

Charting the evolution of the Student Digital Champions at the University of Plymouth

**Vivian Hocking, Michaela Moclair and Christie Pritchard
(University of Plymouth)**

Introduction

The Student Digital Champion (SDC) programme at the University of Plymouth is a peer support scheme, which seeks to draw upon the digital literacy of the institution's more technically minded students to provision support to their peers around digital tools and technologies. In its current iteration, the SDC programme runs daily drop-in clinics on our campus where students can receive one-to-one support, primarily in-person. Clinics are situated either in our Student Services Hub (which also includes our careers and wellbeing services) or within the university library, alongside our peer-led academic writing support programme known as the Writing Café. Students can seek support to resolve queries around the Digital Learning Environment (DLE) used at Plymouth, timetable issues, installing and effectively utilizing software, as well as seek support with online enrolment and digital assignment submissions. The clinics can be easily identified thanks to two large rollup vinyl banners, situated next to the permanent one alongside the Writing Café.

It has been recognised widely that students can make valuable contributions to the development of their peers and the digital capabilities of staff by sharing their experiences and running sessions related to the use of digital technologies (Topping, 2005; Kligyte et al, 2021). This partnership between the student partners and the staff in our Digital Education team, enables the university to better understand and address the digital capabilities and needs of its student community. This understanding is achieved both through monitoring the unique interactions that the programme has with the student community and supplemented

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by canvassing students with questionnaires designed to gauge literacy with, and the value of, specific technologies.

Institutional context

Providing a supportive environment to our diverse student population is crucial to ensuring their success. The majority of students come to the University of Plymouth from the South West, the region with the lowest progression to higher education in England, and the student population has higher than average proportions of students with a declared disability, students from state schools and students from low participation neighbourhoods. The university also has a growing population of international students.

At the University we have multiple long-standing, nationally recognised and celebrated peer-led initiatives. These include our Peer Assisted Learning Scheme, Hello Project, and the Writing Café¹. The Student Digital Champions are a key part of our integrated, innovative, and supportive teaching and learning environment to ensure that all students are able to learn from their peers in a transformative way. The SDCs work throughout the academic year, enhancing students' transition to university and right through to the completion of their studies. They play a significant part in making sure new students feel welcome and that they belong, which is both empowering and reassuring. The Student Digital Champions educate their peers, as well as academic staff members within the schools. Crucially, they also play a key role in helping the university to adopt key technology changes and contribute to our overall digital transformation.

Employing our students to work alongside staff and students to enhance digital learning throughout the disciplines not only provides academic support to our community, but as Felten et al (2019) highlight, they also transform academic development. We recognise our Senior SDCs as key change agents who can help shape our digital projects and the overall digital experience at our university. They are critical members of our steering, project and

¹ <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/news/peer-led-learning-contributes-to-outstanding-student-experience>

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working groups, which lead and oversee widespread change in areas such as our digital learning ecosystem, our development of digital exam provision and our guidance and resources for both staff and students.² In connection with the digital learning aspects of the JISC Framework for digital transformation in higher education (McGill, 2023), they are also helping guide the university in considering the impact of artificial intelligence in the higher education sector. Their ideas, prior experiences, energy and commitment to the educational mission of the university and digital transformation helps ensure we have a holistic approach to success.

This approach is weaved throughout our strategy, 'University 2030: a Future of Excellence'. The Student Digital Champions are celebrated across the university, with executive-level support. This senior sponsorship ensures the future presence of peer-led engagement opportunities and allows practices to evolve as new technologies emerge in our journey of digital transformation. As well as being highly celebrated across the institution, the SDCs featured as part of our gold rated submission to the OfS Teaching Excellence Framework. The review panel specifically highlighted the work of these students in ensuring excellent academic support and an outstanding student experience.

Specifications of the SDC programme

Originally envisioned as a four-month pilot project to recruit and train Student Digital Champions across schools within our institution, the launch of the SDC programme was impacted by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and forced to pivot into an online-only format. Our peer-led approach is institutionally funded from the Academic Development Department, demonstrating the university's commitment to the programme and ensuring students are paid and rewarded for their time and commitment. Rather than being able to launch with a physical presence on our campus, the adapted format of the programme instead moved forward with an increased focus on drawing upon the experience of the student partners to obtain feedback for the institution. This online format enabled the

² <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/the-tef/tef-case-studies/taking-a-holistic-approach-to-peer-led-learning/>

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programme to understand how the student community was engaging with, and utilizing, the digital tools and technologies that were available to them.

Facilitated by a staff partnership through a combination of Microsoft Teams and Zoom meetings, each week the SDCs were given remote tasks and asked to record their reflections of completed work in digital diaries on PebblePad. As is highlighted by Pham and Muralles, the use of such collaborative software provides a 'degree of transparency and accountability' (2023, p 111) between the SDCs and the staff team. Within their digital diaries, the SDCs kept logs of the tasks they had completed, and the new technologies (if any) they had tried during that week. Reflective of the digital culture and mindset element within the JISC Framework for digital transformation in higher education (McGill, 2023), the PebblePad diaries enabled the staff team to gain insight into what the SDCs felt was either going well or not going well, so that they could action changes accordingly.

Throughout this initial year of the programme, SDCs were tasked with reviewing the accessibility of learning resources on the institution's DLE, creating video tutorials for digital tools via Panopto and curating new LinkedIn Learning pathways that could demonstrate how LinkedIn Learning could be utilized within taught undergraduate programmes.

Building a Community Post-Covid

Following the withdrawal of COVID restrictions, the programme was challenged with transitioning back out of its adapted online state to the physical pilot that had originally been envisioned. This began with effectively rebooting the programme and establishing the Student Digital Champions as a face-to-face service within the university library, alongside existing student-facing, staff-provided library and IT support services. With the prior shift to the online environment in the 2020-21 academic year, SDCs had been forced to adapt their communication methods to the remote space. The SDCs now had to renegotiate their adapted skills between an online and physical presence, ensuring that they were able to continue identifying the potential digital development needs of students and staff. With four

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of the SDCs from the previous year remaining in the programme, there was a continuous rapport via fortnightly briefings that occurred in person and online via Zoom.

Drawing from the online presence, the transition into the physical space began by designing and offering face-to-face training sessions, orientated towards increasing levels of digital literacy within the student community. These sessions were entirely student-led, designed by the four SDCs and included topics around learning support technologies such as Panopto and Zoom. Sessions also covered basic capabilities such as navigating the DLE and the digital submission of coursework assignments. Whilst the sessions provided opportunities for students to meet with other students, they also facilitated the development of those initial physical peer-to-peer relationships. As an unexpected benefit, advertising these sessions meant that the programme also began to attract not just students for SDC support, but staff too.

From the recorded interactions achieved by SDCs in the 2020-21 academic year, Table 1 shows the frequency of staff interactions, as well as a breakdown of the disciplines staff members originated from. Academic staff encompasses all teaching and research staff whilst professional services encompass all business and administrative staff.

Staff Role	Frequency	Percentage
Academic	4	57.1%
Professional Services	3	42.9%
Total	7	100.0%

Table 1 – Frequency of staff interactions within the 2020-2021 academic year.

Stationed alongside staff in the university library at the 'Ask Us Desk,' the SDCs supplemented the drop-in service where students could request in-depth assistance for university-related IT problems. SDCs triaged queries, such as paying for, and carrying out, printing as well as software installation and licensing.

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"I was really happy with the support by friendly Digital Champion Harriet. I first approached Harriet when I was setting up Wi-Fi access on my new computer and she helped me get online really quickly... Harriet went above and beyond to find the answer for me and we met up later in the week to go through it and get everything set up. This has been really helpful and has meant that I can now edit my Solidworks files at home when needed, as well as having more time to practice. Thank you for the support, highly recommended!"

- First Year Mechanical Engineering Student

Across the year, SDCs were asked to record each interaction that they had with students. Table 2 shows a sample of student interactions within this period, where partially complete or otherwise unclear interactions have been excluded. The table highlights the frequency of interactions with students across the different stages of academic engagement. Further to this, Table 3 provides an overview of the faculties that these student interactions originated from.

Year	Frequency	Percentage
Foundation	4	2.1%
Year 1	85	43.6%
Year 2	20	10.3%
Year 3	26	13.3%
Year 4	7	3.6%
Masters	44	22.6%
PhD	9	4.6%
Total	195	100.0%

Table 2 – Frequency of student interaction across stages of academic engagement (2021-22).

Faculty	Frequency	Percentage
Arts, Humanities and Business	91	46.7%
Science and Engineering	52	26.7%
Faculty of Health	52	26.7%
Total	195	100.0%

Table 3 – Frequency of same student interactions across faculty of origin (2021-22).

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With their new position at the desk and with each having been issued their own iPad by the staff team, the SDCs could easily guide students through processes and signpost them to further appropriate services if needed. Equipped with uniforms of burgundy shirts and jumpers, the SDCs easily increased the visibility of the service and achieved a greater student engagement.

Programme evaluation

Building upon the strengths of the return to campus in the previous year, recruitment reopened for the SDC programme at the beginning of the 2022-23 academic year. During this period, there was an increased focus on how the programme could continue to evolve and as a result, the SDC scheme recruited and swiftly became a team of thirteen. This meant that the programme could continue to reach even more students from its spot in the library and engage with additional faculties and departments for course-specific digital learning and learning advice. In the second year of face-to-face service, the SDC team achieved more than 100 recorded student interactions and became capable of provisioning additional pop-up clinics at the request of schools within the university. As an example of this, the SDC programme provided pop-up clinics for the Plymouth Business School and assisted them with their mid-year international student intakes.

“The Student Digital Champions have been extremely helpful during Business School Postgraduate January arrival weeks. They helped new arrival and late arrival international students to complete their Right to Study Check and Online enrolment, they were also very helpful with any questions the students had... The champions were friendly, knowledgeable and professional, as one of the first contacts to these new international students, they set up a positive tone to their learning journey. Plymouth Business School will definitely invite the Student Digital Champions again to future induction and social events.”

- Plymouth Business School, Postgraduate Experience Manager.

Table 4 highlights the frequency of engagement versus the year of study for the 2022-23 academic year, whereas Table 5 shows the frequency of visits across the different faculties.

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As with previous tables, incomplete recorded interactions or otherwise unclear interactions have been excluded.

Year	Frequency	Percentage
Foundation	11	7.43%
Year 1	14	9.46%
Year 2	8	5.41%
Year 3	14	9.46%
Year 4	2	1.35%
Masters	98	66.22%
PhD	1	0.68%
Total	148	100.0%

Table 4 – Frequency of student interactions across the different year groups (2022-23).

Faculty	Frequency	Percentage
Arts, Humanities and Business	92	62.2%
Science and Engineering	34	23.0%
Faculty of Health	22	14.9%
Total	148	100.0%

Table 5 – Frequency of student interactions across faculty of origin (2022-23).

With more SDCs joining the programme and a growing recognition of the scheme across the institution, the SDCs required a permanent physical space. To ensure a baseline for the service, students can now visit SDC drop-in clinics every weekday between 10am and 3pm, situated in both the Student Services Hub and the Writing Café.

Reflecting on the student-staff partnership, the unit manager for our institution Student Funding and International Advice Service expressed that the programme had been helpful in relieving pressure on existing staff support teams:

“We had a short review session yesterday and all involved commented on how important the Digital Champions were. They provided helpful, in the moment, advice to students – and also took a lot of pressure off both the [Student] Hub and International Student Advice teams.”

- Student Advice Manager.

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As the programme developed, increased hours and budget has been allocated to ensure the SDCs are fully supported to facilitate digital literacy and transformation across the university community. We now have the budget to support over 2000 hours of SDC activity within an academic year and have moved from 4 SDCs post-pandemic to an eclectic team of 13 from across our disciplines, with the continued engagement of two of the SDCs over the scheme's duration. As the SDC community has evolved, so have their roles. Now titled as 'Senior Student Digital Champions,' their responsibilities have grown to help enable the scheme to grow and become more student-led. The development of the senior role has enabled the SDCs to take agency in the programme and action ideas and suggestions which they believe will continue to build upon the success of the scheme.

Due to this development of their respective roles, the Senior SDC position has created a further level of partnership with the staff coordinator. As discussed by Denise Higgins et al, 'as an extension of student engagement, partnership implies empowerment and accountability for student partners, providing them with greater agency than other types of engagement,' (2019, p 1155). The continuous support from the staff coordinator enabled the SDCs to feel confident in developing their agency on the programme and within the senior role. This has helped to facilitate a positive environment that allowed for the growth of the staff-student partnership. The Senior SDCs have been independently providing peer-support in pop-up clinics to their junior colleagues, helping new team members settle into the role and giving support whilst they get to grips with their responsibilities. Collaboratively, the senior SDCs planned the advertising and comms strategy for the scheme for the year ahead and helped to continue raising the profile of the SDCs through both our institution and Student Union social media.

Independently, they have also had the opportunity to develop the SDC programme and lead on some aspects of the scheme. For example, one of the Senior SDCs has acted as a coordinator for the junior team members by providing mentoring within the physical space and keeping track of, as well as providing feedback on, the junior team members' outputs on set tasks. The other Senior SDC drew upon an earlier concept of an online supplement to the physical space and developed the standard operating procedure for an online

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equivalent. This included determining what an online space would entail, how it might work and how it would be resourced. This space launched in March 2023, with the online drop-in continuing to be available for two hours in the afternoons on weekdays, ensuring that the services of the SDCs are also available to remote students, those studying across our campuses and individuals who benefit from digital access.

Lessons learnt and next steps

Both Senior Student Digital Champions have acknowledged how their involvement with the SDC programme throughout its evolution has contributed positively to their own career development. The opportunities that the programme has provided them, such as speaking about the scheme at national conferences and forming leadership roles, has helped to build their individual confidence levels and capabilities. Both Senior SDCs completed their initial postgraduate studies during their engagement with the scheme and both went on to secure PhD research opportunities within our institution. Of the two, one currently now teaches on Computer Science undergraduate programmes and the Cyber Security Masters programme at the university. The other, in the final year of their PhD programme, has transitioned across multiple roles in the university, including an Information Assistant at the Ask Us Desk, interning as an Assistant Peer Learning Specialist and is now an Administrator, supporting Associate Pro-Vice Chancellors at another institution.

In addition, the Senior SDCs nominated the staff coordinator of the programme for an award within our institution's Student Union Staff Student Teaching and Representation (SSTAR) annual awards ceremony. The award sought to recognise staff members within the university community at Plymouth who had made a significant contribution to the campus community. The Senior SDCs were delighted to be invited to the award ceremony where they were asked by the Student Union to give a speech upon the announcement of their staff coordinator winning the award.

Following two successful academic years providing a face-to-face service on campus, the Student Digital Champions are now firmly entrenched within the community at the

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University of Plymouth. Looking ahead to the start of the 2023-24 academic year, the scheme has already been fielding requests from across the institution to provide additional subject-specific digital literacy induction support. In prior years, the university's peer-led initiatives were structured and evaluated independently of each other. Bringing the initiatives together and evaluating them as one has helped us to develop a more holistic understanding of their combined impact. We aim to build on our initial results by analysing institutional and empirical data to support further development of peer-led initiatives.

The SDCs, supporting staff and education leaders are excited by the future of the scheme and the opportunity it provides for digital transformation across the university community. Developing the role of the Senior SDCs as a way of ensuring ongoing recruitment within the department is also an exciting development for the retention of talent, energy, and knowledge. In partnership, students and staff are working on a range of projects across the university, digitising assessment practices as members of a senior project board, steering the response to artificial intelligence and sharing their practices in collaborative journal articles, such as this. In conclusion, we are committed to providing excellent academic support and an outstanding student experience for all involved in the Student Digital Champions.

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