Digital Poverty:
The Learner Perspective

Presented By

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Digital poverty

- What is it?
  - The Office for Students defines digital poverty as **an inability to fully interact with the digital world.**

- What is it from the **learner** perspective?
  - appropriate hardware
  - appropriate software
  - reliable access to the internet
  - technical support and repair when required
  - a trained teacher or instructor
  - an appropriate study space

Why is it so important?

- All learning is digital – virtual learning environments; recorded lectures

- Limit time on campus due to cost-of-living
  - Increase in transport costs
  - Need to work more
  - **1 in 10 students** lack the data or WiFi needed to attend classes virtually (NUS, 2023)

- Digital provides:
  - Opportunities to collaborate with friends
  - Possibilities of working in groups without being on campus
  - Increases sense of belonging

Support

- What could institutions offer in the future, and why?
  - Providing learning opportunities in different ways eg not just synchronous but perhaps pre-recorded
  - Working spaces
  - Free access to resources/software and guidance
  - Loans
  - Improved design of virtual learning environments
  - More recorded lectures
  - More guidance/training

Damson Ellen
What Do SRUC Do Well?

- Student IT support service – helpful and on hand.

- Project running to look at the different software's used on each course for student to know pre-study.

- Online resources and tutorials through libraries and Moodle for students to learn how to use different IT programmes.

- Microsoft Office is available to students during study.

- Lap safe provision at every campus is now available.

- Typically a mix of pre-recorded material, online and in person lectures.

- IT equipment funding available for those that need it at home.

- IT resource assessment form sent to student before starting at SRUC.

Damson Ellen
My Experience

- Good support from lecturers for modules using new software; additional sessions, high email response to questions, and different approach to different learners techniques.

- Fellow students receiving additional funding for IT equipment for their studies.

- Walkthrough of access to Moodle, emails, logins, and resources from IT support during the first week of the academic year.

- Accessibility for learners an issue, particularly mature students and those with different learning needs – not consistent across lecturers.

- Online lectures limit interaction between students, particularly in first year.

- Students are completing coursework on their phones, rather than reaching out for IT support or funding.

Damson Ellen
What Could Be Done Better?

▶ In depth refreshers needed for students who haven't used programmes (e.g. Microsoft) for many years.

▶ Monitoring of students who have additional needs to ensure they have the required IT equipment for study.

▶ Clarity on timetable of online study and on campus learning before academic year.

▶ A dedicated 24/7 IT support helpdesk (currently being looked into) – every student completes work at different times.

▶ Mid-year refresh on IT resources students could be using to assist with study.

▶ Lecturers speaking with students to ensure they have an appropriate place to study, and providing alternative options (library, quiet spaces on campus).

Connel Greenhorn
What do Heriot-Watt Do Well?

- 1. **Hardship Fund**
  - Laptop Loan Scheme to support students experiencing financial difficulties.

- 2. **Microsoft Remote Desktop functionality**
  - Permits access to software and packages off-campus.
  - Desktop interface accessible off-campus.

- 3. **Disability and Wellbeing Services**
  - Identification of additional support needs and complex learning profiles.

Connel Greenhorn
My Experience

- **1. Design of Assessment**
  - Some assessment types with heavy emphasis on groupwork or accessibility to specific software can be challenging.

- **2. Library Access during unsociable hours**
  - Longer working hours mean less time during the day to study or to make use of some university facilities.

- **3. Equity of access to recorded learning and teaching material**
  - How are the digital needs of different groups of students considered?

Connel Greenhorn
What Could Be Done Better?

- ▶ 1. **Advertisement of support mechanisms available in the institution**
  - ▶ Does the institution have a consistent comms plan available to staff and students that clearly illustrates the support on offer, e.g., not on SharePoint?

- ▶ 2. **Pedagogic guidance**
  - ▶ Review guidance and direction for academic colleagues and peers on 'potential risk' of assessment design and taught content that could be inaccessible.

- ▶ 3. **Better partnership with student union or association**
  - ▶ Work with student representatives across courses and programs where there could be greater risk of digital poverty.

- ▶ 4. **Hearing from students firsthand – how is this captured and monitored against accessibility factors**
  - ▶ How is digital poverty as an experience captured by an institution and identified as an inequality?