

DIGITAL FUTURES INSTITUTE

**Annual
Report**

2023-24



I write this Introduction to the first annual report of the Digital Futures Institute with a sense of immense pride in what we have achieved in such a short a time, and with immense gratitude to everyone who has been a part of this incredible journey.

Our research conversation has gathered momentum quickly and is already forging new perspectives on some of the most challenging contemporary issues. The pilot round of Research Fellowships has resulted in the submission of major external funding bids and we are now into our first full-university round of recruitment and looking forward to seeing how this new cohort will help shape the Institute's research agenda. The conversations that have taken place around the work of the fellows have in themselves been invaluable to developing new interdisciplinary approaches at King's. Plus, we have already recruited three eminent Honorary Research Professors who join our Living Well With Technology mission to bring into the university invaluable external expertise: Peter Logan (digital humanist), Daniel Susskind (economist), and Robert Wigley (businessman, entrepreneur, investor and author). Their generosity with their time in working with our colleagues in the Institute has already done much to catalyse some exceptional new projects.

In the education space we have seen the phenomenal achievement of the pilot round of the Success for Digital Futures programme that aims to train a new generation to be able to build a digital future for the good of the many not the few. Funded entirely by philanthropic donation (and in collaboration with the School of Biomedical Engineering & Imaging Sciences), this pilot programme engaged with 116 secondary school pupils and we are now gearing up for a massive multi-institutional expansion that aims to support thousands of students over the next few years. In the meantime, the Digital Futures online MA and other short professional education courses are also helping learners across the world to understand better how they can be part of the solution.

Also funded entirely by philanthropic donation, the Institute has launched its Living Well with Technology thought-leadership series with a packed-out inaugural lecture by Stephen Fry. This series will be developed in collaboration with the Edinburgh Futures Institute as a flagship UK-wide platform that will bring together expertise from across all sectors to make a step-change in our ability to respond to issues that cannot be left to the tech sector alone to resolve.

In addition to our eminent Honorary Professors we also have in formation a magnificent Advisory Council to help connect the Institute with external partners, and to advise on our mission. Dr Marcus Weldon (Chair of our Advisory Council; 13th President of Bell Labs and CTO of Alcatel-Lucent, and Nokia Corporations) and Dr Wol Kolade (from Livingbridge, and co-founder of the 10,000 Black Interns Initiative) have already shown a level of engagement and dynamism that is super-charging our activity.

I want to end this introduction with a huge thanks to the Digital Futures Institute leadership team: I couldn't have asked for a more talented, generous and fun team of people to work with, and it's very much that collective spirit that has got us to where we are today.

Marion Thain

Professor of Culture and Technology, and Chair-Director of the Digital Futures Institute, King's College London

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About the Digital Futures Institute

The Digital Futures Institute at King's College London recasts what have typically been considered technical challenges – to be solved through technical fixes – as human and social challenges requiring innovative ways of knowing, responding, and making.

Our research centres represent our work across the key dimensions of mind, body, culture, society and governance:

- The Centre for Attention Studies
- The Centre for Technology and the Body
- The Centre for Digital Culture
- The Centre for Data Futures

In alignment with the university's broader ambitions, the Institute serves as a hub for interdisciplinary research, engagement, and educational initiatives aimed at understanding and addressing the social, ethical, and economic challenges posed by emerging digital technologies.

King's Digital Lab – the Faculty of Arts and Humanities Research Software Engineering department - is affiliated to the Digital Futures Institute to enable software and data -intensive interdisciplinary digital research.

In its first full year of operation, the Digital Futures Institute has achieved extraordinary growth, more than doubling its income target and establishing a sustainable

financial foundation. By focusing on responsible spending and impactful investments, the Institute has been able to scale its research and educational activities, contributing to cutting-edge technological and societal advancements.

With a mission to foster interdisciplinary collaboration, the Digital Futures Institute has expanded its research networks, built partnerships across academic and professional domains, and executed a range of impactful events and exhibitions. It has also made strides in professional development, surpassing financial expectations and growing its educational offerings. The Institute's success in philanthropy has further cemented its role as a rapidly developing leader in digital innovation with a human-centred focus. This annual report reflects on the achievements of 2023-24, detailing how the Digital Futures Institute has laid a strong foundation for future growth and influence within the rapidly evolving landscape of digital futures.

Successes and Achievements

The Digital Futures Institute has seen many successes during its first full year. We have made some successful connections that have allowed us to grow much more quickly than expected. We have doubled our income target, spent responsibly and with impact, thus protecting our future financial forecast. Below are some notable accomplishments.



Impact Reception (Left to right: Prof. Marion Thain, Dr Jonathan Gray, Felicity Roberts, Dr Arianna Ciula)

Research

“As a first time project-lead the Digital Futures Institute Fellowship has afforded me a wonderful opportunity to become familiar with the grant application process. It has been a steep learning curve but it has resulted in what I believe to be an innovative and hopefully successful funding bid.”

Brian Kavanagh, pilot Institute Research Fellow

Research successes include Kate Devlin’s RAI UK grant, Fay Bound Alberti’s FLF grant and Jonathan Gray’s Digital Good award. There is also the Kings Digital Lab’s *iREAL* (Inclusive Requirements Elicitation for AI in Libraries to Support Respectful Management of Indigenous Knowledges) and *STEP-UP* (a Strategic Technical Platform for University Technical Professionals) funding.

The Institute also secured an internal Research Infrastructure Funding grant that allowed the Institute to purchase some specialist equipment to support its research.

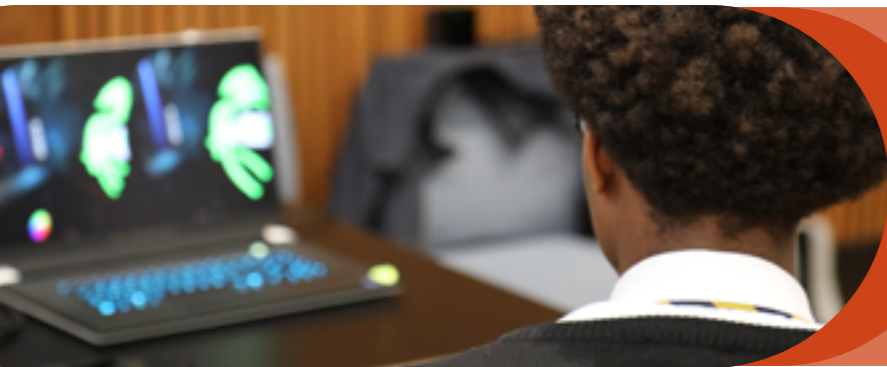
There has been notable success in creating new connections both across the university and with external partners, including

welcoming in Sylvie Delacroix’s new Centre for Data Futures; expanding the Institute Fellowship scheme; and launching the XR & Attention Research Group with an inaugural symposium in June 2024 featuring industry experts alongside academics and artists. We have also had several visiting researchers actively participate in Institute activities.

Lastly, under our research activity, our Management Group members have been involved in the setting up of the new Centre for Human and Synthetic Minds.

£5.4m

research
grant
income



A pupil taking part in the *Success for Digital Futures Celebration Event*

Education



“The Fellowship activities led to a number of productive new connections to colleagues at King’s and beyond.”

Anna Maerker, pilot Institute Education Fellow

Our flagship education fellowships programme is designed to bring the King’s academic expertise to a broad audience through the development of education opportunities that reach beyond the walls of the College. In working to disseminate the work of the institute through courses offered to professionals and non-traditional learners, the Digital Futures Institute achieves King’s goal of ‘serving the needs and aspirations of society and the wider world.’

The collaborative project *Success for Digital Futures* between the Institute and the School of Biomedical Engineering and Imaging Sciences, supported by the Buttinghill Foundation has seen a successful first year in the two-year pilot programme, which brought 116 students to King’s. The project is an outreach programme for Year 10 Black school pupils from London schools focusing on developing technology for social and human good. The aims of the programme are the following:

- Demystify digital skills and technology.
- Generate interest in digital skills and technology.
- Empower students to engage with digital technologies.
- Raise awareness of study and career options using digital skills.



We believe that Black students are underrepresented in study programmes and subsequently careers involving technology. We aim to reduce this underrepresentation. School pupils attended a workshop series at King’s covering topics from digital humanities, programming, and bias in AI and technology.

Student feedback from the workshops:

“I liked the interactive and engaging topics about data humanities and what it includes like data algorithms on apps and data storage such as archives.”

“It gave me an opportunity to experience how others got themselves into the Digital Industry. I also got to learn new keywords.”

Teachers’ feedback from workshop one:

“Our students absolutely loved the yesterday session. We had a very good discussion about it today in the lesson. Thank you for providing them with ‘food for thought’ and allowing them to think critically.”

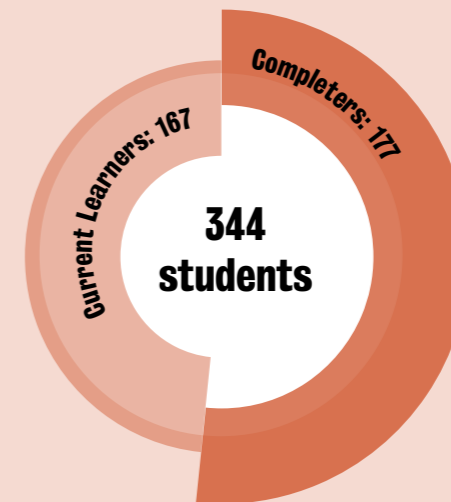


Success for Digital Futures Celebration Event, PhD students and school pupils using VR Headsets

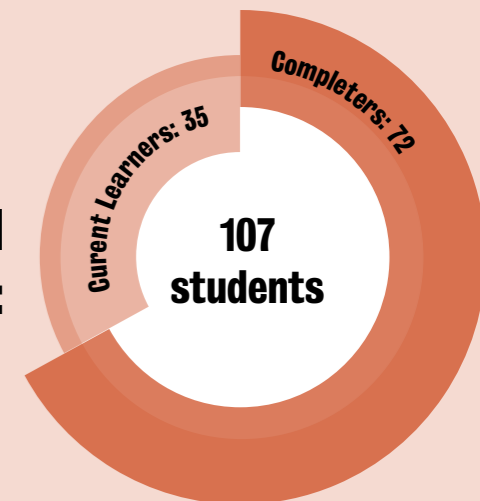
The plans for the 2024/2025 are already underway and the project aims to scale-up rapidly.

Alongside this project, we have also had great results from the launch of our professional development career accelerator courses in partnership with FourthRev, in product management and UX & UI product design whereby we succeeded in securing over 400% more income than we targeted for in this financial year. We will also be taking in our first cohorts of students on our Digital Futures MA and Digital Economies MSc programmes starting in September 2024.

Product Management Career Accelerator:



UX & UI Career Accelerator:



Philanthropy

We have made some great partnerships with individuals who have become key collaborators to the Institute, with pledges totalling £150,000 this year. This has supported us in making rapid and meaningful progress in this area, with further sponsorship in the pipeline.

Public Engagement

Our Management Group, collaborators and wider faculty colleagues come together to ensure we have executed impactful events to showcase the Institute's work including; *Living Well with Technology: AI and the Future* event, the *Seeking Connection* exhibition and the *GLoW: Illuminating Innovation* exhibition.



Living well with Technology: AI and the Future event speakers



Stephen Fry delivering the lecture *AI: The means to an end or a means to the end?*

Thought-Leadership Series: Living Well with Technology

“AI is already both thrilling and chilling. Where will it lead, and who will lead it? Tech titans? Elected politicians? Dictators? Philosophers? A cat seems to be out of the bag, a cat that can outrun anyone.”

Stephen Fry

The series aims to lead a cross-sector conversation about our digital futures by convening tech leaders, academics, public figures, and policy makers in a series of public events and associated open-access online publications that will provide a tangible and impactful outcome to the annual programme. The events are solutions-focussed, aiming to avoid the yay/nay-technology

binary, offering thoughtful and impactful analysis/ideas that both acknowledge the challenges and point the way forward to solutions.

It was launched on 12th September 2024 in the inaugural lecture delivered by Stephen Fry: *AI: The means to an end or a means to the end?*

2023-2024 Pilot Fellowships Round

Digital Futures Institute awarded three fellowships in its 2023-24 pilot round, across the three centres, the Centre for Digital Cultures, the Centre for Attention Studies and the Centre for Technology and the Body.

Dr Anna Maerker was awarded an Education Fellowship to develop educational initiatives examining the relationship between disability and technology. The project included the development of accessible digital courses and collaborative resources for educators in the humanities and social sciences. Additionally, it capitalised on unique resources at King's, such as the Foyle Rare Books Collection and the Cicely Saunders Archives, to enhance understanding and teaching related to disability and technology.



Dr Brian Kavanagh and his Co-I's Professor Sally Marlow and Dr Kimberly Goldsmith were awarded a Research Fellowship to develop a project that investigated the role of digital technology in advancing the mission of performing organisations to promote classical music to new and more diverse audience in an era in which attention has become a scarce commodity. The intention is to apply for an AHRC standard research grant in the range of between £500,000 and £1m. Outputs from the fellowships also include an application to the Catalyst Award, in May 2024.

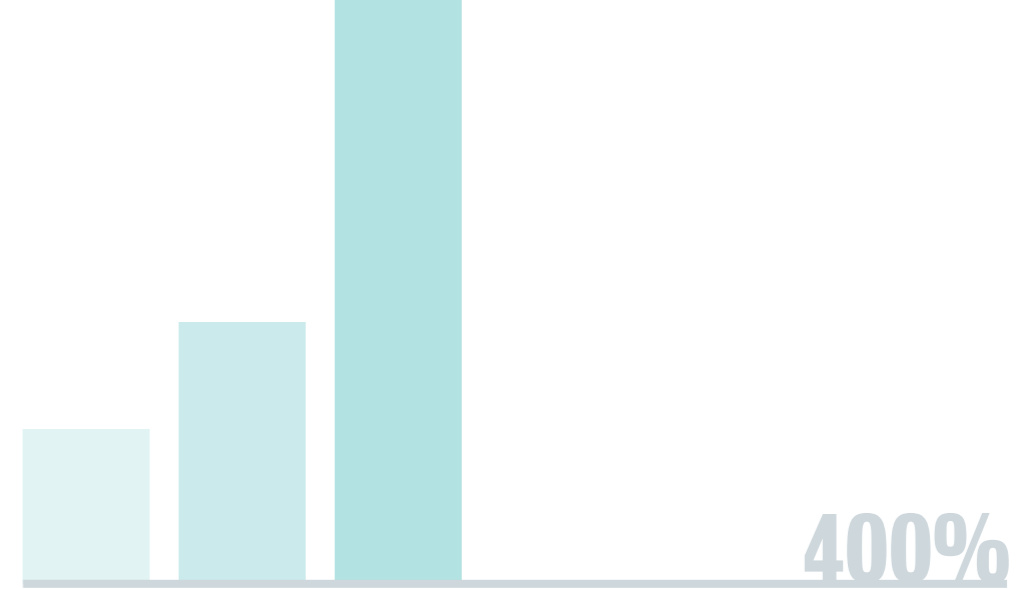


Professor Kate Devlin was successful in her bid (as Co-I) for a five-year, £31m EPSRC-funded multidisciplinary consortium to convene the responsible AI landscape in the UK. RAI UK works with academics, policymakers, industry, and the public to ensure that AI is developed to benefit people, communities and society. As King's lead on this, Kate is bringing £5m to the College.



Summary

The 2023-24 academic year was a spectacular launch year for the Digital Futures Institute, marked by significant successes in research, education, and philanthropy.



The Institute secured £5.4m in income from research grants, and additionally, the King’s Digital Lab secured key funding for the *iREAL* and *STEP-UP* projects. The Institute also leveraged internal Research Infrastructure Funding to acquire specialised equipment, expanding its capacity for pioneering research. Collaborative efforts flourished, including the expansion of the Institute Fellowship scheme across the university for 2024 and 2025, and contributions to the future Centre for Human and Synthetic Minds.

In its education domain, the Institute’s collaborative project *Success for Digital Futures*, with the School of Biomedical Engineering and Imaging Sciences and supported by the Buttinghill Foundation, completed a successful first year. The Institute also launched professional development courses that exceeded financial targets by over 400%, reflecting

strong demand and future growth potential. Additionally, the Institute will welcome its first cohort of MA students, set to begin in September 2024, further expanding its educational reach.

Philanthropy was another area of great success, with £150,000 pledged within this first year and further sponsorship in the pipeline with the Institute forging important partnerships and connecting with the public through successful events like *Living Well with Technology: AI and the Future*, the *Seeking Connection* exhibition, and the *GLOW* exhibition. These efforts enhanced the Institute’s visibility and fostered key relationships that will support its future growth. Overall, the 2023-24 academic year has positioned the Digital Futures Institute as a leader in driving impactful digital research and education, with a clear focus on ethical and societal advancement.

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