

# A curriculum for a complex world

Students' views of digital  
literacy in the curriculum

**WONKHE**



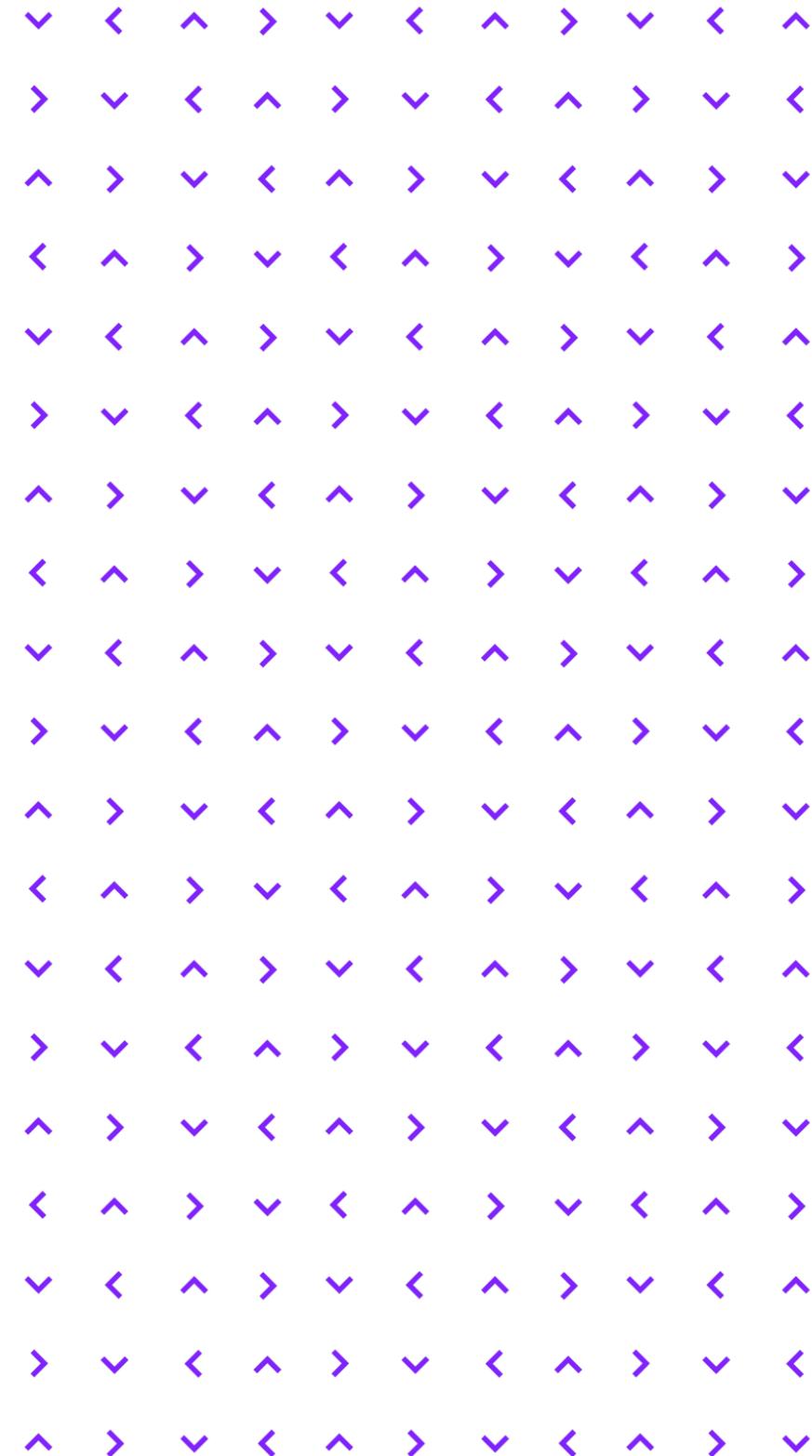
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# How we conducted the research

## Objectives

1. Gain a qualitative understanding of students' hopes and expectations for how the learning they undertake in their curriculum will help them thrive in their future lives.
2. Explore the relative value placed on digital literacy and capability to other kinds of generic\* skills and capabilities students might aspire to develop.
3. Explore students' perceptions of what kinds of curriculum experiences do, or might, help to develop digital and other skills.
4. Understand the current state of practice in students influencing the curriculum and the extent students and their representative organisations are able to take part in conversations about curriculum.

\*Specific topic areas relating to subjects, disciplines and professional practice were excluded, though these did come up as examples.

## Methodology and demographics

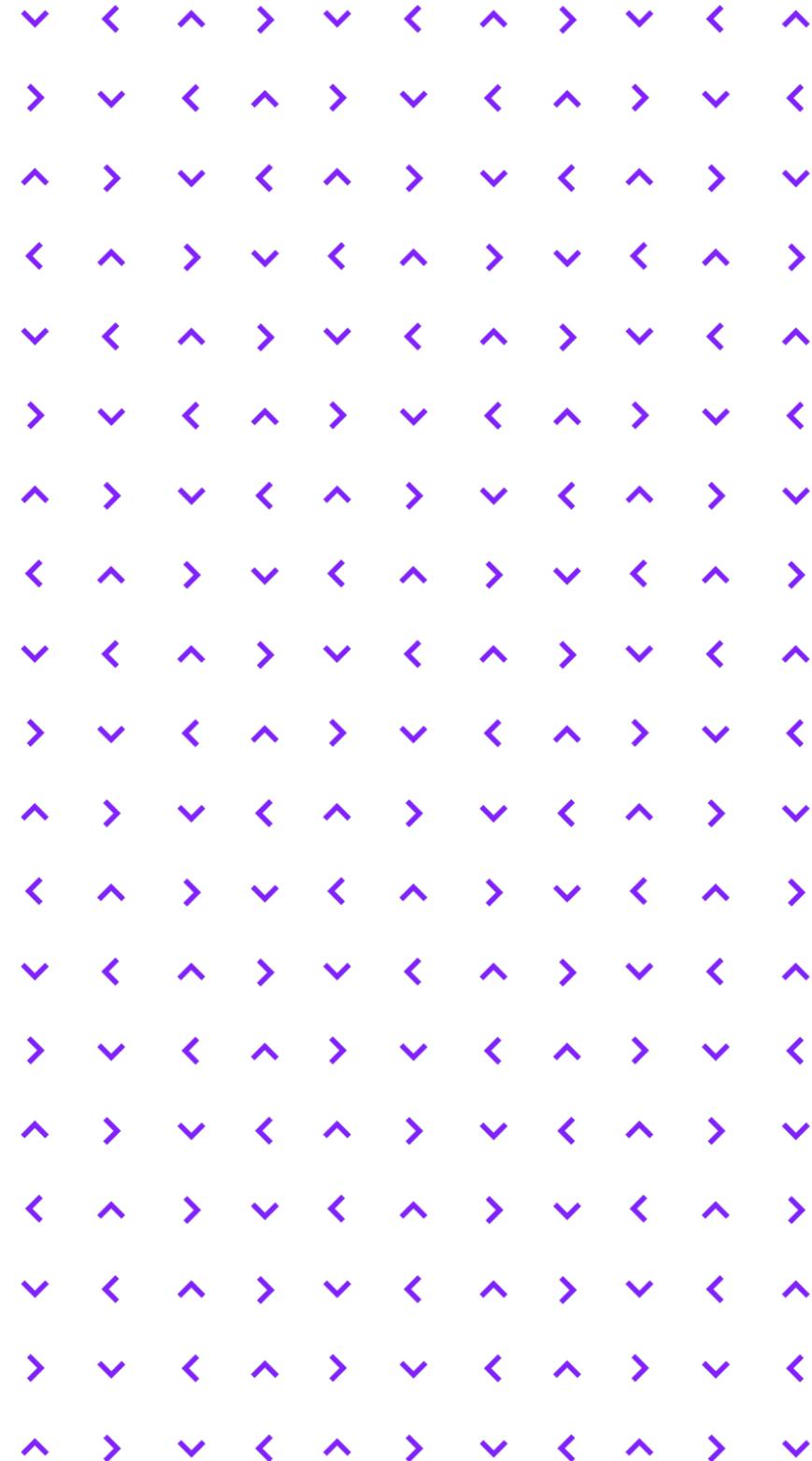
**12 students' unions** volunteered to conduct an online focus group on our behalf, working from a model discussion format that we provided and tested with SUs in advance. Each students' union submitted a report of their focus group, including direct quotes from students.

The unions involved were: Aberystwyth SU, Christ Church SU, Exeter Guild, Newman SU, Liverpool Guild, Plymouth SU, Portsmouth SU, Southampton SU, Manchester SU, Manchester Metropolitan SU, Durham SU, Sheffield SU.

**105 students from a range of subject disciplines** took part in the research of which:

Gender: 71% female | 24% male  
Age: 51% 18-21 | 40% 22-29 | 9% 30+  
Ethnicity: 62% white | 23% Asian | 7% black  
Domicile: 69% UK | 25% non-EU international | 6% non-UK EU  
Level of study: 2% FY | 70% UG | 27% PGT | 1% PGR  
Disability: 18% had a disability | 80% no disability

Most - around 80% - were **course reps**



# Working definitions

## Curriculum

*The process of you learning and developing knowledge and skills – this might include the topics you cover, the kinds of learning activities you do (eg group work, assessments); and the voluntary opportunities you have around your curriculum to take part in activities that will develop you such as student societies, internships, research or independent study, projects with employers, or study abroad.*

## Digital literacy

*Your confidence, and competence, in choosing and using digital tools to help you do something well, or better than you'd otherwise be able to do it eg communicate, analyse, or create.*

# Students' hopes for the future

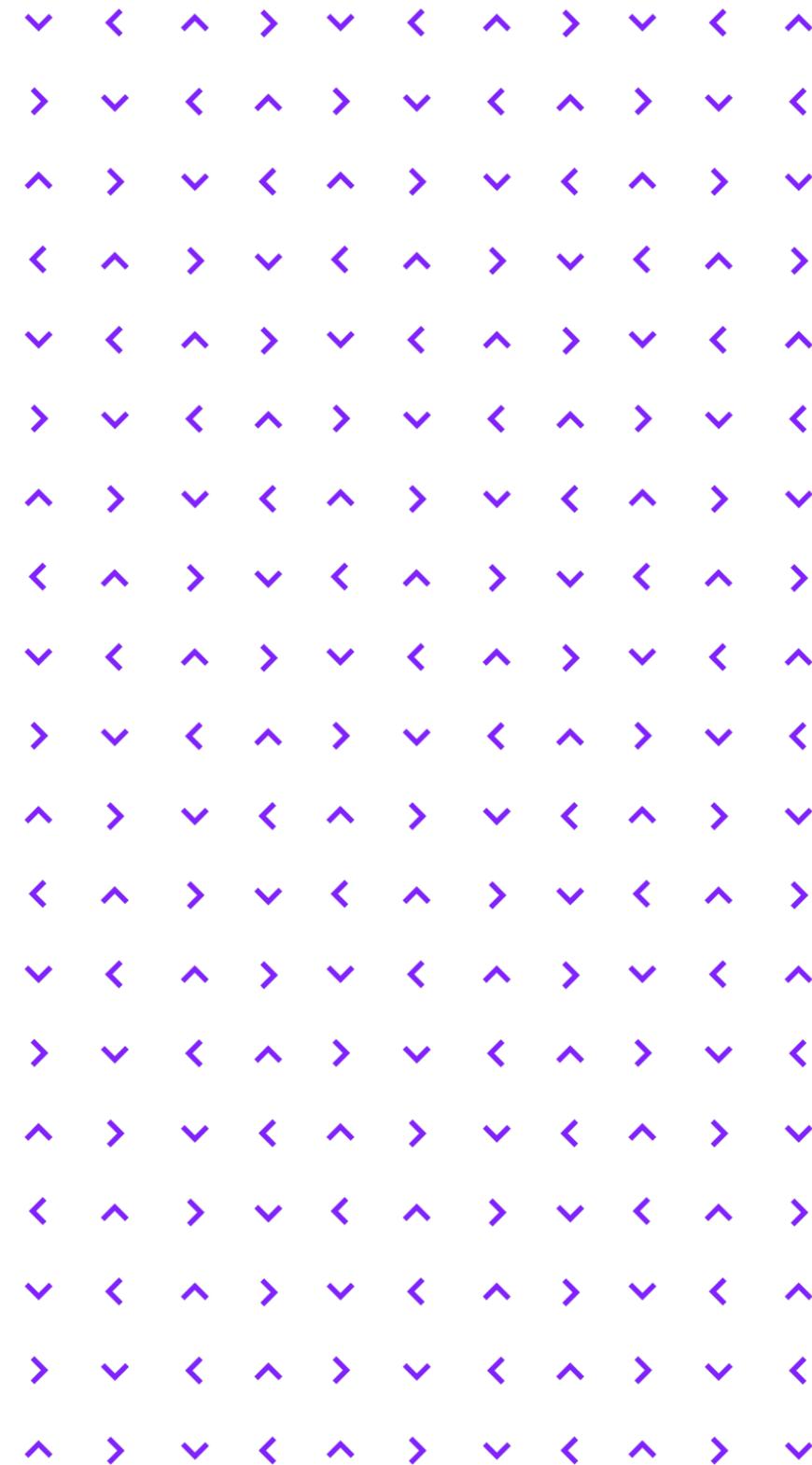
Students have a wide range of goals, from specific career aspirations to ways of living to changes they want to make in the world. In discussion they were clear about how they believe their university curriculum will help them achieve their goals.

Examples of goals include: open a school, write a popular history book, travel, conduct research, starting a business, enter a profession, get into investment, enter politics.

There was strong alignment between students' values and their future plans. Many expressed an altruistic desire to make a social contribution through the work they will do. Some mentioned a hope they would continue to learn throughout their lives.

## Key findings

- Students were highly cognisant of the range of “generic” **skills** they were developing at university such as time-management, data analysis, research, communication, and groupwork. Students also spoke about how university “changes how you think and feel” and the importance of developing a particular mindset: self-discipline, and confidence.
- The **co-curriculum** emerged as a particularly valuable creative space that shaped students' sense of what they might do in future. Some students mentioned SU focused activity such as student societies, course repping or volunteering; others, opportunities like external speaker events, skills-based sessions, language learning, peer assisted learning, and placements. Though engaging in these opportunities students' options and sense of possibility expanded.
- Building **networks** and connections while at university was perceived as an essential element of preparation for the future.
- Students also spoke about aspirations for achieving work/life balance, and good health and **wellbeing** in their future
- **Pathfinding** is a challenge, with students keen to get more help in matching choices of modules and co-curricular activities to their future life plans.



*“I came to university for a new experience and to build my skill set. I chose my course to learn more about the environment we live in and change public perception, reduce the destruction to ecosystems and reduce the use of finite resources.”* (Student, University of Plymouth)

*“I want to tackle issues surrounding underrepresented groups in the beauty industry.”* (Student, Manchester Metropolitan University)

*“Most participants felt that practical learning and real world application gave value to their curriculum and helped them to fully realise their future career hopes.”*(Christ Church SU report)

*“Students mentioned the most relevant skills are time management skills, self-directed study, group assignments and working with different people as key skills they feel will help in the future. Students felt their programmes were geared towards future careers and they could clearly map the skills they were gaining.”* (Liverpool Guild report)

*My course encourages interdisciplinarity, challenging competing theories and models in order to work out the pathway for the subject and my future. This is vitally important.”* (Student, Newman University)

# Students' views of digital literacy

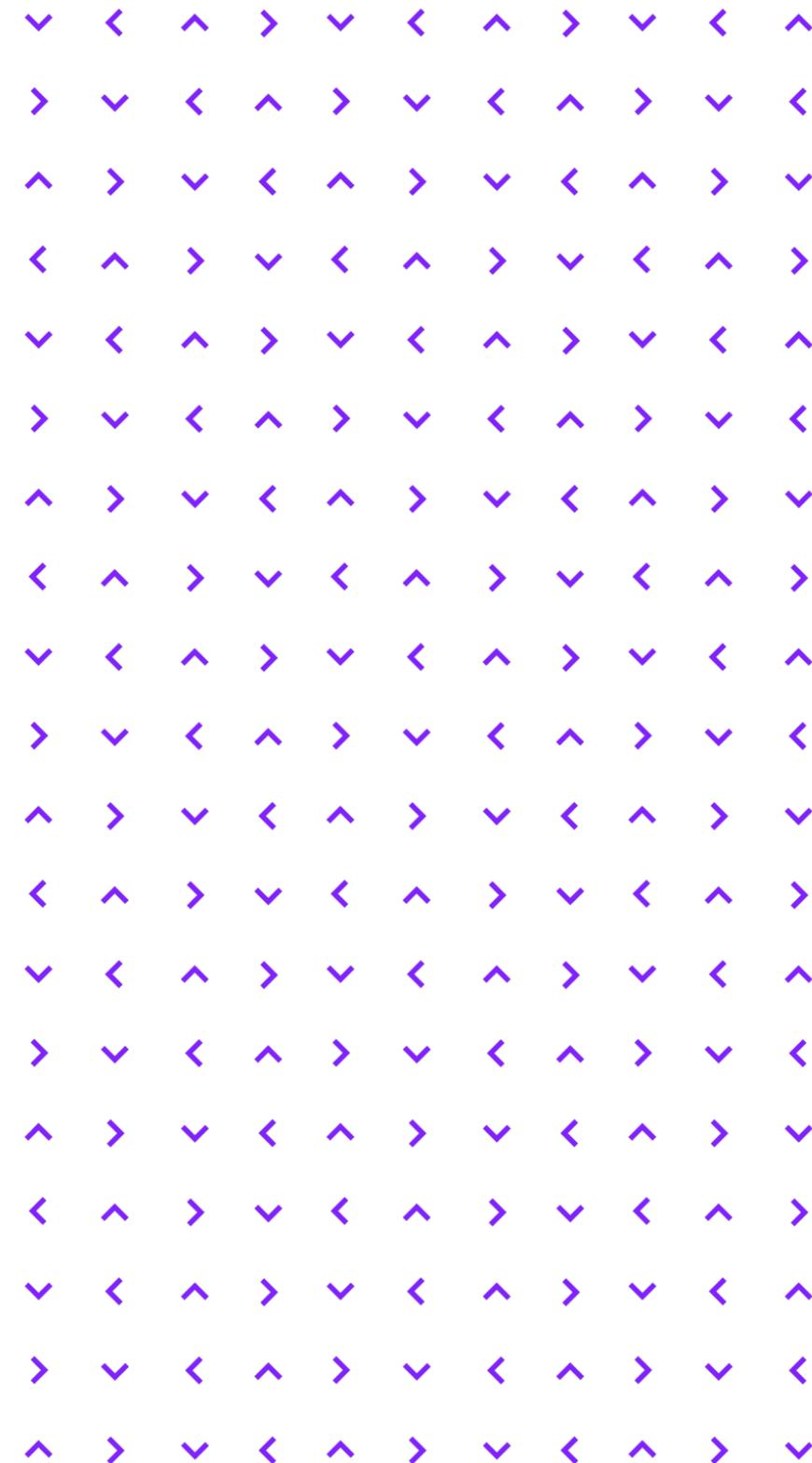
Students were universally clear that digital literacy is very important for their academic success and future plans. All were able to connect specific technologies and digital processes – eg social media, data analysis, online research – to future possible careers. For example, one student noted the increasing prevalence of apps in healthcare and wellbeing professions, and another note the growing importance of video consultancy.

Digital was understood to have value in saving time, facilitating collaboration, and opening up opportunities for creativity and new- potentially global – connections and access to the latest research and thinking. The importance of effective digital communication was widely referenced. The increasing availability of digital learning resources expanded options and meant students had to work harder to process and condense the wide range of information available.

In most cases, the digital tools and platforms students had in mind were not especially advanced: word processing and presentation software, video conferencing, virtual learning environments, data analysing software, virtual whiteboards, and social media and communication platforms. A few mentioned video editing, website development and project management software as part of their experience.

## Key issues with digital literacy

- Students reported that on arrival at university **it was assumed their levels of digital literacy were higher than they actually were**. As a result many felt nervous about asking for help. There was a perception that STEM subjects offered comparatively better training in digital tools.
- Students said they would welcome more support with adopting **appropriate online etiquette and social codes** and good practice for online communications
- The **digital divide** was an ever-present issue, with costs, accessibility, connectivity, porting software across devices, and learning across time zones mentioned frequently.
- **Digital fatigue** was also a concern – one student noted that “from a mental health perspective we don’t get the time to check out.”



*“Digital literacy = literacy - you can’t be called literate in the modern world without being digitally literate.”* (Student, Durham University)

*“In terms of the value of digital skills / literacy, the conversation seemed to come to a consensus that digital skills in the future are as important as (and in some way linked to) inter-personal skills and human interaction.”* (Exeter Guild report)

*“Digital tools allow students to find new solutions to problems faster and work collaboratively even when they are apart.”* (Portsmouth SU report)

*“Participants also felt that it was hard to ask for help sometimes. Either feeling like there was an assumption that they should know the basics or that their questions were too simple.”* (Christ Church SU report)

*“Many participants identified the pandemic as having boosted their digital literacy of navigating tools relating to communication and group working. However, other skills relating to shared social understanding and etiquette needed further work and held equal importance in making the most out of such tools.”* (Aberystwyth SU report)

# Digital literacy in the curriculum

Asked to think about what kinds of activities in the curriculum support digital literacy students were particularly keen on diverse and creative forms of **assessment** – such as video assessment, and assessment that included the use of specific platforms or software such as digital poster presentations.

They particularly emphasised the value of activities that have a “**real-life**” **application** and make use of “real life” examples.

Students saw digital literacy as enabled through the **embedding of digital into other activities** such as research, group work, project planning, conducting surveys and undertaking data analysis.

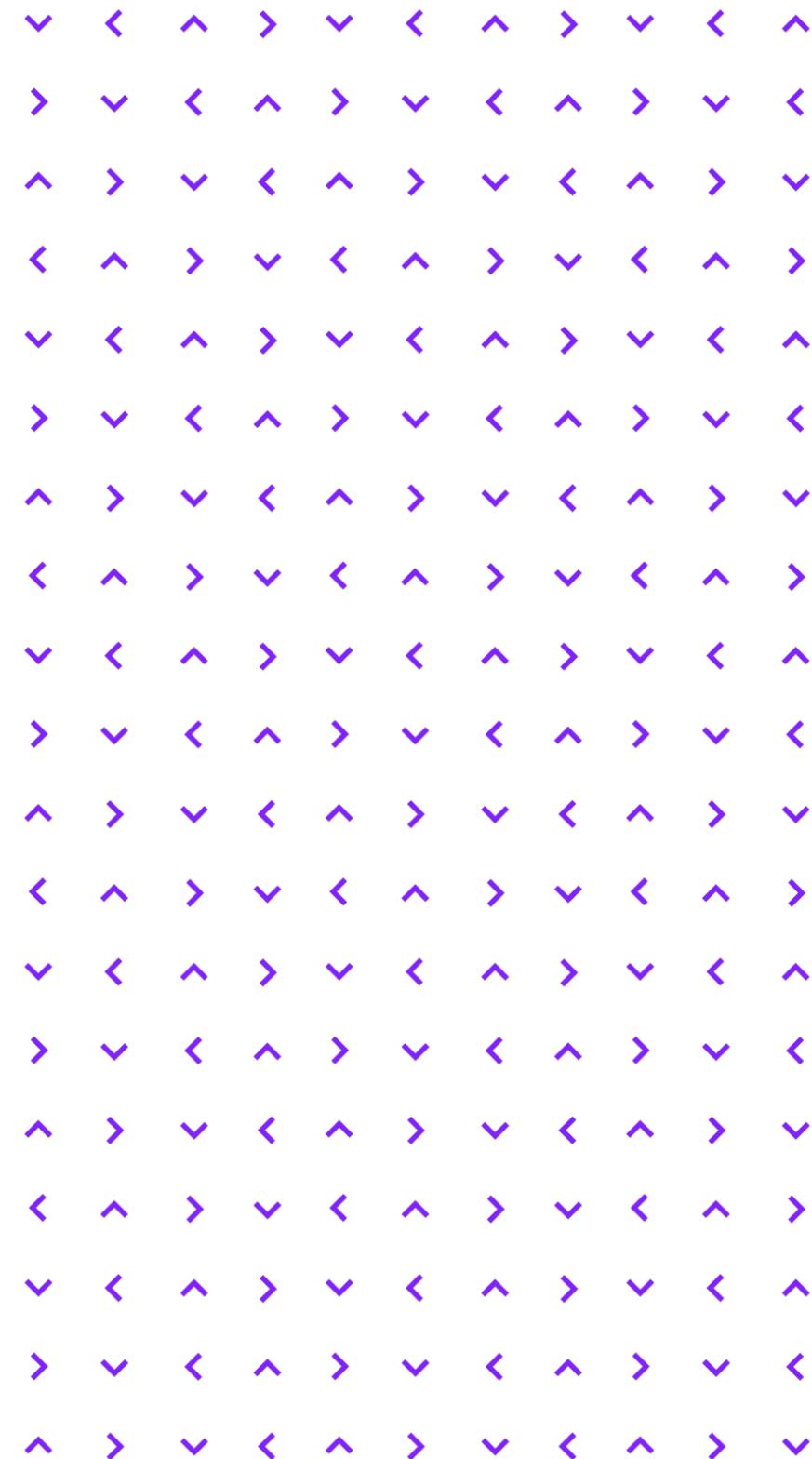
Digital literacy was also perceived to **enable the co-curriculum**, with use of digital tools to support student representation one example. The co-curriculum emerges as a creative space in which students can apply their learning.

Some **struggled to articulate the link** between their curriculum experience and digital skills development, agreeing digital literacy is important but not able to point to how they were developing it.

Students felt their experience of developing digital literacy depended heavily on the **digital literacy of their lecturers**. One group in sharing examples made the distinction between digital as an “add on” and examples of where it had been integrated into the curriculum in interesting ways, and concluded this related to lecturers’ digital fluency.

Students welcomed opportunities to learn digital skills from **peers**, and to **learn by doing**. They hoped to be (gently!) “forced into independence” - with support for “learning how to learn”.

One group felt their digital learning should be awarded with a supplementary “**badge**” they could add to their CV.



*“It was felt that learning from others as well as learning with them was of benefit, and allowed new approaches which enhanced the learning experience and were useful for future skills and ways of working.” (Exeter Guild report)*

*“Students told us that there are few general digital skills workshops, and instead they tend to develop these skills gradually as the curriculum progresses. Students told us that having more digital skills training embedded into their course could increase student confidence with using digital tools.” (Manchester Metropolitan SU report)*

*“Has our learning experience been limited by the knowledge of our tutors? If a lecturer is unaware of a software or support that could help I won't be either.” (Student, University of Aberystwyth)*

*“Integrated software into the course rather than just an add on, helps with future development and learning those skills to take forwards.” (Southampton SU report)*

# Students influencing the curriculum

In many cases, the students attending felt they personally, as course reps, had good relationships with academic staff and felt able to open up a discussion about the curriculum.

However:

- This was not the case everywhere, and many students said they did not feel they had the confidence or permission to discuss the curriculum. Some international students had cultural reservations about “criticising” the curriculum.
- It was widely acknowledged that the wider student body had relatively poor access to these conversations, and this was a challenge.

Students were not always confident in the possibility of change. Some felt the conversations happen too late to change things ie at the end of a module rather than part-way through. Some had been told that accreditation bodies would not permit change. For others it was implied or explicit that staff themselves did not feel they had the authority to make a change.

Some students had been involved in curriculum change campaigns – eg a campaign to have people of colour represented in dermatology textbooks showing examples of different skin complaints.

## Students’ suggestions

- Students wanted more **open and informal opportunities to discuss the curriculum**, such as debate events, or student forums, as well as discussion about the curriculum embedded in the curriculum.
- They saw a **possible role for academic tutors and academic societies** to facilitate conversation, take up issues and “back” students who were lobbying for change.
- Some groups expressed a desire to give more **immediate feedback** than module evaluation permitted eg an anonymous poll at the end of a lecture
- Course reps were also keen to endorse **more sharing of good practice** between student reps, facilitated by students’ unions



*“Some disappointment that students felt that they often had to force the discussion through student staff committees, rather than staff seeking out their opinions as a matter of practice.”* (Sheffield SU report)

*“I think the Course Rep system is really effective because all students feedback is taken into consideration and anything that students have an issue with is immediately changed if possible.”* (Student, Manchester Metropolitan University)

*“there’s definitely a gap where the SU could be assisting more and taking an approach which leads to the “dream-scaping” of future needs which could then be better used to inform development and change in the curriculum.”*  
(Exeter Guild report)

*“I feel academia is really set in its ways, when we ask questions like ‘why exams?’ it seems disregarded because it’s too radical a suggestion to make change.”*  
(Student, University of Aberystwyth)

*“Some felt feedback was often asked a bit too late, so they would not notice the impact, rather it would just improve or develop for future years.”* (Southampton SU report)

# Thank you

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