



## Digital Wellbeing – A review of the JISC guidance from the UK and Vietnam

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# Digital Wellbeing – A review of the JISC guidance from the UK and Vietnam

## Abstract

**Purpose** - The aim of this paper is to contribute to the discussion of wellbeing within the university education system by outlining the key issues and benefits and recognizing future research on digital well-being for students.

**Design/methodology/approach** - This is a technical review article which summarises key guidance for organisational digital wellbeing and then reflects on the application in the UK (a developed economy) and in Vietnam (one of the fastest growing economies). This is the first time a review has been conducted from the perspective of different countries. There are two aspects to digital wellbeing, individual and the social or organisational perspectives.

**Findings** - The Jisc Digital wellbeing paper highlights the many positive and negative impacts associated with digital wellbeing. This paper explores how some of these features have been considered within institutions within the UK and Vietnam and highlights the emerging research in one Vietnamese institution in relation to student wellbeing, where digital wellbeing was identified as a key concern. The context of digital wellbeing within higher education is then discussed drawing similarities between the UK and Vietnamese student experiences whilst acknowledging the limitations of current research within the field.

**Originality** - Many institutions have seen a rise in the number of wellbeing challenges, and there are few examples of specific initiatives aimed at addressing digital wellbeing challenges for their stakeholders. Existing research on students' wellbeing is predominately focused on undergraduate students and does not differentiate between undergraduate and postgraduate students, nor between Masters, Doctoral, and Professional level students and does not explore the impact of digital wellbeing discretely; this is an area which would benefit from future research.

## Introduction

The term digital wellbeing can be defined as an impact of digital technologies on what it means to live a life that is good for an individual in an information-based society (Burr *et al.* 2020). In a post-Covid19 environment, a student's journey is often perceived as demanding by their institutions, personal tutors, and programme leaders due to the challenges of accessing online digital resources, thus impacting their wellbeing. The ever-evolving implementation in the use of digital technologies and the rapid inclusion by society and within education has forced most students to adapt their relationships with others on the course and the broader environment (Floridi, 2014). Therefore, individual and social well-being is now intimately associated with the information environment and the digital technologies that facilitates our interaction with it, which drives a question concerning the impact of digital technologies on students' well-being within Higher Education (Bao Khanh, 2023).

When outlining key issues posed by using technologies in Higher Education, Burr *et al.* (2020) point out that there are some tangible benefits, such as the implementation of artificial intelligence, which is currently being used within institutions to help support the management and monitoring of student engagement within the class (Roffarello and Russis, 2019). However, the lived experiences of students are multidimensional; as well as acquiring knowledge and expertise about their field of choice, students are required to not only identify and adopt the values and skills necessary to secure careers in their discipline, but to also learn a new academic way of working and thinking, which includes a multitude of digital technologies (Gardner, 2008).

Sverdlik, *et al.* (2020) highlight students have become submerged in their studies, which will often involve longer hours of independent study to successfully tackle a sequence of ill-structured and broad tasks that will culminate in their degree. As a result, this individual path of achievement often increases the deterioration of the students' wellbeing due to the demands of the university educational system (Walker, 2015). However, despite an ever-increasing awareness and support initiative provided within some higher education institutions, the expertise within business and management schools remains limited (McCray & Richard 2021). Therefore, the aim of this paper is to contribute to the discussion by outlining the key issues and benefits and recognizing future research on digital wellbeing for students.

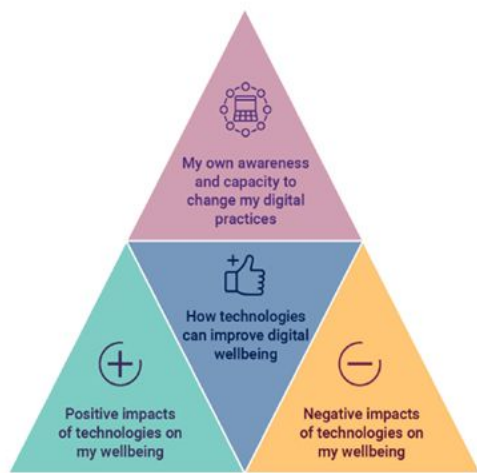
There are two aspects to digital wellbeing: individual and the social or organisational perspectives (Jisc, 2023). Consequently, there are tangible benefits for institutions in providing a positive culture of support for their community from the perspective of both staff and students. Many institutions in both the UK and Vietnam have seen a rise in the number of wellbeing challenges (Tran *et al.*, 2022; Feger *et al.*, 2021; Burr *et al.*, 2020); those institutions that have an active strategy in place and have progressively enacted specific services to support their students have been able to support and minimise associated negative effects. Yet, even with the positive steps taken, the issues in dealing with digital wellbeing challenges for their stakeholders remains challenging for institutions. For example, issues such as adequate resourcing to facilitate effective monitoring and mitigation of constantly evolving digital threats can be complex requiring investment in staff and technology (Do *et al.*, 2022). This is also not helped by existing research on students' wellbeing which is predominately focused on undergraduate students and does not differentiate between undergraduate and postgraduate students, while also not distinguishing between Masters, Doctoral, and Professional level students.

In summary, the purpose of this paper is to outline and review resources for digital wellbeing available online by Jisc, the UK digital, data and technology agency focused on tertiary education, research and innovation (2023). The paper primarily considers guidance made available through Jisc's building digital capability service webpage [Digital wellbeing | Building digital capability \(jisc.ac.uk\)](https://www.jisc.ac.uk/building-digital-capability), with the focus on digital wellbeing. This article is relevant to an international audience as, whilst focusing on institutions in the UK and Vietnam, the global nature of digital engagement ensures that similar issues are likely to be replicated in institutions worldwide.

## Summary of technical guidance

Individuals know that it is important for them to take control over digital wellbeing, but not all have the opportunity or capacity to manage impacts of technology and digital services on their lives. For example, in employment contexts where staff may not be able to change the impact of technologies on their work or in personal contexts where individuals may not have access to, not be included in, or not be provided with enough support or capacity to realize and prevent negative effects of technologies (Gui, 2017).

Jisc has developed the below pyramid model focusing on four aspects of individual digital wellbeing for individuals, which has been designed to depict the underpinning positive and negative impacts of technologies on wellbeing, the central potential for technologies to improve wellbeing and the resulting stresses on both the individual's awareness and capacity to change their digital practices.



Jisc - Four aspects of digital wellbeing for individual model

Jisc has suggest that technologies and digital activities can impact on physical, mental, social and emotional wellbeing in both positive and negative ways. How far these might affect an individual depends on their social, personal, learning and work contexts. For digital social wellbeing, some positive impacts are: preventing isolation, building and maintaining relationships, reducing loneliness, full participation and connection with family, friends and wider communities, increased opportunities for inclusion (e.g. disabled people), whereas negative ones have been found to include such things as cyberbullying, online grooming (e.g. sexual exploitation, radicalization), exclusion and/or accessibilities (e.g. gender, age, poverty). For digital personal wellbeing, positive impacts have been identified, including creating a positive identity, building self worth, employment (e.g. games, fun, interactions, music), convenience/time saving (e.g. shopping), access to new ideas/ inspiration, tools for physical health, while some negative impacts have been realized such as negative comparison with others, additive online behaviour, passive consumption, access to illegal activities/ materials, personal data breaches, lack of access and/or being left behind, lack of sleep, impact on physical health (e.g. eye strain, posture, lack of exercise).

Colleges and universities in the UK and Vietnam are increasingly focusing on students’ personal and mental wellbeing which does include elements of digital wellbeing, although this is limited in respect of Postgraduate students (Sverdlik, et al. 2020). As suggested in the Jisc report (2023), staff and students may have more control over their digital wellbeing in personal and social contexts than they do in a learning or a work context, but only if they have the knowledge, capacity and appropriate support to do so. Digital learning wellbeing has both positive and negative impacts, the positive ones could be seen such as alternative ways to learn, online collaborative learning opportunities, engaging learning activities, practice digital skills for employment, learn digital skills for new careers/career change, increased access to learning, more engaging assessment, and feedback. However, there have been some negatives impacts: lack of digital skills, digital overload, negative impact of compulsory online collaboration, time learning new technologies not the subject, inappropriate use of technologies, lack of choice (e.g. told which technologies to use). For digital work wellbeing, some positive impacts have been mentioned: improved communication, global collaboration, flexible working, tools to manage workload, tools to make things easier, creating positive online professional identity, links to other professionals/ subject networks, while some negatives ones could be pointed out: digital overload, always on (24-hour access), changes to job roles/activities, automation of tasks (e.g. redundancy), poor ergonomics.

**Managing your own digital wellbeing - positive actions for individuals (Jisc, 2023):**

- **Access and utilise appropriate training and guidance for digital systems and tools relevant to your learning and role**
- **Take time to explore and understand your own digital preferences and needs:** for educators this may include encouraging students to identify their needs based upon permanent disabilities, temporary impairments and any mental or physical health challenges that can affect technology use. Educators should familiarise themselves with the advantages of adjustable features such as screen contrast, text size, colour adjustments, and use of assistive technologies and ensure students are made aware of how and where to access such resources effectively.
- **Consider the impact of digital activities on your own and others' health:** reduce negative impact by observing good posture, taking regular screen breaks, adjusting monitor brightness, making sure you get enough sleep, avoiding addictive behaviours, challenge and avoid the negative online behaviour of others, use security features like passwords and two-step authentication processes, report any environmental problems back through appropriate channels, take a proactive role in identifying potential challenges and sharing good practice.
- **Manage digital workload:** although technology can help to improve efficiency it can create unrealistic expectations that support will be available 24:7 and cause stress, manage emails and avoid distractions.
- **Make sure you know how to use digital equipment, tools, services and content safely:** Your work and study environments are ergonomically designed and comply with health and safety requirements. Students and staff should be aware of organisational guidelines about safe use and practices.
- **Create and manage a positive digital identity (professional and personal):** It is up to individuals how visible they would like to be online and in digital communities, but all students and staff need to be aware of their digital footprint and how their online activities, and those of others, can affect this. Always focus on making a positive contribution.
- **Ensure that any services, content and systems that you provide, or produce are accessible and inclusive.** Your college or university will be working towards compliance with EU and UK government regulations for the accessibility of online content. There are also broader considerations in relation to accessibility and inclusion that can impact significantly on individual digital wellbeing. Staff should be aware of these and be working towards improving accessibility.

**Good practice principles to support the digital wellbeing of others** - areas when staff could help learners to:

- Know how to effectively access and use the digital content, systems and tools that your organisation provides – having guidance readily available or offering workshops to support staff and/or students can be an effective way of managing this.
- Be able to choose the most appropriate technologies for learning or for specific tasks – ensuring staff are trained on the commonly used technologies and/or have a dedicated staff member available to provide advice and guidance on such matters can be beneficial; in the UK this may be provided by a dedicated Learning Services team but can also be supported by having an educator tasked with oversight of these technologies within individual schools or faculties.

- Access and use appropriate technological support and guidance through signposting of relevant support personnel and services within pastoral meetings with students, through websites, internal marketing activities or promotion during teaching sessions.
- Understand their own digital learning preferences and needs (e.g., assistive technologies, personal learning environments) – educators are required to consider this in the same way that students are. They should also consider whether particular programmes of study require specific digital learning support; auditing this and engaging in regular reviews taking on feedback from both staff and students can facilitate this.
- Manage digital workload and learning (e.g., planning and preparation, avoiding distraction). The demands from both the perspectives of staff and students should be considered and steps taken to mitigate (e.g. ensuring sufficient time and/or training is provided to ensure stakeholders are confident on how to navigate relevant technologies).
- Safely use digital equipment, tools, services and content to maintain physical and mental health (e.g., observe good posture, follow guidelines and safety regulations, take screen breaks, adjust monitor brightness, get enough sleep and avoid addictive behaviours)
- Use security features like passwords and two-step authentication processes.
- Develop digital capabilities to support their digital wellbeing (e.g., information, media, financial, data literacies)
- Create and manage positive digital identities personally and in preparation for work
- Take opportunities to positively participate in appropriate communities (e.g. personal, political, social, educational, professional networks)

## Reflection on application

Although research has primarily focused upon schools (Le, et al., 2019; Tao, et al., 2022), there has been some research on digital wellbeing in universities in Vietnam (Nguyen, et al., 2021). In 2021, the Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City (VNU-HCM) announced research results on the impact of Covid-19 on the mental health of VNU-HCM students (Tran, et al, 2022). The research found that digital wellbeing was a top concern, significantly affecting mental health for students. The survey was conducted from on an online platform for all university students studying at VNU-HCM, including 6 topics: delivery and assessment in online environment; mental health and well-being of students during the Covid-19 period; Covid-19 and students' perspectives on careers; Covid-19 and personal and family finances; opinions on policies to support learners; personal information. 37,150 students participated in the survey, in which there are 17,969 women (48.4%) and 19,181 men (51.6%).

The survey results showed that, amongst the psychological pressures that students endure, the problem of online learning pressure is recorded the highest (65.1%). Students tended to worry about this, both because of equipment reasons and pandemic-related stress, both because of the loss of daily activities and formal or informal support, and such as being particularly concerned about safety when living in difficult or dangerous environments. In addition, there are other significant mental pressures on students: anxiety about the ability to pay tuition fees (58.9%), conflicts with family in understanding issues (27.7%), or being overworked (27.1%).

This research coincided with the Minister of Education and Training Notice of Conclusion (Duc-Long, et al., 2021) on the organisation of the online counselling program *Accompanying students in the Covid season* with the themes of learning practice, life skills training, psychological counselling to provide psychological counselling and support to students during the time of studying at home to prevent and control the epidemic. To address students' wellbeing needs with respect to issue of psychological support for students after studying online at home, educators from the Ho Chi Minh City University of



Education in Vietnam developed a manual on mental health care for students alongside a digital handbook that could be spread to students according to the policy of the Ministry of Education and Training. This is a novel approach which has not widely reflected across other higher education institutions, including within the UK. Although UK institutions routinely have wellbeing services in place to support students which do include digital wellbeing apps and access to online personal wellbeing support; there remains a lack of emphasis on the support available for digital learning wellbeing which can have negative impacts upon both university staff and students alike.

Although there have been sharing sessions from experts in newspapers or talk shows organised by colleges and universities, there has not yet been guidance provided at governmental or university level about digital wellbeing in either the UK or Vietnam. However, many colleges and Universities in both countries have designed policies and guidance on how to shift from in-person classes to online classes and how to adapt to the new normal when the Covid-19 pandemic happened and after the pandemic. Both the UK and Vietnamese universities have tried to provide more individual consultancy on mental and physical health for staff and students, but it seems that no empirical research on this has been carried out, and there has not yet been guidance in a systematic way for leaders, administrators, teaching staff and students on how to use technology and digital tools or digital services in a safe and controlled way.

## Final Implications

Digital wellbeing in Higher Education is an unexplored field in Vietnam much the same as it is in the UK. The lack of central guidance around digital wellbeing in the UK has led to inconsistencies in practice amongst departments and faculties within the same institutions, and across the sector. Although most UK institutions have provided some basic training for staff around the implementation of online teaching, this focuses primarily upon the basic processes of engaging practically with the available resources and fails to explore the impact of digital wellbeing which is particularly significant in relation to digital learning. UK students have expressed concerns around the quality of digital learning due to issues with access to appropriate technologies, lack of face-to-face interactions and concerns about the resulting reduction in nuanced engagement and responsiveness. These issues are consistent amongst both undergraduate and postgraduate students, but further research is required to explore the specific concerns of distinct groups, for example the experiences of postgraduate researchers, due to demographics, external pressures (such as caring responsibilities) and nature of study may contrast to the experiences of a new undergraduate.

Importantly, there is very limited research on the digital wellbeing of postgraduate students in Vietnam and the UK. The mental health and digital wellbeing for groups of students should be taken much attention during the Covid pandemics and post-covid 19. Covid-19 has aggravated problems and mental pressure on students, and this is consistent both across the UK and Vietnam and greater awareness of this from educators would benefit student populations in these countries but should also be considered by other international institutions who are likely to be experiencing similar challenges. The Vietnam-based research (Tran *et al*, 2021) indicated special support measures including exchange activities and interactive activities are necessary, especially during the time students' study online. In addition, female students, students with financial difficulties or students whose parents have died due to Covid-19 were identified as the most in need of mental support yet more research is required to identify the underlying causes for this and whether this can be attributed to acute needs within these groups or their readiness to seek support in comparison to other groups. Educators should therefore be encouraged to utilise the Jisc (2023) paper to support them in identifying current best practice and areas for development within their own institutions.

Consideration should be given to the needs of specific groups with support tailored to meet the needs of these cohorts within the context of the specific institutional background, available resources, and digital engagement. Whilst each institution will undoubtedly face nuanced issues, the broad nature of the guidance set out in the Jisc paper will provide value to educators and students from a broad range of contexts worldwide.

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