Digital Poverty Alliance

Report on Higher Education and Digital Poverty

June 2025

digital poverty alliance

Higher Education and Digital Poverty

Executive Summary

Access to a personal laptop is universally acknowledged as fundamental to success in higher education, with 98% of surveyed students and families affirming its importance. Yet, significant gaps in institutional support persist - only one in ten universities offer extended laptop loan schemes, leaving many students without reliable access to the devices necessary for their studies. This digital divide exacerbates existing socio-economic inequalities, limiting opportunities for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Moreover, the inconsistent availability of support services amplifies these challenges, leaving many students to navigate digital barriers without adequate guidance or resources.

Meanwhile, the rapid rise in generative AI tool usage - from 53% to 88% of students within a single year - signals a profound shift in how students engage with academic work. These technologies offer powerful opportunities for learning and productivity but also risk widening the gap between those with ready access and digital fluency and those without. Students from more privileged backgrounds are markedly more likely to harness advanced AI capabilities, while many disadvantaged peers face barriers to effective use.

This landscape demands immediate, coordinated action. Universities must establish clear, consistent guidelines on the ethical and responsible use of AI, paired with comprehensive and mandatory digital literacy training to equip all students with the skills needed in a rapidly evolving digital environment. Equally important is ensuring equitable access to personal devices and reliable broadband connectivity, especially for students facing financial hardship.

Without decisive measures to close these gaps, digital poverty will continue to hinder academic achievement, diminish student confidence, and curtail long-term social mobility. Addressing these challenges is not only an educational imperative but a matter of social justice - ensuring that every student has the tools and support necessary to thrive in today's digitally driven world.

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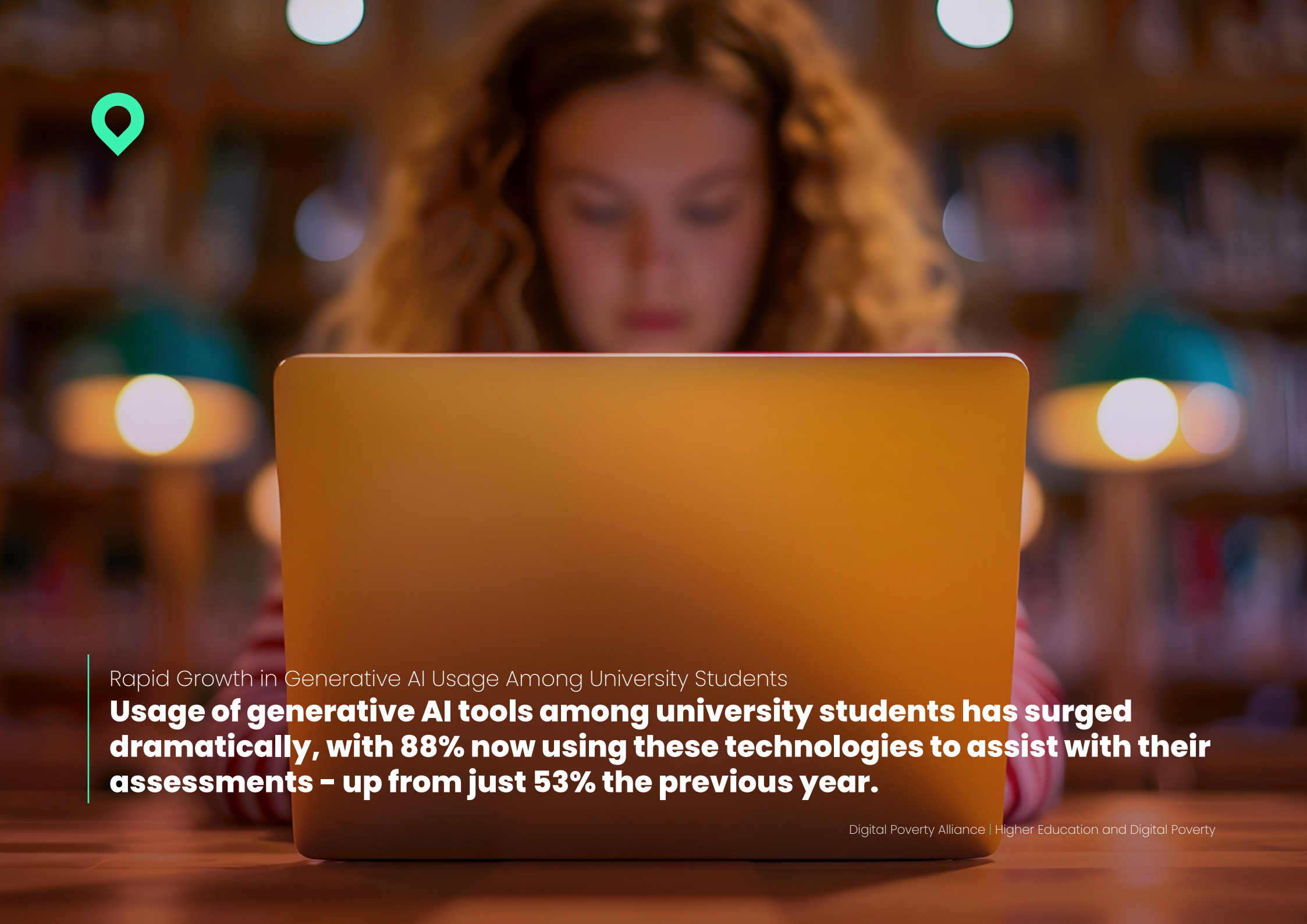
Methodology and Data Sources

This report draws on primary and secondary data collected through independent surveys by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), the Digital Poverty Alliance (DPA), and a research project led by undergraduate students at the University of Oxford. Together, these diverse data sources provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of digital access and its impact across different student populations.

The DPA posed a survey completed by 58 respondents who had previously applied to DPA initiatives for support. Out of those, 54 were parents and caregivers who filled in the survey on behalf of their child and four were young people (aged 15–17), who completed the survey themselves. 48 respondents reported plans to apply to university, whereas 10 did not.

All participants applied for a laptop through our Tech4Families initiative, each with a verified need. Ten participants had already received their personal device by the time they completed the survey, whereas 48 had not.

The HEPI data referenced in this report is based on responses from 1,041 undergraduate students from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. The research was conducted by the Higher Education Policy Institute in partnership with Kortext, aiming to broadly explore student engagement with generative AI, beyond the context of digital poverty alone. The Oxford data is based on a student-led research project at the University of Oxford, where undergraduates collected survey data from 50 peers and conducted desk research on university laptop loan schemes and bursaries. Lastly, secondary insights were integrated from published research by the Sutton Trust, Universities UK, and HEPI. These additional sources provided broader context on students' experiences in higher education.



Rapid Growth in Generative AI Usage Among University Students

Usage of generative AI tools among university students has surged dramatically, with 88% now using these technologies to assist with their assessments - up from just 53% the previous year.

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Digital and Socio-Economic Barriers

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted how pre-existing digital inequalities, such as lack of access to personal digital devices, broadband, or adequate study spaces, negatively impact students' experiences in higher education. Digital exclusion frequently overlaps with broader socio-economic disadvantages. For example, individuals from DE households (the lowest socio-economic group) are more likely to lack foundational and essential digital skills, appropriate connectivity, and personal devices.

Consequently, students from lower-income backgrounds often face compounded barriers, accumulating larger debts from university maintenance loans, lacking adequate family financial support, and struggling to cover basic living costs. Essential living costs are often higher than the maximum available loan for 57% of students, and 33% of students from working-class backgrounds reported skipping meals. Approximately 18% of students also avoided purchasing essential university supplies, including laptops, due to financial pressures.

Students also work more hours outside university, with the weekly average rising from 11.9 hours in 2020 to 14.5 hours in 2024. Almost a quarter of students have reportedly missed academic deadlines due to part-time work. Moreover, in 2022, just under a quarter (24%) said they are less likely to finish their degree due to the cost-of-living crisis, with 4% saying they were much less likely to. These financial barriers might not only negatively affect immediate academic success but also have long-term implications for job prospects and social mobility. Research emphasises graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds typically earn over a third more than non-graduates from the same background by age 31.

These challenges are further intensified by the unequal availability of support networks and resources. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds often have limited access to academic mentoring, career guidance, and technological support services. The absence of these resources compounds digital exclusion, limiting educational attainment and future opportunities. Overcoming these barriers requires financial support and targeted digital inclusion within student services.

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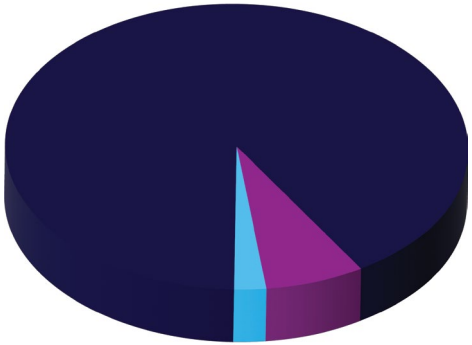
Aspirations and University Applications

The DPA was interested in understanding how students' long-term educational aspirations may be shaped by living in digital poverty and particularly how this affects their desire to apply to university.

Overall, 57 out of 58 respondents (98%) believe that access to a personal laptop is either important or very important for success in university application and studies, with only one respondent identifying it as 'somewhat important' and no one identifying it as 'not important'.

67% of respondents agree that lacking a personal laptop or reliable internet access has influenced their own or their child's confidence or decision to apply to university. One young respondent highlighted the practical uncertainty of relying on shared devices, stating, "I'm not sure the family laptop will be free enough time for my preparation." One parent noted, "They are concerned they may not be able to complete the work and also be the 'odd one out' amongst friends." Both points were echoed by multiple parents. Concerns surrounding completing coursework on a phone and lacking a suitable device for a child's special educational needs were also frequently mentioned.

Regarding how a personal device would or has been useful in preparing for university, one parent highlighted that "[The laptop] enabled her to research universities and various degrees,



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- Very Important
- Important
- Somewhat Important

contact them, apply, interview online, and receive acceptance online." Moreover, one young respondent explained that access to a personal laptop would allow them "to plan for a personal statement and use the laptop when it suits me," highlighting the essential nature of personal devices for autonomy and time management. Growth in confidence and gaining essential IT skills were also mentioned as ways in which having a personal laptop has been supportive in preparing for university.

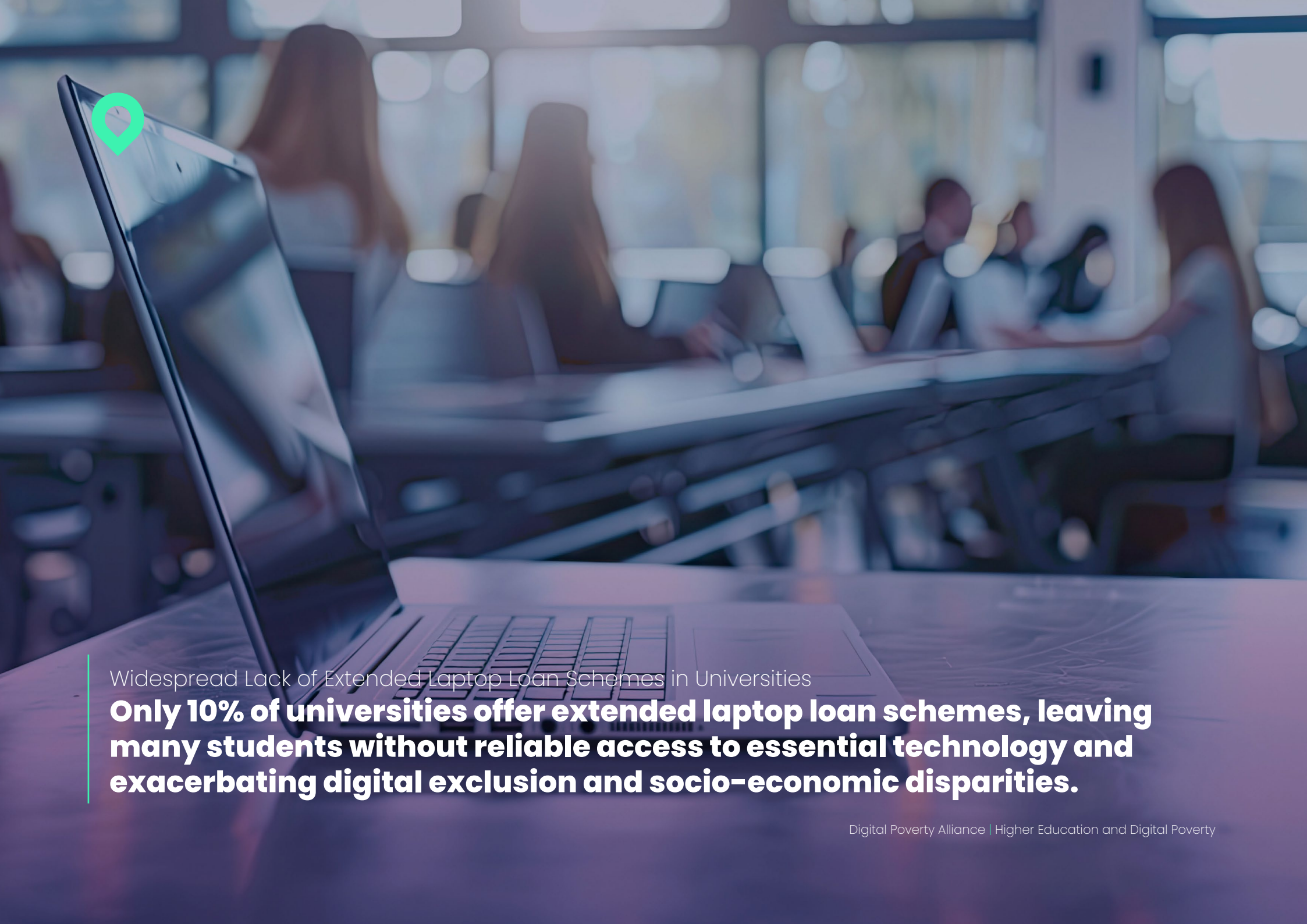
This feedback suggests that without consistent access to a personal laptop, the university application process itself can be challenging and a potential deterrent for students who are digitally excluded. Intensive research, continuous email monitoring, drafting of personal statements, and attending online interviews are essential elements of the application process that require digital access and skill before even starting university. Fear of exclusion, lack of confidence, and sharing devices with family members are further deterrents.

Challenges at University

Digital inequalities are likely to persist once students reach university. Parents frequently voiced anxieties regarding how their children would cope in higher education without reliable access to a personal device. Concerns centred on academic struggles such as difficulties taking notes during lectures, delays in coursework, and challenges with independent research. One parent said, "He would not be able to follow lessons and take notes. Needs [the laptop] for his own research and study at home." Another noted the potential risk of "automatic fails" and being "potentially kicked out" due to significant disadvantages from lacking their own device.

The lack of a personal laptop was anticipated to increase the time spent on assignments compared to peers, intensifying stress and academic pressure. One parent noted, "There will be a big gap in doing assignments and it will consume more time than other students." Students themselves acknowledged challenges, pointing out the impact on extracurricular activities and time management: "More time will be spent on completing assignments as it will be necessary to use public libraries."

Parents also highlighted emotional and social consequences, fearing isolation and exclusion. One said, "She will really struggle and will be isolated and feel left out," while another expressed anxiety about their child "being the odd one out amongst peers making it difficult to



Widespread Lack of Extended Laptop Loan Schemes in Universities

Only 10% of universities offer extended laptop loan schemes, leaving many students without reliable access to essential technology and exacerbating digital exclusion and socio-economic disparities.

make friends in a new environment." These combined academic and emotional barriers led some parents to question their child's ability to attend university, with one emphatically stating, "Really don't think it would be possible!"

A University of Oxford student survey illustrates how digital poverty manifests at university. Out of 50 respondents, 47 (94%) regularly used personal laptops, while 3 (6%) relied on library computers or shared devices. Most rated their device reliability highly, though some reported slow performance, outdated software, frequent crashes, and battery problems. Fourteen per cent acknowledged limited access to digital resources negatively impacted their online learning or academic tool access. A larger group (35%) acknowledged insufficient digital resources hindered coursework, assignments, or exam preparation at some point. This suggests some students with occasional digital challenges may not fully identify as digitally excluded, normalising inequality and underestimating structural disparities.

Laptop Loans and Bursaries

Laptop loan schemes provide essential support, particularly for students from lower-income households who may lack personal devices needed for coursework and digital literacy skills.

The Oxford report analysed the 60 largest UK universities, which enrol 63% of all students. Eleven offered no laptop loan scheme. Of the 49 with a scheme, only six offered loans lasting one month or longer. Most restricted loans to less than 24 hours, insufficient time for assignments or funding device replacement, especially for low-income students without parental support.

Only 13 universities offered grants for digital equipment, ranging from £250 to £500, usually as one-off payments. Thirty-five universities offered non-specific bursaries based on financial need, varying considerably in amount, typically around £500, with higher amounts at Oxford and Cambridge. Nineteen universities offered neither digital-specific nor need-based bursaries. Students without sufficient funds may attend without suitable devices, work longer hours, or risk dropping out.

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Generative AI and Digital Skills

The HEPI Student Generative AI Survey 2025 shows 88% of undergraduates use generative AI tools for assessments, up from 53% the previous year. Common uses include explaining concepts and summarising academic articles, reflecting rapid adoption of these technologies in academic work.

Significant socio-economic disparities remain. Students from higher socio-economic backgrounds more frequently use advanced AI functions, while disadvantaged students report limited or no use. The growing prevalence of subscription-based AI software risks deepening these inequalities by restricting access for less privileged students.

Despite widespread use, only 36% of students feel adequately supported by their institutions to develop AI skills, even though 67% recognise the importance of AI literacy. Inconsistent digital literacy training and a lack of formal programmes frustrate many students. Additionally, 18% report that lacking digital skills has negatively affected their academic experience, underscoring the urgent need for accessible and comprehensive digital education.

Bridging this digital skills gap is crucial not only for academic success but also for preparing students for a workforce increasingly shaped by AI technologies. Universities must prioritise inclusive, structured training that empowers all students to engage confidently and ethically with generative AI. Without such investment, existing inequalities risk being entrenched, limiting opportunities for those who need support the most.

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Recommendations

Digital poverty and the rapid integration of generative AI in higher education demand an urgent, coordinated response across sectors to ensure equitable access, skills development, and ethical use.

1. Government must embed clear, standardised guidelines on generative AI within the national curriculum, emphasising ethical, responsible, and safe usage. This foundational step is critical to prepare all students for the realities of a digitally transformed academic and professional landscape.

2. Universities should implement mandatory, comprehensive digital literacy programmes that equip students with the skills to engage confidently and responsibly with AI technologies. This includes transparent policies governing AI's role in teaching and assessments, alongside consistent financial support through accessible device loan schemes and targeted bursaries.

3. Businesses play a pivotal role by supporting cross-sector efforts to address digital exclusion - through initiatives such as the Digital Poverty Alliance's Tech4Youth programme, which provides young people aged 11 to 19 with a device of their own and practical support to develop digital skills, and its device donation programmes, which offer secure, end-to-end models for refurbishing and redistributing technology via trusted local partners. These approaches help close access gaps that would otherwise compound existing inequalities as technologies like generative AI become more embedded in education.

Research must be prioritised and funded to deepen understanding of generative AI's impact and to develop evidence-based interventions that evolve in step with technological advances.

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About the Digital Poverty Alliance

The Digital Poverty Alliance is the new name for the Learning Foundation, which was founded in 2001. The Learning Foundation, Currys plc, and the Institution of Engineering and Technology first established an initiative called the Digital Poverty Alliance – run by the Learning Foundation team – to unite efforts and accelerate action against digital exclusion. In 2024, the Learning Foundation rebranded as the Digital Poverty Alliance, marking a pivotal evolution in its mission to address the urgent and growing challenges of digital inequality. This transformation signalled a renewed focus on creating lasting change and expanding its impact on communities across the UK.

Digital poverty remains a major barrier to opportunity, with millions of people still lacking the tools, connectivity, and skills needed to thrive in an increasingly digital world. The Digital Poverty Alliance works across government, industry, and the third sector, aligning efforts to break down systemic barriers related to affordability, access, skills, motivation, and connectivity. By fostering collaboration and avoiding duplication, the Alliance ensures that every initiative contributes meaningfully to long-term, sustainable solutions.

Through advocacy, research, and delivery programmes, the Digital Poverty Alliance drives systemic change. Its evidence-led campaigns engage policymakers and inspire action at every level, while its innovative programmes offer practical support to individuals and households. By combining robust insights with real-world delivery, the Alliance is working to bridge the digital divide and empower communities nationwide.

The Digital Poverty Alliance represents a bold vision for a digitally inclusive society. By convening diverse voices, forging strong partnerships, and delivering tangible impact, we are building a national movement to eliminate digital poverty. With determination and collective effort, we are shaping a future in which everyone – regardless of circumstance – has the tools, confidence, and opportunity to thrive in a connected world.

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Join Us in Our Mission

Ending digital poverty requires more than ambition. It requires sustained, coordinated effort from individuals, organisations, and institutions across the UK. The Digital Poverty Alliance invites all those who share our vision of a digitally inclusive society to stand with us. Whether you represent a business, charity, local authority, or public body, there is a meaningful way to contribute to this national movement.

Become an Industry Forum Partner

The Industry Forum is a national platform for organisations that are committed to tackling digital poverty at scale. Members of the Forum help shape the direction of the National Delivery and Advocacy Plan, collaborate with peers across sectors, and contribute to the development of coordinated, impactful solutions. Forum members have access to exclusive research, events, and policy discussions, and play an active role in advancing digital inclusion across the country. Joining the Forum is an opportunity to demonstrate leadership on one of the defining social challenges of our time.

Sign our Charter for Digital Inclusion

The *Charter for Digital Inclusion* offers a practical and visible way for organisations to commit to action. Signatories pledge to embed digital inclusion into their operations and culture – whether through raising awareness of digital poverty, improving accessibility, donating devices, supporting staff training, or partnering to deliver local solutions. Signing the Charter signals a clear commitment to building a society in which digital access is recognised as a basic need, not a luxury. There is no cost to sign the Charter, and it is open to all organisations with two or more employees.

Join our Local Authority Network

The Local Authority Network brings together local authorities from all four nations of the UK to share best practice, deepen understanding of different policy environments across regions and nations, and identify how to increase support for councils – regardless of where they are on their digital inclusion journey. Membership is free and open to all UK local authorities, with up to two nominated representatives per authority. Quarterly meetings and additional network events offer a space to connect, learn, and shape approaches to digital inclusion together.

Join our Community Circle

The Community Circle is a collaborative initiative designed to bring together charities, non-profit organisations, and community groups who are working to end digital exclusion on the ground. It is a space to share knowledge, influence policy, and develop local responses that are grounded in lived experience. By joining the Community Circle, your organisation becomes part of a collective effort to create systemic change – working in partnership to ensure that no community is left behind. Together, we can help make digital access a right for everyone in the UK. There is no cost for non-profit organisations to join the Community Circle.

Make a Donation

Every donation – whether financial or in the form of devices – helps bridge the digital divide. Donated laptops, tablets, and smartphones are refurbished and provided to individuals and families who would otherwise remain excluded. Financial contributions help to scale delivery programmes and sustain our advocacy work across government and industry. However you choose to support this work, your contribution helps create a future in which everyone has the tools, skills, and confidence to thrive in a connected world.

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