

A photograph of four international students sitting outdoors at night. A young man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a blue denim shirt, is holding a smartphone and looking at it. Behind him, a young woman with curly blonde hair and glasses is also looking at the phone. To the right, a young woman with long dark hair is smiling and looking towards the phone. In the foreground, a young woman with long blonde hair, wearing a green and blue striped sweater, is looking at the phone. They are all sitting on a stone ledge with a metal railing in the background.

# From culture shock to digital shock: Preparing international students for an unfamiliar digital environment

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# Who are Jisc?

We're on a mission to improve lives through the digital transformation of education and research.

That's why we exist.  
It's what drives us every day.

Our vision is for the UK to be a world leader in technology for education, research and innovation.





# Why look at the digital experiences of international students?



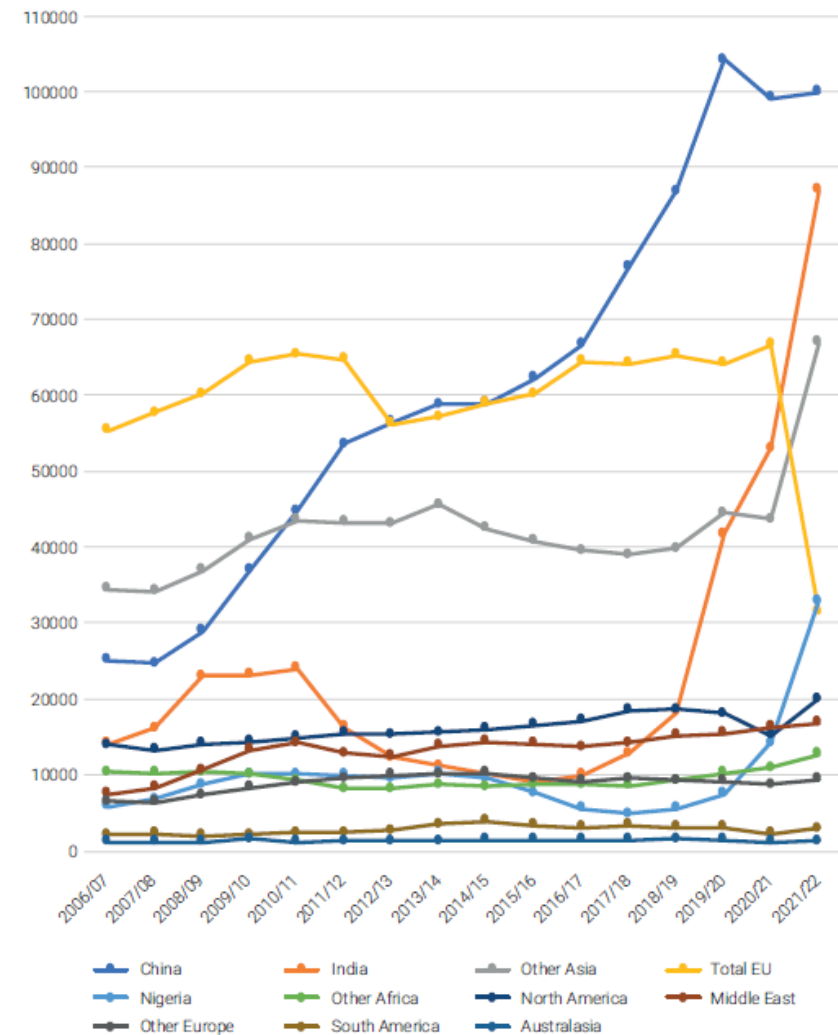
- UK higher education (HE) embeds digital into teaching and learning like never before
- Numbers of international students coming to the UK to study are higher than ever
- Important for UK HE to consider the expectations and experiences of international students to support their transition
- This isn't just about access; this is about considering cultural and digital expectations and differences
- Understanding the experiences of international students ultimately helps all students to better access and learn

# **International students in the UK: facts and figures**

# International student population

- 2021/22: 680,000 international students from 200+ countries/territories (HESA data)
- 17% full-time UG and 67% full-time PGT are international students
- In last five years, significant increase in students coming from Southern and Eastern Asia and a decrease in EU students

Figure 1. First year non-UK domiciled students by domicile. HESA data, recreated here under CC-BY 4.0



Original chart available from the HESA website

# Phases of Jisc research: International students' digital experience

- **Phase one** reviewed issues and perspectives from UK HE policy makers, academic and grey literature, and advocates working in this space
- **Phase one** report published in April, available from [ji.sc/international-students-digital-experience](https://ji.sc/international-students-digital-experience)
- **Phase two** consulted directly with international students at 14 HE providers to better understand their experiences
- **Phase two** report published 20 November 2023, with a set of briefing papers to follow in new year
- **Phase three** is being scoped with sector input



# From culture shock to digital shock

## Culture shock definition:

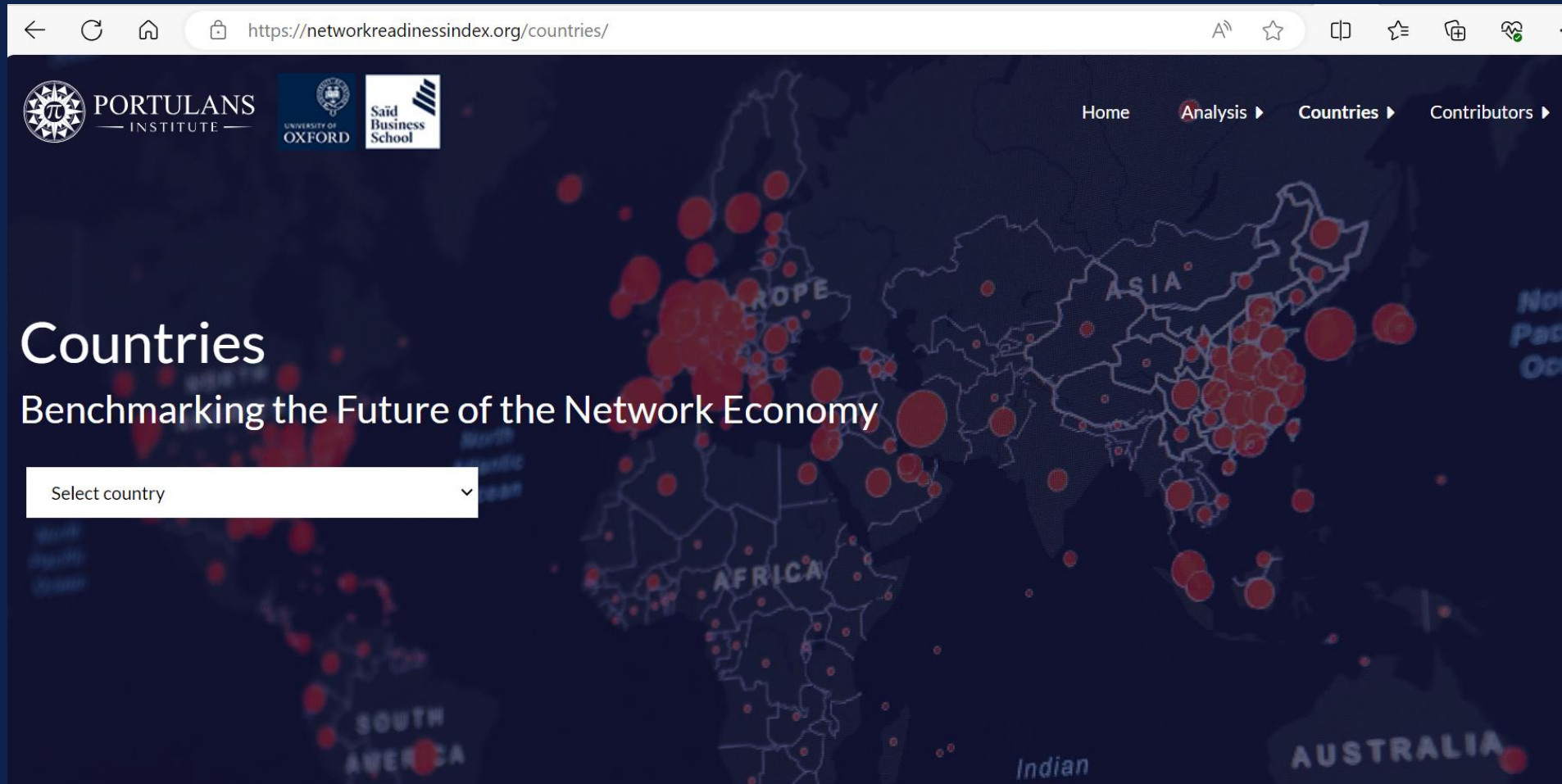
*‘the feeling of disorientation experienced by someone when they are suddenly subjected to an unfamiliar culture, way of life, or set of attitudes’*

UKCISA (2016) 5 top tips for dealing with culture shock

Available at:

<https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/Information--Advice/Preparation-and-Arrival/Facing-culture-shock>

# Diversity of digital experiences in and between countries



<https://networkreadinessindex.org/countries/>



## **Phase two: consultation with international students**

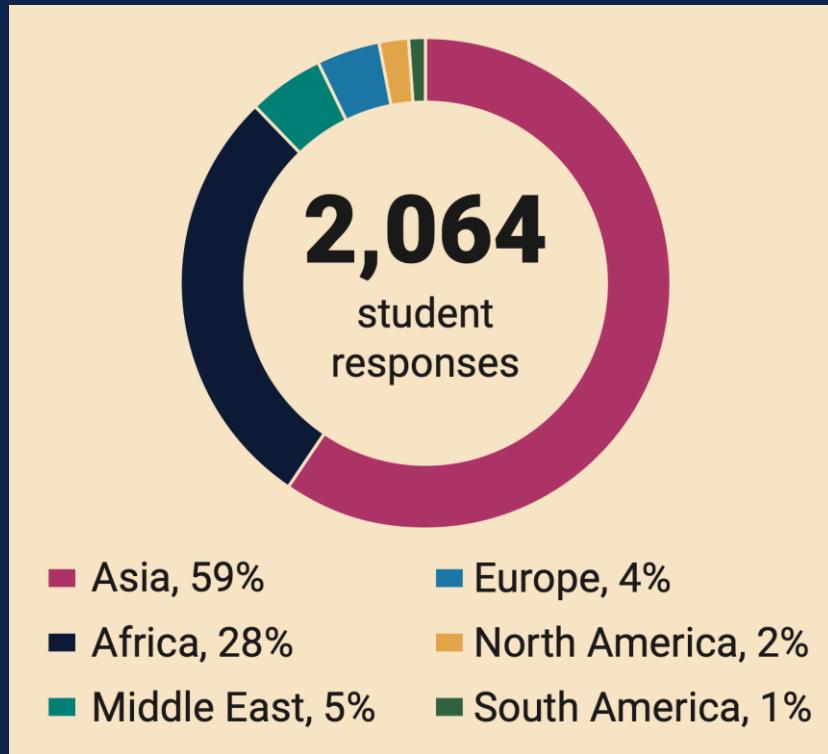
# Research methods



- Anonymous online survey across 14 HEIs (N=2,064 responses)
- Focus groups in 10 sites across 9 HEIs (N=150 students)
- All focus groups carried out offline, with students using nicknames
- International students reimbursed for their time

**Whose voices are represented?**

# Who we asked



- 80% PGT students
- 67% English was a second language
- Most participants from Asia or Africa
- Most common home countries: India (26% survey), Nigeria (20% survey)
- Fewer Chinese students than national cohort
- Significant differences in digital use between sub-areas of Asia, notably Indian Subcontinent versus East Asia
- Age: 33% focus group and 38% survey respondents 30+
- Gender: 60% female, 40% male



# Who we asked

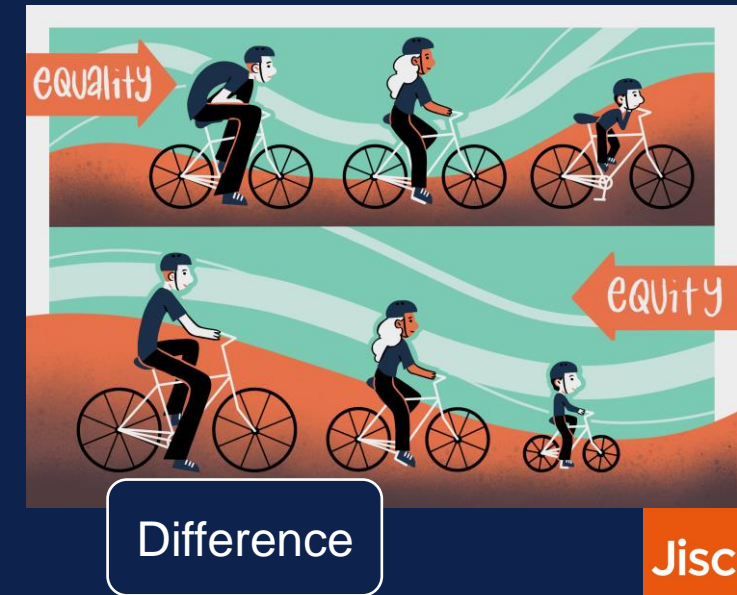
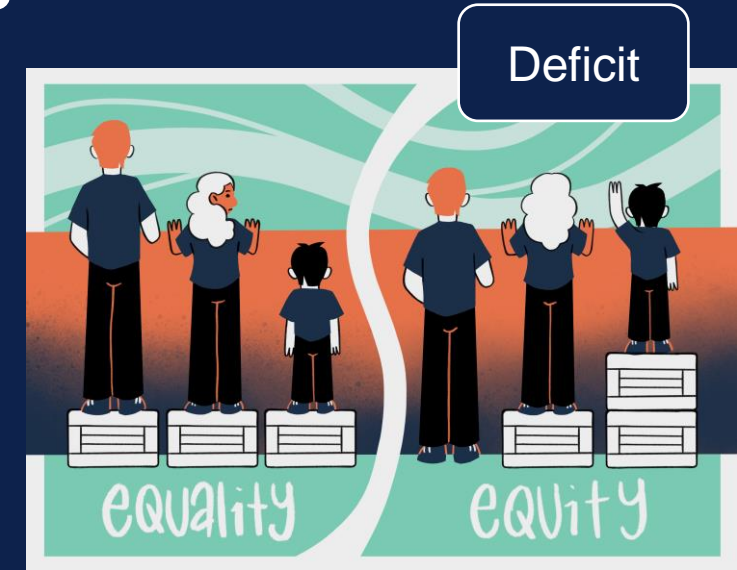
- Most were mature students
- Many previously held careers relevant to their current PGT
- We met people who in their home country were architects, GPs, accountants etc
- Almost equal number of participants attended private school (fee paying) versus state/government funded school



# Use of digital in home country

# Home country infrastructure and learning differences

- 46% of East Asian students felt their access to reliable Wi-Fi in their home country was better than in the UK
- 57% of African international students were used to daily power cuts, 18% in Indian Subcontinent and 2% in Europe
- Students across all groups used digital daily to support their learning but more students from African countries did so amid frequent power cuts and less access to reliable Wi-Fi
- African students told us they often relied on mobile data (4G or 5G) and secondary power sources



# On course digital experience



# Areas of common experience

- Most students were positive about exposure to technology-enabled learning (TEL)
- Most international students are using AI to support their learning
- Struggles included: authentication, access to university systems outside UK, lecturers with unfamiliar accents, lack of subtitled recorded lectures
- Some international students do not expect access to reliable, high-speed Wi-Fi



# Digital shocks



- Expectations around how technology-enabled learning is used in UK HE
- Navigation and understanding of how, when and why to use digital
- Understanding what digital is: university-provided, licensed from other suppliers, accessible post-graduation
- Additional support to develop digital skills to enable equitable access to learning
- Additional language needs driving digital inequality

**A focus on online behaviours**

# Online behaviour comfort levels

- American students more likely to feel comfortable turning on their webcam
- Students from African and Indian Subcontinent countries were more likely to feel comfortable raising a hand to speak
- East Asian students had a preference to not engage in any forms of online interaction other than posting comments in the chat





# Digital shocks in the wider learning experience

# 'Good digital' isn't enough for a good learning experience

- Happy with the digital resources provided on course but...
- Many hadn't appreciated amount of self-directed and independent learning
- Expected more:
  - face-to-face teaching
  - access to lecturers for one-to-ones
  - opportunities of group discussion and debate with course peers



# Two-way dialogue, grade boundaries and parental pressure



- Current digital practice was predominantly experienced as one-way
- UK HE grade boundaries are often very different leading to shock and anxiety for students used to getting high marks (80%+)
- Parents can place significant pressure and, without managing expectations, current UK marking schemes do not make students look good back home
- Clear guidance sought on how to improve grades in future assessments

# Summary and recommendations



# Top five recommendations

Pre-arrival

Arrival

On course

Strategic thinking

1. Manage expectations. Provide clear information about (a) how technology will be used on course, (b) what additional support is provided for broader digital skills, (c) the importance of self-directed study in UK HE, (d) typical grade boundaries, and (e) how to expect to use technology in day-to-day life both on and off-campus. Institutions may want to consider offering differential support to international students based on their digital experiences prior to arriving in the UK (four infrastructure groups?)
2. Provide international students with an overview of university digital systems and how they interact, and facilitate access from abroad
3. Ensure all recorded lectures have clear, high-quality audio and captions that are checked to ensure critical subject-related terminology is captioned as intended
4. Design teaching and learning activities to cater for a diversity of digital experience and comfort levels, and support international students to learn new digital skills
5. Ensure that the digital experience support requirements of international students on transition to UK HE are reflected in institutional strategies on-course, including those relating to business planning, digital transformation, teaching and learning, and EDI

# International students' digital experience phase two: experiences and expectations

*“This research into the international student digital experience is vital. It will inform a wide range of stakeholders, improving the HE experience of all our international students, and positioning the UK as a world class study destination”*

Jacqui Jenkins, Global Programme Lead –  
International Students Mobility, Education and Society  
– **British Council**

**Phase two** report published today  
**20 November 2023**  
available from <https://ji.sc/isdx-phase-two>



# Follow the ISDX project

If you are interested in following the outcomes of this project, please register your interest

[ji.sc/stay-informed-isdx](https://ji.sc/stay-informed-isdx)

Find out more







Get in touch ...

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