Brief for FE college leaders and managers

FE learners’ expectations and experiences of technology

This briefing shares the outcomes of our work on further education (FE) and skills students’ expectations and experiences of the digital environment and makes recommendations for leaders and managers.

About our research
The project team was led by Professor Rhona Sharpe at the Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development at Oxford Brookes University. We conducted a literature review, 12 focus groups with 220 learners in six FE colleges and consultation with 300 staff over 11 national events during 2014-15.

Key challenges
» Learners’ digital experiences are strongly dependent on the confidence and capabilities of their teachers, but currently staff workload and career pathways are hindering staff development

» Lecturers are not well-supported and incentivised to integrate digital resources into their teaching. Where there is high staff turnover or heavy reliance on casual staff, this is exacerbating the problem

» The lack of funding for research into the learner experience in the FE and skills sector leads to out of date research and assumptions about students’ level of digital literacy

As in higher education, there is also the challenge of ensuring a consistent student experience using technology, by providing support for all users, a relevant digital curriculum and a robust, flexible digital environment.

Learning provider solutions
In order to address these challenges, we recommend college leaders and managers take the following actions:

Develop a digital strategy and engage staff, learners and employers
Colleges need to engage staff, learners and employers in a constructive dialogue to define expectations of technology use. We recommend using a range of methods to involve them. Facilitate closer working with employers to ensure that learners’ technology use prepares them for employment.

Initiate a group to develop and monitor your strategy, informed by staff and students, and underpinned by local and national evidence. Learners will appreciate getting feedback on how they have influenced this.

Jisc can help: our developing digital literacies guide (http://bit.ly/1IdMYpN) assists with developing your strategy and supporting staff, while our developing employability guide (http://bit.ly/1Mw8Cbp) helps you identify opportunities for learners to gain skills. Find out more about the Change agents’ network (http://bit.ly/1JrzlUN) bringing staff and students together.
Support staff to use digital technology in a more innovative way
Staff need clear expectations on how to integrate technology into their teaching, and their responsibility for developing digital literacy, so allocate time and resources to support them in this. For example, you can target newly qualified lecturers to shape their behaviour. We recommend working with your HR department to explore training, reward and career pathways that promote technology for teaching staff.

Jisc can help: our enhancing the digital student experience (http://bit.ly/1IoD9B3) guide helps you to better understand your learners’ expectations and experiences of technology. Find out what support you can offer staff and learners (http://bit.ly/1VKKN2J).

Develop a continual process of audit and evaluation
In general, learners have high expectations of technology but many are less confident using it than their lecturers expect. It’s best to assess learners’ digital literacy on entry and then track progress.

Undertake an audit and regular evaluation of how your current services meet learners’ needs. Encourage staff to share their own evaluations of technology use in the classroom.


Promote research at learning provider level
As research is currently under-funded in FE and skills, responsibility for embedding research needs to be at the grassroots. We suggest that colleges encourage staff to use research findings, undertake postgraduate study, and conduct their own evaluation. All of this helps to engender professional pride.

Jisc can help: We produced these materials to assist providers with conducting learner research (http://bit.ly/1D1wECJ).

Find out more

Explore (http://bit.ly/1MUe9Ws) the other outputs from this project including tools you can use in your own setting.

Join the conversation by following #digitalstudent (https://twitter.com/hashtag/digitalstudent) across social media.

Jisc support
If you would like further help and support from your Jisc account manager on this topic please contact our customer services team (http://bit.ly/1eXvNOz) who will be glad to assist you.

Email us on customerservices@jisc.ac.uk or phone: 0203 006 6077