

# Is augmented and virtual reality technology essential for education?

February 14, 2020



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## Dave Kenworthy, Director of Digital Services at CoSector, questions whether or not the education sector should be adopting augmented and virtual reality technology to improve learning experiences for all

Augmented and Virtual reality (AR/VR) has been receiving a lot of attention and there's been much talk about the wonders it will provide for entertainment, as well as how it could reimagine training for all industries. This hype has made its way to the education sector and it's now become commonplace for the **classroom of the future**. AR and VR is everywhere. Whether it's an advert, featuring students wearing headsets with a look of excitement on their face, or former education secretary Damian Hinds, who told us last year that immersive technology could transport students to significant points in history, or explore the forest floor from the comfort of their classroom.

### Universities

Whilst that does all sound revolutionary, how realistic is it that this vision will come to life in the near future and exactly as imagined? Is it worth the cost and resource that it will take to implement it? A recent JISC report included a survey of more than 100 lecturers, researchers and learning technologists at universities and colleges, which indicated that **82% of the respondents are 'interested' in VR or AR**. However, what really stood out for me when reading the wider report, is that there were no examples of how VR was actually being used or how these

respondents were planning to use it in the future; which makes me question, why are we pouring so much funding into a technology that is very much wanted, but not altogether yet needed?

Don't get me wrong, there are simple pre-made games and learning tools that are fun for younger children in primary and secondary school, but how can this translate to HE and FE organisations, when at this point it would be difficult for a lecturer to get the full experience they are hoping for. Take a history lecturer who wants to enhance learning about Ancient Rome, by transporting students to that period in time - where can they go next? At this point in time you can't just download an app onto a VR headset and suddenly you've got what you want, you have to think about design and how to implement a bespoke project. The gulf between having the idea, to actually implementing that experience, is huge.

University IT departments are a long way from supporting that bespoke creation of VR experiences, they're generally facing significant challenges in doing the more basic stuff. That being said, if you look at digital learning environments (DLE) 15 years ago, they were very much in the same position, it took a few lecturers with a real interest in the technology to develop it to a level where the university invested more heavily in growing their platforms.

## **Immersive tech**

As a rule of thumb, it's best not to adopt technology whilst it's still in its relative infancy, simply because it is often expensive and there are still a lot of issues that need to be ironed out. iPhones are a key example of this - 12 years ago when the first model was released, no one would have suggested that every student in a classroom should have one, they cost hundreds of pounds and no one knew how exactly they could be used to improve learning. Whereas fast forward to today, we think nothing of students using them as a learning tool because they either bring their own device or its easy to purchase low cost leased versions. I believe that immersive technologies will likely follow a similar path, but that by no means assures its long term success in the education sector.

Further to this, the report suggested that rather than being widespread throughout organisations, immersive tech seems to be embedded in pockets, with 54% of respondents suggesting if they have the tech, that it is mostly used in one or two departments, further indicating that there needs to be a better understanding of how VR and AR can positively impact education. In the HE and FE sector specifically, there are many issues that are preventing students from achieving their best results and having the most valuable experience during their time at college or university. The money that is being poured into immersive headsets, would at this time be better channelled into other areas of technology, which will have far more impact.

## **Mobile technology**

Mobile technology is continuing to offer opportunity for students to work remotely, and with a bit more investment it could flourish into something much more accessible. It also feeds into assessment, which is an area in dire need of review. Digital assessment is in the early stages of development, but already we're seeing great strides in online examinations, which has the

potential to widen participation amongst underrepresented student groups, by enabling exams to be taken offsite and at different times.

## The future

In terms of the bigger picture, the potential for technology to completely innovate the way we learn as a society is infinite, there is a framework there to build an online marketplace where people of any ability or age can pick out learning resources and allow more flexibility when taking assessments. We're just at the beginning of a journey that will see the sector transformed.

Immersive technologies may or may not have a role in this. We may reach the stage where everyone has AR glasses, in the same way everyone has a smart phone, but it's just not that inclusive for every student yet, and for it to catch on it needs to be. In other industries, AR and VR have already proven valuable, particularly for training, however, I feel that if we fall too hard and too fast for immersive technologies in the education sector, we may see it become a solution without a problem.

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