

EQUANTIIS

2021

THE YEAR
TO JOIN UP
THE STUDENT
EXPERIENCE

CONTEXT

In the last year, the UK's higher education sector has rapidly transitioned from a physical classroom to an online classroom at an unprecedented pace. We're entering an age in which the effective implementation and utilisation of digital technologies is imperative to attracting students, enabling staff, promoting growth, streamlining business processes for efficiency and effectiveness and ultimately surviving in a world where digital strategies are the drivers of sustainable businesses.

As expectations rise and income drops, HE institutions need to be looking at faster, more effective digital solutions to deliver a joined-up student experience to stay relevant and rival other Institutions.

COVID-19, Brexit, and ever-changing funding models are challenging Higher Education institutions to think differently; to reimagine the nature of higher education; to deliver student-centric services; and to adopt a digital approach across the whole organisation that empowers efficient operations and the joined up student experience every institution aspires to achieve.

Technology is rapidly reshaping the fundamentals of the Higher Education model and for many organisations this has been an amazing opportunity to experiment and embrace exciting digital opportunities. Mobile apps, cloud services, chatbots, automation, and virtual reality are all finding their way into the learning experience.

However, for the majority, many parts of your organisation are lagging way behind on this digital journey. Your People, Processes and Technologies are simply not joined up and are holding you back.

This report focuses on the challenges of this rapid shift to a digital-first model and what you can do to maximise the potential of re-examining your student experience and aligning digital technology for your institution.

The good news is that there are many tools and techniques you can use to join up the student journey without having to embark on major change programmes and complex IT projects.

Importantly, there has been a definite shift in recent years away from big, long lead time IT transformation projects to smaller scale, "quick win" solutions. This is because the pace at which digital is revolutionising businesses is so rapid, by the time lengthy IT projects are delivered, they're likely to be out of date.

Not only will they be out of date, but they're expensive. For Higher Education where time and money are of the essence, it's not viable to transform everything immediately.

ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES

The modern HE institution must have a well-defined strategy that sets it apart from other organisations. Offering a connected digital experience with both staff and students in mind is a challenge – there's no 'one size fits all' approach but there are common and consistent challenges across the sector.

Student expectations

Expectations of students have been dramatically changing over the last decade, including:

- Choice and Personalisation: an accessible, tailored and joined up experience, with continuous engagement and feedback
- Value for Money: affordability linked to clear outcomes in terms of learning and future opportunities
- Customer Service: responsive services available 24/7 and a single point of contact for enquiries
- Learn Anywhere: use of modern digital tools, mobile apps and social channels within a fully connected campus
- Blended learning experience: effective sharing, collaboration and virtualisation are essential ingredients of the physical or virtual classroom

Meeting these raised expectations of your Gen-Z students is a significant challenge while maintaining critical tuition income revenue for your organisation. Interacting with students who are used to doing everything online and expect an instant response requires managing more communication channels and technology if you are to attract, successfully enrol and satisfy their digital requirements.

Siloed systems and data

The chances are you are already on a transformation journey to adopt new technology and ways of working, but it takes time and a strategic approach.

The successful selection, implementation and adoption of new technology can be a complex effort encompassing the whole organisation.

Joining up your CRM, Student Information, ERP and Learning Management Systems, then connecting with external services such as UCAS across various stages of the student journey is not a trivial task.

However, offering prospective and current students a 360-degree personalised service and an accessible familiar point of contact is virtually impossible without core systems integration and data interoperability across your organisation.

Internally, streamlining your processes and gathering data for essential analytics and decision making is often a distant dream as your systems simply do not talk to each other. The value of the insights gained from such datasets is unrivalled. Getting to the data is crucial to knowing which steps forward you should take, and when.

ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES

Time and resources

Meanwhile, the Covid-19 global pandemic has now brought into sharp focus your digital maturity and readiness to meet these raised expectations, and as we have learned, we no longer have the luxury of time.

Drive business forwards, not backwards

Due to the necessity to shift to new digital channels and services quickly, many organisations have not had the opportunity to optimise their new technology and services. There is a fundamental limit to the benefits that can be achieved by simply replicating your old processes online and you may not have re-designed the new online processes based on a thorough understanding of the students' needs.

This requires you to take a fresh student-centric design approach. Consequently, your students may now do everything online, but you are still grappling with clunky processes and old technology with lots of manual working behind the scenes, the current mismatch between your student (customer) needs and your capabilities leads to many problems.

- Disjointed experience
- Low student satisfaction leading to a higher dropout rate
- Lack of data insight to make effective decisions
- Internal bottlenecks and inefficiencies
- High level of manual effort, often with seasonal peaks
- Exhausted staff with low morale

HE Institutions clearly have an urgent need to modernise the student experience to appeal to today's learner and increase revenue. New education services are continually entering and disrupting the market based on clear learning outcomes, and increasingly obtaining a degree certificate may not necessarily be the student's main objective. Online and distance learning models are becoming more popular, and students have more choice than ever, meaning that traditional monolithic learning models could soon be a thing of the past.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Joining up the Student Experience

2021 is the year to re-imagine your student experience.

Many practices developed during the COVID-19 pandemic will be here to stay, and institutions must think about how to redesign the way your people, processes, and technology work together.

Many organisations have also restructured and are now leaner, so the opportunity is now, or you will get left behind.

As previously mentioned in this article, it doesn't have to be a lengthy IT programme. There are so many quick wins that have high impact to kick start the process.

Transformation as a term often gets in the way of delivering positive change and practical improvements that provide immediate benefits to your customers.

In the current climate, successful organisations will be thinking about a transition rather than a transformation.

Transition is an agile approach where you make incremental changes that takes your organisation from being fundamentally analogue by design to one that is digital design. This transition enables business to quickly pivot in an ever-changing world of business.

In the diagram below, this is represented by moving from a Digital Maturity Level 2 (you have digitised your offline processes) to Level 3 – you have redesigned your processes by fully leveraging digital technologies based around a solid understand of your student needs.

Digital Maturity Model	Level 0	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Use this model to assess where you are and where you want to be on your digital journey	Offline Using mainly manual paper-based processes	Digital Channels Using digital channels but not digital end-to-end	Digitised Services Offline processes have been "Digitised"	Digital Services Processes have been digitally reassigned	Digital Organisation The organisation has been redesigned to work digitally	Born Digital The business model is digital first
The Digital Organisation	Analogue by design			Digital by design		
The Digital Journey	Evolution (Change happens organically)		Transition (Change through specific projects)		Transformation (Change through organisation-wide design)	

STUDENT EXPERIENCE MAPPING

Student Experience Mapping is a practical approach to align your disparate stakeholders and siloed departments around a shared vision. Detailed analysis and the experience map of the student journey reveals the needs, opportunities, and barriers to deliver successful improvements. By doing this, the challenges and opportunities become apparent and you're also able to make more immediate changes that are low effort yet high impact.

You identify the needs and aspirations of your student customers and highlight various touchpoints of interaction with your institution, along with any barriers and the opportunities to achieving digital transition.

Research suggests that very few institutions have engaged in student journey mapping and this is a missed opportunity. ([Read more here](#))

You start by segmenting your students by developing Personas. Personas are a set of fictitious users who each represent a key user segment or demographic. They are created using real information about students and their behaviours and they provide a common reference point when discussing user needs and a framework to support user-centric decision making.

Personas can also be used to gain insight into the experience students have when they undertake specific tasks or stages of the applicant or student journey.

Next, a "task map" considers that journey or experience from the applicants' or students' point of view using real information, user context and behaviours. They provide a tool for understanding and empathising with the experience of the student and a framework for identifying key metrics to measure improvements as changes are made to the experience. Here are examples of Personas and Task Maps.



Engineering Student

Jenny Hargreaves

BIO

Jenny is a hard working engineering student who is approaching the end of her first year. She is due to begin specialising in civil engineering.

She commuted from within the city, coming on the tube from Ealing. She is due to begin preparation for her year in industry, and is excited to increase her employability whilst pressing on with the qualification.

Ealing, UK

22 YEARS OLD

STUDENT

ENGINEERING

AT WORK

JOBS TO BE DONE	PAINS	GAINS
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Passing courseRevisionPart time job	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Struggling to balance her workload with the draw of social opportunities at the UniversityExpensive textbooks are adding to her worries about the cost of university	<ul style="list-style-type: none">She is very proud of

RELATIONSHIP

EXPERIENCE	TOUCHPOINTS	VALUE
<ul style="list-style-type: none">4 days a week in lectures, studiesLibrary access	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Almost daily presence at the universityInternal systems organise her classesFollows University Twitter updatesEmailed directly by staff members.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Degree qualificationSocial societiesYear spent in industrycommunity involvementLibrary access

TASKJOURNEY MAP

Choosing classes for next semester





Daniel Jones
Software Development Student

Receiving Options	Making the choice	Receiving Confirmation
<p>Receiving Mail</p> <p>Opening Mail</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">opt in to receive by mailCall up university with questionsReading EmailsI hope my options are good this yearSelecting optionsOpening letter	<p>Logging in</p> <p>Making selection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Make a complaintsave and return laterStudent internetThe system is confusingSelecting information	<p>Receiving Mail</p> <p>Opening Mail</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">opt in to receive mailConfirmation mailConfirmation mailHave I made the right choice?Opening email
<p>" Do I have to decide right now?"</p> <p>Email</p> <p>Phone</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Could go into spam folderCould be forgotten about (need reminding)Could not like their options	<p>" I wonder if I can change these later..."</p> <p>Support Access System</p> <p>Phone</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Could exit accidentallySystem interface confusing	<p>" Can't wait to get started!"</p> <p>Mail</p> <p>Email</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Could forget to open thisSystem occasionally sends wrong course confirmation
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Emails are concise and simpleEmails do not currently filter into spam	<ul style="list-style-type: none">System interface is	<ul style="list-style-type: none">For most students this process causes no issues
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Opportunity to post options that are phragging to make numbersCould incentivise attendance or mix page	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Improve UXSome supporting policy should be present on page	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Could this be streamlined?Could we add text confirmation or messenger confirmation
<p>COURSE SELECTION PROCESS</p>	<p>COURSE SELECTION PROCESS</p>	<p>COURSE SELECTION PROCESS</p>

BUSINESS PROCESS DISCOVERY

A key part of the optimisation approach is to engineer business processes to become more efficient and support a better student experience. In order to understand the current constraints in how any institution operates, a process discovery exercise will provide a single version of how the organisation operates and where efficiencies can be made so that these changes can be prioritised.

Within each area you identify the processes and a high-level description of the activities, what effort is involved, the systems used and how often it takes place. This qualifies where there is opportunity to improve business processes and where efficiencies can be made in order to meet the strategic objectives.

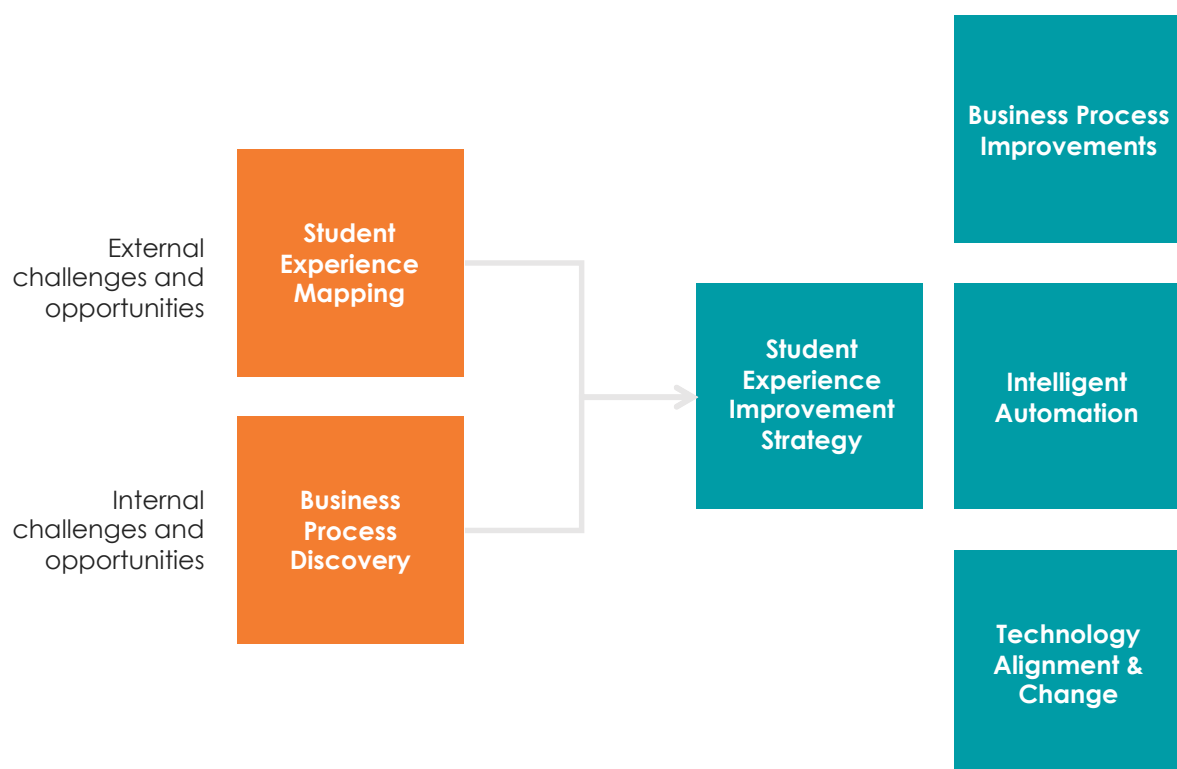


The potential improvements can be estimated as operational efficiency savings as an average percentage and can be shown in two parts:

- **Process opportunity:** This is the opportunity to improve the process without the need to invest in technology or automation. As an example, it could be achieved through re-ordering or grouping of activities within the process or through the removal of activities from the process.
- **Technology opportunity:** This is the level of improvement to be gained if there was investment in automating the activities through better use of existing technology or investment in new technology.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE IMPROVEMENT STRATEGY

By looking at the external Student Experience and the Internal Processes you can quickly gain an understanding of the right approach to improve the student experience as well as internal operational efficiencies. Improvements can be achieved in a variety of ways including by re-engineering processes, intelligent automation and through investment in technology change as shown in this diagram:



An approach that is gaining popularity as it does not require large scale IT change is to automate your process using Robotic Process Automation (RPA) technology combined with technology such as Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning in a solution called Intelligent Automation.

INTELLIGENT AUTOMATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

We are seeing how intelligent automation is transforming how HEIs work and is a key consideration for all digital transformation programmes.

As we said, Intelligent Automation (IA) is a combination of RPA and Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies. Together, they enable rapid end-to-end business process automation while extending the horizons of business process automation and what is possible.

It sounds complex, yet automating key processes can be achieved relatively quickly using RPA platforms to deliver services to students and staff efficiently and effectively. This then has knock on effect - operational efficiency is significantly improved, meaning we now have more time to focus on other quick win solutions.

The core component of Intelligent Automation is an RPA platform. This is software that replicates human interactions with a business process. It captures and interprets data from your existing applications to automate rules-based processing, data manipulation, and communication across multiple systems, including web-based and local software applications.

Let's take a look at RPA in a real-life examples:

RPA Bots are used to respond automatically to student enquiries or enter data and complete forms with greater accuracy. RPA can achieve increased compliance, significant cost reduction and rapid improvements to the overall student experience.

For example, Equantiis helped the University of East London to streamline their clearing process. They were able to process clearing applications so fast, UCAS themselves contacted the Head of Admissions at UEL to say what we had created was a complete a game changer.

Watch the case study video [here](#).

Manchester Metropolitan Univerisy partnered with Equantiis to build the strategy and support the delivery of the Student Journey Transformation Programme. With over 8000 business process re-engineered and 60 system integrations considered, we provided critical support and insight to help them deliver the student journey transformation successfully. See the full case study [here](#). By automating simple student enquiries, this returned a 240% ROI meaning costs could be cut with staff re-allocated to front line student services.

INTELLIGENT AUTOMATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Other examples of Higher Education processes that can be automated:

- Managing prospective student offer letters
- Processing student enrolment including data capture and confirmation
- Assessing scholarships and bursaries
- Processing student transfers and changes
- Responding to student transcript requests

Intelligent Automation works best supporting any of the following scenarios:

- Manual and Repetitive Processes; freeing up staff time and reducing errors
- High Transaction Volume: working much faster than a human and 24/7 saving you time and money
- Multiple Data Sources: joins up your data and without having to integrate your back-end systems
- Structured Data: when the format and type of data is known

CONCLUSION

As society continues to rethink the value of post-secondary education, accelerated by the changes from COVID-19, higher education institutions are responding by emphasising their value via increasingly joined up, flexible ways to prepare students for the workplace.

It is critical that your digital capabilities are unified and are focused to help your institution rethink and achieve this direction. If you don't, you risk becoming outdated in the face of rapidly changing circumstances.

As touched upon earlier in this article, it's imperative that as a large institution, you make digital transitions efficiently and effectively, operating with a lean business approach where pivoting and responding to change is easier. Technology such as artificial intelligence, intelligent automation, blockchain and advanced analytics can all change the way in which services are delivered to students. It's incumbent upon HE institutions to recognise that potential and leverage the power of those technologies in the most relevant ways.

Over the years of working with many Higher Education institutions, we have found the most successful institutions have implemented a unified view of their organisations capabilities that aligns initiatives, investments, and strategy in order to compete and engage the student to achieve their best possible potential.

EQUANTIIS

**Let's
talk!**

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