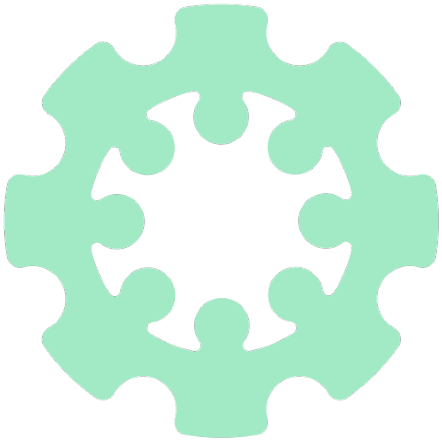
DIGITAL ACTION AT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AS A CATALYST FOR SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS



HEIDI

Higher Education guide for effectively embracing bottom-up Digital Action in Higher Education Practices

Synthesis Report

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Introduction

An early finding in Project HEIDI was the lack of knowledge of how citizens and community groups shape Digital Action (DA) in collaboration with HEIs (Higher Education Institutions), or how HEIs can support these stakeholders in DA. Through a series of roundtable discussions and other activities, HEIDI partners mapped the characteristics of different stakeholder groups, their perceived impact of DA and their needs and requirements. This report presents the findings.

There are three components to DA:

- citizen science, in which citizens participate in science as data collectors or analysts, funders, or observers
- the maker movement, in which an increasing number of people are involved in the collaborative creation of artefacts and new products
- hackathons, in this case civic hackers, in which organised groups of people use information technology to tackle some civic problem or to build up a database

All these forms of DA encompass public participation in activities that may be run in collaboration with HEIs.

Our Rationale and Approach

Early in the HEIDI project, we held a series of roundtables with HEI students and different types of HEI staff to discuss challenges and barriers to DA. The following factors were felt to be lacking: Digital literacy; Access to technology; Institutional support; Communication and collaboration, especially among different levels of staff, for example researchers with professional and support staff. Other challenges included digital inequalities and language barriers.

We noted these factors and used them to inspire our methodological framework for further investigations into DA, including DA by community and voluntary groups, although these

stakeholders often have different needs, requirements and challenges to HEI staff and students. Stakeholders' needs and requirements may also vary at different stages of the DA (e.g. advertising, setting up, or running the event), or depending on their role in it (e.g. participating versus organising).

This Intellectual Output (IO5) takes a holistic approach to explore the needs and requirements for successful DA driven by communities to address societal needs. It subsequently raises awareness, increases the capacity of HEIs in engaging with communities and provides recommendations to inform digital transformation towards this direction. In this deliverable, we provide a detailed analysis of the key background characteristics of those who engage in DA at multiple levels through six persona designs and we further present our findings of how different stakeholders perceive the impacts of DA and the major challenges they face as well as the kind of support they need from mainly HEIs but also other actors. We finally provide a list of key recommendations for HEIs, which can be used to more effectively embrace bottom-up DA practices.

Methodology

To investigate the needs, requirements and challenges of DA for different stakeholders, and the perceived impacts of DA, in late 2022 three HEIDI partners (UCL, UP and UM) each held three roundtables. In each institution the roundtables were:

- One roundtable for HEI staff;
- One roundtable with voluntary groups;
- One roundtable with community groups.

Therefore we held a total of 9 roundtables, for which 145 people registered. Each institution followed a consistent methodological protocol to collect and analyse data which we used to further develop a set of recommendations. Our methodological framework consisted of:

- Pre- and post-event questionnaires, adapted to the different stakeholder groups;
- A standard set of discussion agendas with prompts and questions;
- A separate Padlet for each roundtable (a website on which participants can write their thoughts in the style of Post-It notes under specific headings)

The questionnaires asked about participants' background, prior experience in DA, digital competence, specific lack of experience in or opportunity to do DA, and for their consent for their answers to be used in our research. We recruited participants to these roundtables by social media advertising, using mailing lists, and also targeted invitations towards members of all three groups we knew to be active in some form of DA. Throughout 2022, we had run DA training webinars and talks, many of which targeted voluntary and community groups, and we encouraged participants to attend all our HEIDI events.

To further improve awareness and investigate institutional barriers in more detail we carried out additional webinars and events at UCL such as our "Community and voluntary organisations training Skills for Digital Action" training webinar, the "'HEI Ethics for Digital Action during COVID-19" and the "Citizen Science in fragile contexts and with marginalised communities" online event.

Roundtables

We began each roundtable with introductions, asking participants of their prior DA experience, and then we introduced Project HEIDI. The participants then discussed potential DA impacts, challenges, the digital skills required and their wider needs and requirements to engage in DA. We asked community and voluntary groups more specifically about the support needed by individuals and groups. With HEI participants we asked about institutional support, and separated out the needs of organisers and participants. At the end of each roundtable, we thanked all participants and gave them a summary of HEIDI's next steps. The post-event questionnaires asked if the event met their expectations, and invited them to add more about their DA experiences and the likelihood of their participation in DA in the future.

Vignettes

As part of presenting our findings from these questionnaires and roundtables, UCL created six "personas" of fictional individuals, two from each of the three stakeholder groups, to serve as inspirations and design tools for future successful DAs. The vignettes describe a personality, background and range of interests based on our findings from IO5.

Key Findings

Roundtable participants had many different experiences in DA - mostly participation in short sessions and usually for only part of the process. Those who had no experience attributed this to a lack of time or skills. Most had at least an undergraduate degree. Common motivations included:

- Address a local issue
- Influence a policy
- Support a cause
- Widen participation
- Upskill their peers
- Improve public understanding of what can be achieved by bottom-up work with technology
- (More rarely) Learn about a subject

Common challenges were:

- A lack of skill, time or access (e.g. not having access to equipment)
- A lack of support from their HEI or other hoped-for provider (for example, being given no information)
- Communication - e.g. unclear instructions, language, barriers and a lack of digital communication skills, or vital aspects of communication (such as body language) being lost through online communication

Roundtable groups were asked what specific actions HEIs could take, and they suggested:

- HEIs actively support DA and fund it as a research model
- Use of work placements (e.g. HEI students in community groups, or community group members at HEIs) to improve skills
- The presence of educated facilitators at community groups
- Shared public access to resources, learning skills and effective design
- Continuous (not one-off) funding and communication
- Improving visibility of DA and DA collaboration within HEIs
- DA targeted funding, including making DA an official paid staff role, within HEIs

Our Recommendations

Our findings provide the basis for the development of key recommendations for HEIs to more effectively embrace bottom-up DA for social change. Our recommendations provide insight into

the needs and requirements of a diverse set of DA stakeholders, address common challenges and barriers they face and consider the opportunities that are important to them when they participate in DA. Our recommendations include:

- Improve the visibility of DA and its impacts for social good
- Reflect on and share lessons learned from DA in different contexts
- Training and upskilling for DA inside and outside HEIs
- Creating a network of interested DA participants and a centralised DA support office in HEIs
- Flexible institutional and governmental funding for bottom-up DA
- Specific DA support and training for HEI staff, including in ethics
- Recognition for HEI staff and students who organise or participate in DA.