Graduating the digital campus with honours

"A digital campus is one where students can have different kinds of experiences in a personalised way – in a way that's meaningful to the students whether that is face to face, online or using a blended approach."

**Dr. Jeff Borden, Chief Innovation Officer
Saint Leo University, Florida.**

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> **'The global higher education market comprising software and services is expected to grow from USD 47.95 billion in 2015 to USD 70.62 billion by 2020, at a CAGR of 8.1%.'** [Markets and Markets. Higher education market report 2015]

It seems improbable that the perfectly manicured campuses of Russell Group or Ivy League universities should ever become less central to the learning experience of our student populations. But that's becoming a reality on both sides of the pond, as digital transformation affects higher education.

Universities are big business, and as such are subject to the same forces as everyone else. They're not immune to '3rd Platform' computing – the next phase of information technology that usually only takes place every 20 to 25 years. It's transforming not just the technology industry, but every industry on the planet, creating organisations that are 100% dependent upon their IT infrastructure. Uber and Airbnb own no taxis or hotels, they simply connect us to those who do – IT is their business and their business is IT. This means there are millions of apps being accessed by billions of users to view trillions of things every week, and driving this growth are four main factors: big data, mobility, cloud and social media. [IDC predictions 2015]

Digitisation offers higher education both the greatest challenges and the biggest opportunities in the history of education so far, and requires a top down holistic approach and cultural change. We are entering the next phase where the physical campus is increasingly less important thanks to the emergence of the digital one. And the change must not be underestimated – there are numerous examples, most notably in retail where some of the high street's best-known brands are gone because they didn't adapt fast enough to digital change. Education must not be complacent and believe that it is any different in this regard.

Let's not forget that students are also changing. Much has been written about the generation known as millennials, digital natives, or generation Y: those born after 1980, and how they differ from previous generations. They are of course more digitally savvy, own smartphones, tablets and wearable technology, use social media almost ubiquitously and covet a work life balance. They have high expectations that technology can provide benefits associated with remote working and the ability to collaborate with colleagues or friends from anywhere. It's possible to use technology to make work or education sit more seamlessly alongside family or social life – and generation Y demands it.

In this white paper we consider the challenges and opportunities facing higher education and how to graduate the digital campus with honours.

Meeting the challenges head on:

"Only four out of ten students graduating in 2015 felt they received value for money – a striking view from the first contingent to have paid the full £9,000 capped fee for the whole of their studies." [Deloitte UK: Making the Grade 2015].

In the UK the increasing tuition fee cap has led to a focus on the students and their expectations, the likes of which has never been seen in UK higher education before. As we've already noted, today's students have greater expectations than previous generations due to them paying more for their education and expecting a return on their investment. That could be measured in a number of ways: quality of the education they receive, the results they achieve, the facilities on offer to them or their employability at the end of their studies. Whatever the measurement, universities must acknowledge the need for a customer-centric approach. This will drive institutions to build next generation IT infrastructure to support delivery of smart digital services in order to enhance student engagement, innovation and productivity - helping to meet those rising student expectations.

Increased competition:

Probably the biggest challenge for higher education is the increasing competition they are under to attract and retain the best talent, not just in terms of students, but also staff and researchers. It comes from traditional and non-traditional sources - other domestic universities, fighting mainly on a battleground of reputation and results, as well as overseas universities that increasingly want to attract high-value international talent too.

America's state universities used to show little interest in the international market place, but since budgets have been cut, things are changing with renewed focus on lucrative overseas students. Likewise higher education is one of the UK's leading export markets, and remains a key asset of UK plc. It has a significant revenue stream with some £3bn income generated in 2012□13 from tuition fees from international students. The UK is well positioned to seize the opportunities thanks to its exceptional reputation, with more universities in the top 10, 20 and 100 higher education institutions than any other country aside from the US. [Deloitte UK: Making The Grade 2015]

A Collabco White Paper

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Increasingly however, there are also new sources of competition that come from the ubiquitous availability of knowledge sharing which has opened up the field to those who can provide digital learning. There are endless possibilities – anywhere with an internet connection is now a potential seat of learning and anyone can provide it in the future – even Google. Qualifications that can be offered digitally and delivered in partnership with corporate sponsors may also appeal to the faster-moving millenials who want more skills-based, vocational courses.

In short, simply demonstrating the value of a university degree undertaken in the 'traditional' manner in the face of debts, fees and finding employment is a challenge that our bricks-and-mortar universities must face head on, and requires a complete top down shift in thinking in order to make the most of the opportunities made available by digitisation.

The opportunity of lifelong learning:

"The student decision journey has moved online. One in ten prospective students now search exclusively online for classes and programs." [Google & Compete study (US) 2012]

At any point in time, more students, staff and researchers have left a university, or are still to join it, than those that are currently attending it. Universities must look at the lifecycle of their customers in order to capture and keep them before, during and well beyond the years they are learning. By moving away from departmental, siloed views of students and alumni towards a more customer-focused agenda, it's possible to foster customer loyalty across a set of linked phases in the customer lifecycle – enrolment, learning, graduation and alumni. Digitisation and the growth in mobile usage provide the opportunities to engage with students at each stage of the lifecycle in the way they demand. Mapping the student journey will become central to delivering a personalised and customised higher education offering as well as maintaining, enhancing and developing relationships over a lifetime.

The lifecycle:

Around 77% of US education seekers will first visit a university website at least two weeks, and often two months before taking action [Google & Compete study (US) 2012]. Mobile device usage and increased access to the internet is already impacting the search for the right course in the right university. It's a highly complex, involved decision for most undergraduates to make and to capitalise on the digital opportunities, marketers need to reach students via the right channels and look beyond traditional enrolment periods - with a constant presence online.

An understanding of how students find the course and the institution is also important. Often students do initial searches from a smartphone and then follow up on a desktop or tablet computer. Providing the right information in the correct digestible format at each touch point is key to the overall digital experience of the prospective student and may be the make or break of any relationship. If students use a smartphone to find a course or institution in the first instance, content that's easily digested on a smartphone is paramount to engaging with that audience.

> **"The student experience at university matters more now than ever before, regardless of location. As students connect with their institutions via digital means, the need for communities in online spaces is ever present."**
>
> Eric Stoller, higher education strategic communications consultant & blogger at InsideHigherEd.com

Digitisation also offers institution a way to bring communities together online for efficient learning and collaboration. The sharing of information across what has traditionally been a departmental view of the students opens up ways for those who aren't physically located in the same place to communicate and collaborate as though they were. This undoubtedly has great application for international learning and also for alumni – once they leave and relocate around the world.

In an increasingly digitised world, students are very much in the driving seat demanding content and learning from higher education institutions via their chosen channels and in an accessible, user friendly, personalised and customisable way and without regard for geography, unless relevant.

To graduate the digital campus with honours, higher education institutions on both sides of the Atlantic must engage with them creating communities online that can learn together and share experiences more easily having the information they need at their fingertips to be better informed, as well as socially connected to the wider university population, now and for a lifetime.