

EQUANTIIS



**Higher Education
Must Invest in
Digital Now to
Stay Relevant in
the Sector**



.. Staying relevant with digital

Over the last few years, we have seen the higher education sector heavily investing in physical infrastructure to improve the environments for teaching and learning. However, with so many HE institutions falling behind because digital initiatives are put on the back burner, the need to change and drive innovation is at a critical level.

This critical level is exacerbated by Covid-19 with the rapid shift to delivering the experience online. The whole sector was virtually disrupted overnight, meaning that universities now have to reimagine their whole teaching and learning environment. As a result, many institutes are now urgently looking to digital for how they can effectively deliver the day-to-day activities essential to running a university – from enrolment and induction programmes, to general student support, exams, graduations, and the lessons themselves.

With this shift, higher education institutes have been trying to develop digital strategies to react to the ever-increasing demands for new technology. Yet many lack the capability, long term commitment and resources to effectively implement them.

More often than not, we see higher education institutes investing heavily in IT systems without understanding how such systems will deliver the benefits they need to see. This is usually down to the strategy not encompassing the business as a whole, but rather focusing on the technology itself, hoping that it'll sort existing problems once implemented. Understandably, many senior leaders of the institute are focussed on the short-term challenges and quick wins, and consequently, the institute is then not equipped to adapt to any long-term challenges that lie ahead. Tackling both the short and long-term challenges is key to staying relevant.



.. Digital disruption is everywhere, higher education is no exception

Digital disruption is impacting every single sector at a pace so fast it's forcing us to think about long term solutions to ensure we can keep up with this accelerating pace.

While every sector faces very specific challenges, many of these challenges overlap across sectors because the demand for digital technologies is driven by generations adopting technology more and more. Higher education should look to commercial businesses and what's happening in this sector to influence what they can do in theirs.

In higher education, the greatest challenges we see include:

1. Traditional models are under threat by digital models

The traditional model of higher education with a physical campus and face to face teaching and learning is being confronted by new approaches to teaching and learning. Access to courses online is becoming a popular method to gaining qualifications, where students can work remotely and in their own time.

2. Demanding student behaviours

Today's student is vocal, connected and digitally savvy. With such attitudes and behaviours comes increasing demands for universities to support their way of living. They often have expectations as to how universities will engage with them, and what they'll get for their money. Fees are high, and students want a return on their investment. To attract the modern student, it's imperative universities deliver against these expectations.

3. Individual and flexible learning experiences

The modern student is one of a digitally focussed generation. The way they interact with each other, brands and businesses is vastly via a smartphone, tablet or computer. The way they expect to interact with universities is exactly the same. Their attitudes to personalised and flexible experiences don't change according to what business they're interacting with; they want to learn using methods that mirror their way of life. There is no 'one size fits all' approach.



.. Digital disruption is everywhere, higher education is no exception

4. A focus on graduate prospects

Students consider gaining a degree to be the starting point of their careers and securing well-paid future employment. This means the experience doesn't just stop after graduation; students expect interactions and support from universities after they graduate to help them secure employment in a field they want to work in. As such, the role digital will play in supporting post graduate employment and the student experience is more critical than ever.

5. Online learning

The rapid shift to online learning due to COVID-19 coupled with increasing popularity for online courses means that all higher education institutions have no choice but to deliver learning in new ways and operate in a global marketplace. Lower cost alternatives to the traditional university model are also challenging universities to think about how they provide access to all their courses, anywhere, any time.

6. Digital poverty

Again, the global pandemic has highlighted the growing issue of digital poverty. What was once a luxury is now an essential utility. There's a digital divide in social classes as many students don't have access to a laptop to learn remotely, so fundamentally, universities must understand the impact of digital poverty within their organisation and consider what interventions are required. Those without online connections risk being left behind on both knowledge and opportunities.



.. Tackling the challenges caused by digital capabilities

As previously stated, there isn't a one size fits all approach, but there are key initiatives a university can tackle in their journey to address and respond to an ever changing landscape, which will deliver the desired results.

The modern university must have a well-defined focus that sets it apart from the competition. One way to achieve that is to offer a connected and immersive digital experience across the whole university, designed specifically with students and staff in mind.

1. Understand who your students are

Students are paying customers and have a set of demands and expectations that modern higher education providers must, at the very minimum, meet. These students expect solutions that offer the similar digital experience from their university that they have in their day-to-day life. As digital is the new normal, especially in the generation of the modern student, it's essential universities balance their business understanding with technology and student insight to best meet student needs.

2. Reimagine and simplify services

Students expect to get the information and services they need, whenever they need it. Navigating unconnected systems and jumping from process to process significantly hinders this expectation and causes frustration. We're seeing many universities working on how they can transform student-facing services so they can efficiently and effectively serve the demands of the student.

3. Efficient communication, deeper conversations

University staff are spending significant amounts of time on arduous, manual tasks. More often than not, this time-consuming work is because the internal processes are built around systems rather than considering the essential tasks required to provide an unrivalled student experience. Higher education leaders are exploring a whole new landscape of interactions that impact how students feel about an institution. From the front-line and back-office staff, to the policies and governance that guide their work, they are leaving no stone unturned and redefining how the institute operates. Redefining processes with the effective use of digital will free up staff to focus on the more important jobs at hand. Those being the human interactions between staff and students, enabling efficient communication and richer conversations



.. Tackling the challenges caused by digital capabilities

4. Quickly identify emerging needs

Technology is evolving at a pace many businesses struggle to keep up with. Technologies such as artificial intelligence, automation and advanced analytics all have the potential to transform the way services are delivered. Universities must recognise the potential and the opportunities and leverage the power of technology in the most relevant ways.



.. Pioneering digital and cultural change, organisation-wide

To become a successful digital university and drive innovation, the digital strategy must be organisation-wide and be driven by cultural change. More often than not, projects with a digital focus get dubbed an 'IT project' when in reality, it's an organisational one.

When considering the student experience, it spans across many aspects, and not just accessing lecture slides online. Students want consistency across all aspects of university life and the digital experience needs to break down the silos and deliver the end-to-end journey and beyond. This means that services need to be redefined and optimised to achieve a richer experience for students. The use and effective implementation of digital technologies to reduce administration and manual tasks will allow staff to shift their focus away from low value mundane tasks and spend more time engaging deeper with students.

In turn, by spending more time developing richer engagement with students, new insights and understanding can emerge. Students and staff expect to have access to data through a single point of contact; they want the ability to inform once and for that data to be used repeatedly eliminating the need to re-key information multiple times. The opportunity to improve data quality and draw powerful insights from the end-to-end journey will help a university respond to ebbs and flows in demand and pivot to meet evolving and emerging expectations.

Such digital agenda needs to be driven by senior management and management needs to be able to rely on the support of individual departments which in turn must take ownership for their contributions. This creates an organisation-wide approach that will stand the test of time and equip the institute for future challenges.



What does this organisation-wide approach look like across departments?

Physical infrastructure – on campus

- Create flexible digital collaboration spaces and
- Provide fast wireless connectivity
- Develop the digital estate and the virtual campus to support anywhere, anytime, anyhow learning
- Develop a security strategy that is resilient to cyber threats to ensure the safety of student information

HR

- Develop Continuing Professional Development (CPD) initiatives to support the ongoing development of digital skills, making sure all staff are trained up and understand technology
- Support teaching to help drive innovation in modern teaching methods and techniques that leverage digital capabilities
- Look at how you can make onboarding better for students

Finance

- Develop budgets that support an Operational Expenditure budget model to strategically leverage new technologies and new ways of working
- Develop budgets for innovation throughout the year. An innovation budget is important from two perspectives. It gives you the financial resources to adapt the overall strategy of the institution, yet it helps teams to continually think about improvements throughout the year. If the institution is positioned for innovation, the institute will embrace the change and give you the competitive advantage of forward thinking



What does this organisation-wide approach look like across departments?

Admissions

- Use digital to engage with and inform applicants on the progress of their applications
- Maintaining contact with applicants after they accept the offer and before they enrol helps them understand what to expect from the university and how might they prepare for university life
- Use insights and analytics to identify and increase conversion rates of the most desirable applicants

Library

- Look at digitising your library and creating a space for students to collaborate 24/7

Faculties & Schools

- Develop opportunities within courses that promote digital literacy to students
- Support academics that are leading the way in the development of digital skills and developing new innovative teaching techniques
- Encourage the advanced use of learning platforms to deliver better outcomes for students and the university and to capture valuable learning data for use in analytics
- Build support networks for students and staff who are less confident with digital technologies

Governance

- Develop greater understanding of the impact of strategy and key decision making through the effective use of data and analytics
- Remove the red tape and budget constraints for realising money



.. What does this organisation-wide approach look like across departments?

Technology

- Become a forward-thinking department that keeps up to date with new technology trends and advises on how these can be used to deliver new capabilities
- Revisit old policies and procedures so the innovative use of technology by staff and students can be encouraged
- Make access to information and systems as accessible as possible so that the data can be used in new and innovative ways
- Leverage cloud technologies to drive innovation and the fast turnaround of the new digital capabilities, products and systems
- Identify where you can integrate systems to speed up workflow

International Office

- Use various digital channels to ensure overseas students gain a better understanding of the university environment
- Engage overseas students and international agents through the use of social media and other digital channels such as dedicated apps

Student Services

- Develop insight and analytics that can help identify struggling or disengaged students, so that targeted and effective interventions can be made to improve retention rates
- Develop services and opportunities that address the key problems that impact students. An example could be promoting mental health support



What does this organisation-wide approach look like across departments?

Procurement

- Procurement should be agile and not a long, drawn out, rigid process that inhibits innovation and ultimately holds back the potential of the university
- Have budgets available for short pieces of work that rapidly deliver huge amounts of value

Marketing

- Engage with staff and students, prospects, and alumni across a range of social channels, websites, and apps to deliver personalised communications that represent and champion the university's culture
- Determine how the university's brand is perceived in its target markets through surveys and social listening and react accordingly to reflect the preferred perception of the institution
- Support the creation of digital communities between individuals at different stages of their academic journey (such as applicants and alumni) to help showcase life at the university or on specific courses
- Use data and analytics to identify target customer segments and develop personalised communications for each segment



Looking to the future

New technologies such as artificial intelligence, advanced analytics, and intelligent automation present new opportunities to improve and reimagine the student experience.

Yet there is a wealth of other technology avenues to consider. Think smart mobile and wearable devices. From personalised alerts, enabling students to keep an online record of their qualifications, allowing credentials to be issued, carried, and shared globally and all in real time, right through to virtual and augmented reality. VR and AR could be used to connect classes and teams working remotely, creating a more immersive experience for those who are not physically on campus. The campus should reach far beyond the confines of the physical plot the buildings lie.

The point here is that by being aware of and being prepared for new trends in emerging technologies and equipping the institution to rapidly harness the potential of new tech, is key to be a leader in the higher education sector. With the pace in which technology is disrupting the world, it's a matter of time before students favour those universities who are up to date with their tech and provide more than just a learning environment.



Technology in Higher Education

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning

With the vast range of challenges universities are now facing from disengaged students, high dropout rates, to the ineffectiveness of a traditional “one-size-fits-all” approach, it’s time to look at personalised learning experiences. When artificial intelligence and machine learning are harnessed properly, personalised learning experiences can be realised, which could help to resolve some of the above challenges..

With a personalized learning experience, every student could enjoy a unique educational experience that’s tailored to their individual abilities and needs. The impact this could have is directly increasing students’ motivation and reduce dropout rates. It could also give teaching staff a thorough understanding of each student’s unique learning process, which is conducive to more effective teaching methods.

Intelligent automation

Intelligent automation can eliminate arduous, repetitive processes that take up too much valuable time. With these processes automated, a boost in staff productivity and general work morale can be expected because staff are now focusing on the real high value, engaging tasks that give them a sense of importance and purpose. With more time on their hands, this is when they can focus of creating those deeper and richer conversations we spoke about earlier.

Virtual reality (VR)

Virtual reality will help a university create an unrivalled, immersive learning environment. As companies across all sectors begin investing more and more in VR, it’s a matter of time before students will expect the boundaries around learning to either reduce or completely disappear, and for lessons to be brought to life – even if they’re working remotely.

Drone technology

Drone technology has been around for a while now. Yet many businesses don’t always understand the power drone technology can have. This is particularly true for a university, where university life is a top selling point to students. With drone technology, you can showcase and provide a distinctive view of the university campus and culture, so students can get excited before they’ve even come to visit.



Technology in Higher Education

Location technology

Location technology again is nothing new. Within higher education this can be leveraged to enhance the overall experience while delivering a personalised experience based on where a student is at any given time. Location technology has the power to bring the campus to life for students and staff, meaning everyone is better connected to the physical environment

Data

Data is hugely important for making better and more informed decisions. In turn, complex challenges can be tackled at a more efficient pace. To leverage data, the university must have the right capabilities to drive business insight. Universities often gather data at an exceptional rate yet fail to harness the massive potential of the insight it would provide.

Blockchain

Blockchain offers new methods to manage information securely. It allows students to take control of their qualifications and share them with those they trust – adding credibility and reducing misrepresentation.



.. Harnessing technology successfully

To harness technology successfully, it's so important not to start with the technology itself but look at the overall vision and strategy of the university. Any successful change programme needs to be guided by this clear vision and strategy, defined by senior management, and take an organisation-wide view.

A lack of an overall vision often leads to disjointed programmes, which is not conducive to breaking down silos and connecting systems. The impact here is wasted time, effort and money, and an output that doesn't really solve the problems that were there in the first place.

Open conversations are essential to building trust among departments and helps everyone involved feel part of the great change they're about to make.

The best way to successfully harness digital is to adopt a design that focuses on student needs, rather than the problems with the current internal structure. If the digital experience is focused on the internal structure, the outcomes will be focused on how the university is currently operating, opposed to how the university needs to operate in the future. The problem here is that by the time the change programme is coming to an end, it's already out of date.

There is a damaging misconception that digital is all about technology. While technology plays an important role, it is simply the platform the digital experience is created – the tool that facilitates its implementation.

Many universities look for a digital quick fix. This is unsurprising due to the slow nature in which such organisations move.

New technology platforms go through the procurement process via the IT departments without first understanding the wider role that digital has across the institution. IT-led programmes rarely deliver the desired benefits and can disadvantage universities while they wait for outcomes that never actually materialise.

Of course, IT departments need to be involved, but involved in the correct way. It's imperative that cross-department transformation programmes are driven by those who will experience the benefits, so the right solutions are implemented for the right teams all governed by the overall vision.



Knocking down the barriers to the university of the future

Many universities still don't have a clearly defined vision. They also don't have a clear understanding of how digital can significantly enhance their performance. The impact here is that they're equipped to respond and pivot effectively over the long-term.

Why does this remain prevalent in higher education?

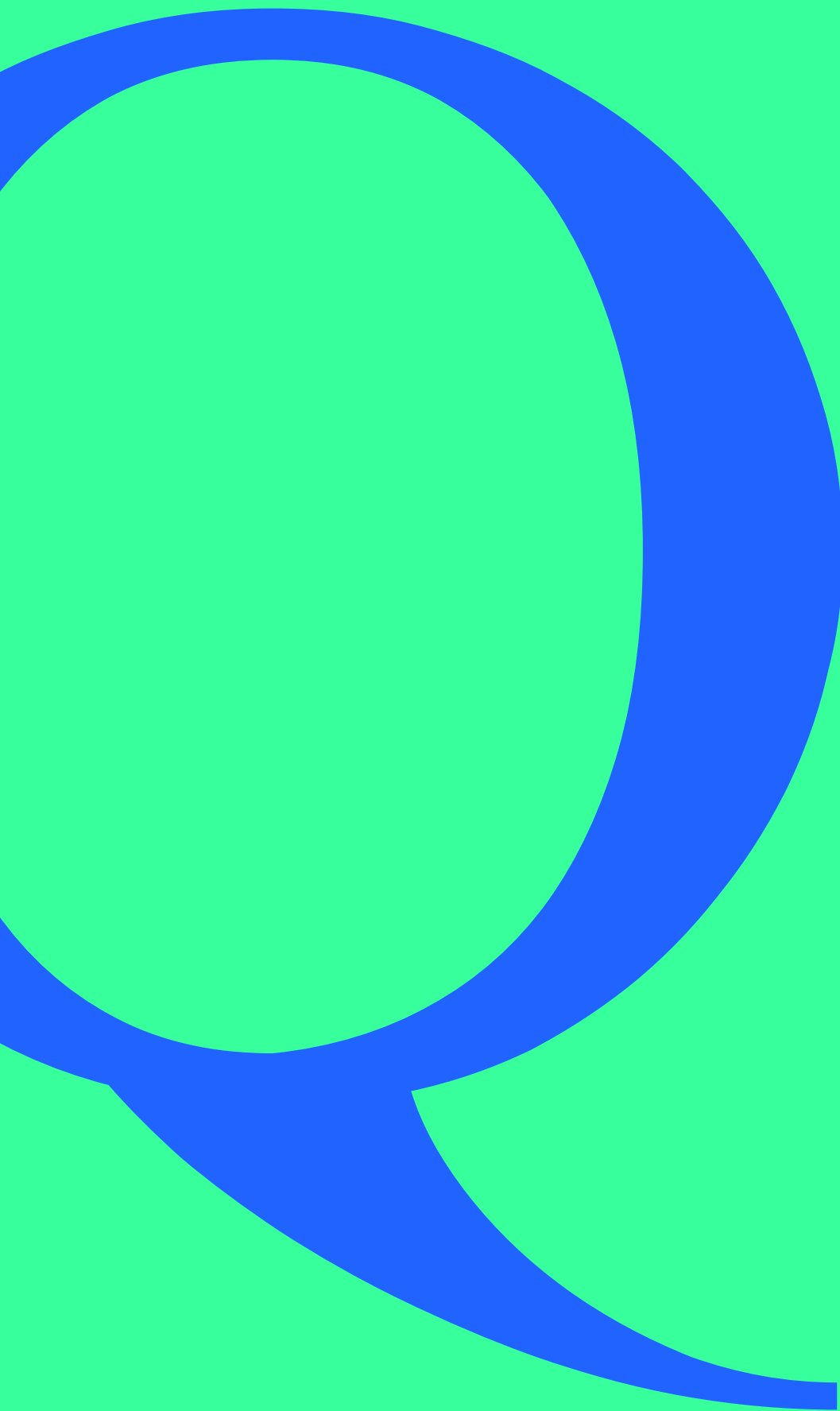
- General lack of understanding about the modern student
- Universities often don't understand that they must deal with a new generation of students with rapidly evolving needs and demands
- They don't realise that their competitors are developing in innovative ways
- Updating and adapting existing ways of working while at the same time adopting and integrating new techniques and tools is difficult to manage in such large organisations
- A culture that inhibits the rapid development and release of new technology
- A lack of trust in digital services and new technologies, or concerns about their reliability, security, and resilience
- Long, drawn out procurement processes
- Digital poverty – not knowing how to respond
- Digital skills gaps
- IT departments are pivotal to the success of digital initiatives but are not always equipped to deliver these in the most effective and efficient ways



.. It's time to knock down the barriers and invest to save the future of higher education institutes

Understandably the transition into the digital age can be extremely daunting. However, the rapid shift from offline to online that we've recently seen higher education institutes respond to during the pandemic is evidence that change can be delivered within a short space of time. The challenge now is continuing the progress propelled by COVID-19 to continue in the right direction.

Universities that develop the right organisation-wide business strategy can open a whole host of exciting possibilities to engage with students and develop the connected and immersive digital experience every student desires.



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