"Digital is helping us to transcend borders"

Stella started her career teaching in schools before turning her attention to further education. She has been principal and chief executive of Highbury College Portsmouth since 2001 and was awarded the CBE for services to further education in 2008.

Tell us about your college

Highbury College is a medium-sized FE college in South East England and we serve around 9,000 students each year. The majority are working on full- or part-time vocational programmes and we also teach professional qualifications and a range of academic programmes to foundation degree level. The courses we offer include art and design, business, construction, computing, engineering, environmental technologies, hospitality, catering and travel and tourism.

We consider strong partnerships with industry and employers to be very important for our students’ learning success and to help them make the transition into work.

We have long considered technology to be a strategic asset for Highbury College. This has been translated into a programme of sustained investment and development dating over a ten year period. Our guiding principle is to adopt those technology solutions that add value and improve the students’ experience and achievement. This sometimes means being an early adopter – which is good provided that we test these against the yardstick of our strategic principles. An example of this is that we were an early adopter of the Jisc eduroam service which has been very popular with our students who take campus-wide Wi-Fi access on any device for granted. Technology has to add value to the student experience and therefore we were delighted to be recognised for our approach by winning the award for outstanding use of technology for improving teaching and learning in the 2016 TES FE Awards.
Why is digital important for the college? What is your vision for digital?

My vision for digital is that it will help us fulfil our mission to be a world-class college – and for me that means supporting staff and students alike to be enterprising, to become lifelong learners and to succeed in their chosen path.

We’re constantly scanning the horizon for new ideas and better ways of working. We are also searching for ways to transcend the physical, social and geographical barriers that can exclude people from learning and achieving their potential.

Digital technologies offer exciting, practical tools to help us achieve all these things. Our current digital futures strategy runs to 2020 (the previous one ran from 2011/16) and it covers all these issues as well as entrepreneurship, innovation, staff development and business processes because these all feed into the same mission.

What benefits are you realising through the use of technology – to learners, staff and core business?

When we invested in digital infrastructure ten years ago we future-proofed things as much as possible. This is very important or you will find yourself continually having to re-invest just to keep up.

An important early step for us was to transform the culture among our teaching staff to enable them to use technology for driving through improvements both to their teaching practice and to business efficiencies. We freed up staff time for regular training and development and encouraged new ways of thinking so that more teaching can be delivered via digital technologies. We try to offer engaging ways for everyone to get to grips with digital - for example, we’ve got a digital beach hut and a digital lounge where staff and students can experiment with emerging technologies. Making technology an everyday part of college life is the goal – to the point that, wherever possible, we adopt the principle of ‘digital by default’, knowing that immersion will have the most impact.

Whenever we consider introducing new technology solutions we work with staff and students and encourage a culture of supported experimentation. I am observing staff confidence in using technology in their teaching and staff and students are encouraged to suggest developments. For example, we are currently developing a suite of online curriculum planning tools and already have a promising prototype which has been produced by a student working in partnership with teaching staff.

Our approach has included rebalancing resources between digital and non-digital to reduce resourcing for non-digital resources in order to encourage adoption of new technologies. We encourage staff to try out massive open online courses (MOOCs) and had a focus on MOOCs in 2014/15 which proved really popular with staff
across the college. Experiencing the benefits of online learning directly and developing their critical awareness of what counts as quality in the online environment turned out to be the biggest benefits from this.

We subscribe to a number of e-resources and our libraries support staff and students in the use of open educational resources and MOOCs. Students value the flexibility this gives. For some time now students and staff have been able to access their college accounts remotely (using Citrix) and this too is highly valued. Staff are increasingly using ILT and the college’s virtual learning environment (VLE) in imaginative and engaging ways - this was formally recognised in our last Ofsted inspection report.

Often, students are the ones who exert the biggest pull when it comes to technology. They expect to be able to access resources anywhere they choose, and they expect those resources to be relevant and engaging. We want that too, and we collect and analyse data on student performance and satisfaction to measure how we shape up. Our data analysis shows we are scoring very highly in these areas; if at any point we don’t, we will step in very quickly to deal with any shortcomings.

We’ve taken a long-term approach to investment in digital technologies and we’ve got the basics right. Now, we can start to really drive efficiencies that will help us to get the most from our resources in times when these are more limited.

How is your digital strategy being implemented?

We designed the digital strategy by a process of direct engagement with staff, students, governors, thought leaders and industry partners. We applied the principles of ‘design thinking’ and ran a series of workshops that refined our thinking. This led us to agreeing a set of core principles, key objectives and deliverables. Although we aligned our strategy to our 2020 vision we have set an initial three year implementation plan as that seems to be the most appropriate timeframe in terms of technological changes.

Digital is one of the things I’m passionate about so I take a very keen interest but we have a team that drives it. We have a director of technology and innovation and a director of research and development who have primary responsibility for it. We also have a dedicated digital futures team with a manager and a number of digital learning assistants who started with us as e-design apprentices. They work on a caseload basis with curriculum teams and focus on different projects. For example, one might work on a video production project – we are very committed to producing in-house video tutorials and staff are gaining confidence in this - while another might work on enhancing the design of course content within our Canvas VLE. They have all worked on the creation of our digital maths academy and it has been fantastic to see visitors from over 30 countries use this resource. It brings home to our apprentices and staff the power of digital technologies to extend the reach of our curriculum. It brings globalisation to life when they see the world map lit up with the countries using the resources our maths staff have developed. The digital futures team give us some excellent insights into what students want from their learning and how they want to use technology.

Students are at the heart of everything we’re trying to do, and so a number sit on my innovation council, which reviews the work we’re doing and suggests new ideas.
Can you share any evidence of impact in terms of cost savings, efficiency gains or improvements in attendance?

We have been working with Professor Sugata Mitra, professor of educational technology at Newcastle University’s school of education, communication and training, on a research project that will help us to gather evidence of the impact that technology is having on our students. We expect to have the results published in 2017, but the signs are so far encouraging with a number of case studies from our students supporting the approach to introducing more self-organised learning. We have introduced a scale of online delivery for the majority of our full-time courses (on a scale of 15% - 30%) and this is beginning to demonstrate efficiency gains which will be further reviewed this summer. For us, it’s about the ‘two e’s - efficiency and effectiveness’ sitting side by side. At the heart of our decision-making process is always the question, “will this improve the student experience?” - that has to be the litmus test.

What advice would you have for other senior leaders on developing their visions for digital?

» If you aren’t sure where to start, the FELTAG report is a great starting point. The headings point you in the right direction

» Useful innovation comes through talking with like-minded individuals, inside your college and at networking events

» Work with governors, staff and students to harness their collective experience and expertise

» Be a role model in your adoption of technology – use it to improve your workload

» There are lots of resources available to guide you online – Jisc has many accessible reports and examples of good practice

» Think about other institutions you can work with to benchmark your own progress

» Take advice on how to future-proof your investment in infrastructure by looking beyond FE and the immediate future – do some of your own horizon scanning – it will pay dividends.

More information

Take a look at the college’s digital futures e-learning blog

Contact the college’s director of research & development, Cathy Ellis by email: Cathy.Ellis@highbury.ac.uk