

Changing student expectations and the future of higher education



Navigating financial headwinds to meet shifting student expectations

Amid pressing financial challenges, digital tools offer universities the opportunity to adapt, meet changing student expectations and find new efficiencies

Institutions have faced unprecedented shifts in the past few years. Rapid advancements in technology have led to pedagogical changes and new learning preferences among students. However, with the prevailing macroeconomic climate, fee caps and changing student expectations, the sector faces critical questions about its long-term financial stability and resilience.

"The upcoming decade is expected to bring significant changes in how we work, learn and live," says Matt Beveridge, head of innovation and partnership for the estates office at the University of Birmingham. "This raises an important question: how will future generations interact with and derive value from the university experience?"

Recent trends indicate that students increasingly value educational formats that differ markedly from the traditional models. Many learners prefer an on-demand, flexible education that is personalised to their needs and available through easy-to-access platforms. Younger cohorts of students favour this approach over navigating a physical library and different online portals to access academic resources.

"In our conversations with leaders across higher education, one of the biggest challenges we're hearing is how institutions can provide a bespoke and personalised experience at scale, amid financial constraints," says Katharine Templeton, head of UK partnerships at Perlego. "Students increasingly expect a Netflix-style education experience, and the ways they engage with content and technology are changing significantly. In a 2025 Perlego webinar on this topic, only 10 per cent of the higher education professionals polled felt that

they were ahead of the curve in supporting learners' evolving needs."

Demographic shifts and the dynamic technological landscape are among the key drivers of the change in student expectations today. Students' content consumption outside the classroom has also evolved, influencing their expectations when they enter university. "Students who seamlessly navigate between apps and have only ever known a connected world with 24/7 access to services, content and wi-fi represent a new generation," says Beveridge.

At the same time, more learners in the UK now classify themselves as commuter students. This requires universities to change their strategies to better support them. "We've seen a major rise in the number of commuter students recently," explains Zoe Radnor, pro vice-chancellor and executive dean for the College of Business and Social Sciences at Aston University. "These students often have caring responsibilities or part-time jobs. University curricula need to take this into account. Are students able to travel off-peak, for example, or enjoy the timetable benefits of block teaching? It's about enabling them to balance home, work and study," she adds.

Despite the admirable pace at which many universities have embraced digitalisation in recent years, more needs to be done to ensure the benefits of higher education are clearly conveyed to students. "Co-creation is crucial," says Stephanie Marshall, vice-president of education at



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Queen Mary University of London. "Listening to the student voice is an ongoing iterative process. It's how we know what student expectations are."

Increasingly, those expectations are for universities to offer more student-centric learning environments that prioritise digital-first and remote or hybrid learning. Students want seamless experiences that mirror those they are used to in their personal lives. "It's reassuring knowing that you can just boot up Perlego, have a look, find new things and that the platform is enjoyable enough to use that you can continue to read the book and eventually finish it," explains Harry Rogers, a human geography student at the University of Leicester and Perlego user.

Placing the student at the centre of pedagogies can be an effective way for universities to integrate inclusive resources and different learning formats into their offering. Studies show that effective learning methods can vary markedly from individual to individual.



According to the [2023/24 Jisc survey](#) on students' digital experiences in UK higher education, almost half of the respondents favour either online or hybrid learning for flexibility and time-saving benefits. The report also highlighted students' views on investing in better digital tools and systems at universities, with 34 per cent indicating a preference for upgrading platforms and 26 per cent expressing a need for specialised tools and software.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, traditional in-person learning at universities has seen a decrease in popularity. "The percentage of online teaching, flipped classrooms and asynchronous lectures we see today has risen, so we can be more inclusive," says Marshall. "We can't present students with a one-way didactic learning experience anymore. We have to ensure they're involved in the learning, such as with peer-led groups."



Adopting a student centric-approach can guide institutions in determining the right technology to ensure resources are allocated to the right areas

Despite the scale of the financial challenges facing institutions, universities are finding innovative ways to mitigate them. "We look to find greater efficiencies where we can," says Marshall. "For instance, learner engagement analytics help us to retain more students." Finding the right edtech vendor to partner with is another way that institutions can gain access to the digital tools students are asking for without seeing costs skyrocket. "The most vital aspect of working in partnership is ensuring your technological offering is future-proof," says Radnor.

Embracing new technology, including AI, to streamline and create efficiencies can help universities address this challenge. For example, Perlego's Smart Search AI tool was developed in consultation with users, higher education institutions and academic publishers. "It enables deep search across our complete collection of over 1 million books to surface relevant extracts within a text, supporting critical thinking skills and interdisciplinary learning," Templeton notes. "Natural language support enables students to phrase questions in a way that makes sense to them to remove barriers and widen participation."

Universities need to embrace creativity and flexibility to meet their challenges. "The current landscape presents a real opportunity for us to think outside the box," Beveridge says. Institutions must respond strategically and align their resources with student needs to build inclusive learning environments that work for the modern learner while remaining financially sustainable. Adopting a student-centric approach can guide institutions in determining the right technology to ensure resources are allocated to the right areas based on student needs.

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Branded content editor
Ashton Wenborn

Branded content deputy editor
Sreethu Sajeev

Designer
Joe Wilkes

Images
iStock
Perlego

Contributor
Barclay Ballard

Sponsorship and advertising opportunities
sponsorship@timeshighereducation.com

Times Higher Education
98 Theobalds Road
London
WC1X 8WB

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Prioritising accessibility and equity for diverse student groups

The right digital tools can help institutions ensure that students have equal access to the educational resources that support their evolving needs

Despite many initiatives promoting inclusive education in the UK, disparities between learners remain stark. A 2024 report by the UK's House of Commons on equality of access and outcomes in [undergraduate education in England](#) revealed prevalent inequalities in access to higher education along factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, age, ethnicity and special educational needs. As the higher education sector moves towards a digital-first model of teaching and learning, inclusive resources and policies can play an important role in bridging the access gap.

"It's essential for universities to recognise the different types of learners today and the pressures on them," says Christopher Umfreville, deputy dean of education in the College of Business and Social Sciences at Aston University. "It's about how they learn and where they learn."

Universities are responsible for making sure their learning models accommodate the different academic needs, learning preferences and skillsets of a diverse student body. With recent advances in technology, adopting the right digital tools can help universities guarantee this.

"Universities are trying to develop more inclusive learning environments for students," says Matt East, director of higher education at Perlego. "One example of this is ensuring that students can find the content they need, which resonates with them and goes beyond the core reading list. With that comes a lot of complexity, both from a learning design perspective and in technology selection."

When universities get the right digital resources, students of various backgrounds benefit. "I'm a parent, I work full-time and I'm doing a doctorate," says Sarwah Mhanna, a psychoanalytic psychotherapy doctoral student at University College London and Perlego user. "Time at a study desk is very rare. But the fact that Perlego has read aloud functionality means I can make it work for the very limited time that I do have."

Universities that are adopting digital resources and moving to online or hybrid



learning formats must not exacerbate the digital divide among learners. The 2023/24 digital experience insights [survey](#) by Jisc revealed issues around digital poverty and access to digital learning in the UK.

"It's important for institutions to not only acknowledge the digital skills gap among their students but also tackle it," says Phil Brabben, chief librarian and group director of learning resources at Coventry University. "We do this by offering training and development to all our students who need support. At the same time, to make sure these gaps don't widen, we offer flexible resources for students, including a 24/7 library and a range of different platforms so they can access the content they need when they need it."

To meet a diverse range of student needs, universities must ensure pedagogies, learning formats and digital resources don't follow a one-size-fits-all approach. This is a fundamental principle for Perlego, says East. "As a content system provider, we have a duty of care to ensure any student can access our features and functionalities," he says.

Adrian Ellison, pro vice-chancellor of people and digital at the University of West London, says: "Giving our students easy access to over 1.5 million ebooks through Perlego has provided a rich resource of learning and supplementary material."

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Students love the read aloud feature, which allows them to consume content on the move. Perlego has especially benefited our international and partner students, who have traditionally not had access to learning resources in the UK."

Tyrell King, a final year undergraduate student at the University of Wolverhampton and Perlego user, explains: "For disabled students, we go through Disabled Students Allowance and sometimes have ebooks that aren't compatible with my assistive technology. Perlego has been a life changer for me." Apart from technology, university policy is key to making sure that digital learning spaces are inclusive. "Setting clear design and access principles is crucial," Umfreville says. Offering content across a variety of formats, such as video, audio, transcripts and captions, can improve student engagement and outcomes.

In the digital age, textbooks work alongside tools such as virtual learning environments, asynchronous resources, mobile apps and video conferencing platforms to provide equitable learning experiences to different student groups.

"As universities, we often make assumptions about the resources that our students have access to," Brabben says. "Now, digital platforms have the data to show exactly what students are accessing. We find that students are dipping in strategically to pull the information they need." In Brabben's view, it's important to make sure that the content is representative.

Inclusivity in higher education is dependent on universities placing people at the centre of their curricula and pedagogy. In doing so, institutions can open themselves up to different perspectives that could foster academic innovation. "Any student who is paying for higher education needs to be able to have access to the same resources as their peers," says East, adding that universities are increasingly mindful of the benefits that can come from an inclusive digital domain.

"It is crucial to have diverse views and opinions," says Umfreville. "It is at the very heart of academia. We need to ensure students can learn from each other as co-creators as it enhances the societal impact and wider benefits of university." Umfreville emphasises that students' lived experience is constantly evolving. To ensure they remain relevant and engaging for all learners, higher education institutions must adapt to this ongoing evolution.

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