

Not all today's students are 'tech savvy'

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A small minority of today's university students don't use email and others are confused by the array of technologies available at universities. Yet many students couldn't bear to be without their mobile phones and find themselves distracted by social networking sites during study.

These are the some of the findings from research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) into how today's generation of [students](#) use technology. The research, led by Dr Christopher Jones of the Open University, surveyed and interviewed over two thousand first year students at five English universities.

"Our research shows that the argument that there is a generational break between today's generation of young people who are immersed in new technologies and older generations who are less familiar with technology is flawed," says Dr Jones. "The diverse ways that young people use technology today shows the argument is too simplistic and that a new single generation, often called the 'net generation', with high skill levels in technology does not exist."

There was little difference in the reported IT skill levels between the sexes, except [male students](#) were more confident than female students in their use of spreadsheets, graphics, audio/video, computer maintenance and security. But university staff noted that while students had a wide exposure to technology, they often lacked an in-depth knowledge of specialised pieces of software.

The research findings included that almost all (97.8 per cent) had a

mobile phone, just over three quarters (77.4 per cent) owned a laptop and over a third (38.1 per cent) owned a [desktop computer](#). Over two thirds (70.1 per cent) felt their access to computers was sufficient to meet their computing needs, and the mobile phone was chosen by 83.2 per cent as the device students would miss most if they did not have access to it.

However, the surveys also revealed a small minority of students who either didn't use email or have access to mobile phones. For example, students who were 20 years old or younger reported being more engaged in instant messaging, texting, participating in social networks, downloading or streaming TV or video and uploading images than students who were aged 25 years or more.

In another example, only 4.3 per cent of those aged 20 or younger never used social networking websites compared to 78.5 per cent of those aged 35 years or older. The younger students also used information and communication technologies for social life and leisure more often while older students were more likely to use them for study purposes.

In their studies, students used these new technologies more than they were required to by their course. This was particularly marked for instant messaging and social networks. However, certain new technologies were only used by a minority of students regardless of their age: contributing to blogs (21.5 per cent) and wikis (12.1 per cent) or using a virtual world (2 per cent).

Despite mobile devices and broadband enabling students to study anywhere, they still inhabit the same kinds of learning spaces they used ten years ago. They continue to study in their bedrooms, the university library or other dedicated study spaces.

The distracting nature of technologies was commonly cited in the

interviews but also happily accepted. Most students had developed ways to cope with the distractions while studying. These ranged from switching off the sources of distraction to taking breaks for social networking.

There was little evidence that today's students enter university with demands for new technologies that teachers and universities cannot meet. Several students reported initial surprise or confusion at the array of technologies that were available at their university, but few thought that this led to long-term difficulties. Teachers who are prepared to develop their own skills with these new technologies and integrate them carefully into their courses are unlikely to be held back by a preceding generation.

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

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