large scale change if it enhances student and staff experiences.

The call to action therefore is compelling. However, there is one massive headache in trying to make the proposition work. Universities face an uncertain financial future (like all other sectors of the economy) so where do the funds to invest in digital capabilities come from and why should that be more important than protecting our core activities?

At the simplest level, funding constraints will drive out priorities more effectively than in a period of plenty. A deeper reflection is that the risk of not building digital capabilities will lead to students (and staff) voting with their feet. It almost feels like we have moved several years forward in our digital expectations as a consequence of the lockdown we are enduring and it’s clear therefore that

**Digital capabilities  
have become core  
drivers of value.**

change is essential. This acceleration means that now is the time to re-assess our plans, including all previously agreed values and assumptions, based on what we have learned and are still learning.

So, what can universities do before the start of the new academic year in September 2020 to think and prepare to become more digital, particularly as that ‘start’ may be part-physical and part-digital to accommodate students who may still be living in lockdown areas or where travel remains restricted?

- **Learn from the crisis-responses made in the past few months** - What do students want? How have they coped with online teaching and assessment? How can staff work differently (and what more do they need in terms of support to do so productively)? Listen to their feedback. Ensure that this feedback is factored into the future operational plans for the university and also features heavily in what is shared with prospective students in relation to their academic studies and also their personal safety & well-being.
- **Identify the highest risks to provision based on the past few months of operation** - infrastructure or applications or capabilities or all of these? In a future planning horizon where revenue will be significantly reduced, what are the key mitigating actions that require investment and should be prioritised? Is physical estate a priority or should investment be made in data storage, applications and networks to support the increased adoption and use of technology which has become ‘the new norm’?
- **What processes are ripe for re-design?** If it didn’t work remotely, why not? If you have saved up ‘things to be done when you are back on campus’, why did you have to do that? These indicate areas where improvements could be made. Go further and identify those activities that we stopped doing and should never return to if we move quickly and decisively. Also, it may have been a strange and unplanned transition to remote working but let’s not go back. How can we embrace more systematic use of remote working to enable better work/life balance and reduce the need for office space to take pressure out of our cost base?
- Finally, **what capabilities are required?** It is foolish to invest in new technologies and not provide the training and support required to really maximise their use and to encourage local ownership.

A more ‘digital’ future must be imagined, planned and implemented properly. The student and staff experiences (and how they are improved by digital capabilities) must be at the forefront of our thinking. We must make, build on and maximise our investment in modern information infrastructure, we must redesign our processes & services and develop fit-for-purpose policies & governance. Finally, it demands strong leadership (in the form of a CIO or CDO) who will champion the voice of users and secure the trust of senior leaders. Without this suite of changes, current systems and human resources will reach their capacity very quickly and there will be systemic failure. The universities

that adopt this more digital mindset and become more agile will have a much better chance of survival and will certainly have more resilience to carry them through the further waves of disruption in the coming months and years. However, it is not a game of ‘I and you’, it is important for universities to put aside the notion of competition and turn to collaboration in their efforts to ensure high quality student experiences. This is particularly important given the vital role of universities in the UK post-COVID economic recovery through Research & Development, innovation, and the up- and re-skilling of the labour market.

### Sources

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