Glasgow Caledonian University: A focus on flexible curriculum design

Background
Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) (gcu.ac.uk) is a large post-1992 university with a mission for widening access and delivering social benefit as the ‘University for the Common Good’. It has a modern campus in the city of Glasgow with an award-winning library and learning centre (the Saltire Centre) as well as postgraduate campuses in London and New York, and partnerships with universities in China, Oman and other countries. The university has one of the largest student populations in Scotland with around 17,000 registered.

Strategic priorities
GCU’s 2020 strategy (http://ji.sc/GCU-Strategy-brochure) aims to provide an innovative, distinctive student experience. Its first goal includes a statement on digital literacy: ‘[We will] develop our digital education environment and expand the use of learning technologies to enhance the student experience, support high-level digital literacy, scale up our online and distance learning offerings and increase the connectivity of our campuses and communities.’

There is also a Digital Innovation (http://ji.sc/GCU-digital-innovation) section within the strategy with focuses on sharing expertise and making digital platforms globally accessible.

The Strategy for Learning (http://ji.sc/GCU-strategy-for-learning) focuses on ‘engagement-led learning and real-world problem solving’, with a curriculum framework of eight ‘principles’ and eight ‘enablers’ to be embedded across all programmes. The enablers include digital development, campus development, university systems and students as partners.

A recent partnership with the African Leadership Academy will see the launch of a joint initiative - the African Leadership College of Higher Education - requiring delivery of many modules at a distance. There is a Blended Learning Roadmap and a general demand for more flexible modes of study, particularly to attract and support international students. On-campus students are also asking for online assessment and feedback as routine, and for a more consistent digital experience.

Leadership of change
Academic quality and development is the new academic department for ‘Excellence in education’ at GCU, whose remit includes online, blended and technology enhanced learning. The team works collaboratively with learning technologists in each academic school to offer strategic direction, pedagogic guidance and practical support to staff. There is also an IT training team in Information Services, and a digital team in the library that deal with information literacy, the open repository and management of digital resources.

The 2016 UCISA Digital Capabilities (ucisa.ac.uk/digcap) survey revealed how leadership of this agenda is in flux: 

Our team has always done the UCISA TEL survey and it was colleagues in the library who have done digital capabilities previously. But this year there has been some debate over whether they should be doing it, or us, or IT/IS, and it has been batted back and forth. So the debate [about leadership] is happening right here in the university.
Responsibility for digital capabilities rests with different teams depending on whether they are supporting academic staff, professional staff, undergraduates or research students. A strength of this distributed responsibility is that there are opportunities to embed the development of digital practice in many different places and processes.

**Actions for digital capability**

2016 has seen academic staff being surveyed (http://ji.sc/GCU-NUS-benchmarking-tool) about their digital capabilities, with the full support of the Deputy vice chancellor (DVC) academic. There is a short section in the survey on basic IT skills, file management, productivity software, and access to hardware and devices, followed by sections on learning, teaching and assessment practice with digital technologies.

We probably wouldn’t have put [questions about access] in but the DVC feels strongly that the university needs to know what kit people have so they are in a position to move forward with digital learning and teaching. Our interpretation of that is interesting, because originally [when this question was being asked by IS] it wasn’t really being linked to learning and teaching needs.

As a follow-up, the Academic development team have used the Jisc/NUS Digital student experience benchmarking tool (http://ji.sc/GCU-NUS-benchmarking-tool) to help individuals benchmark their practice, and to support informal module review.

It engages staff really quickly… being able to articulate the steps you need to take between the different areas is really useful and helps staff think about what to do next. It’s a tool to help people think about their practice, it’s not judgmental at all. We are very explicit about that.

Trello is being used to support visualisation (http://ji.sc/GCU-using-trello-online-modules) in the curriculum design process, allowing staff to quickly build a picture of assessment weightings, activity types, workload and so on.

You can see the lights going on. People can colour code things. Staff start to feel ownership and can use it in the way they want. They maybe don’t see it as increasing their digital capabilities, but it is.

The Jisc Digital capabilities framework (http://ji.sc/digicap_ind_frame) has also proved valuable in their work with programme and module teams.

You can’t develop a new programme or module without considering the digital aspects or including that in assessment and feedback.

A more conscious approach to embedding digital activities is also helping staff to think about learning resources in a new way. The academic development team and school-based learning technologists are on hand to help them develop content more flexibly and creatively once they have decided on their basic course structure and learning outcomes. Staff are also exposed to the use of different social tools and encouraged to see how they might be valuable in learning.

The African Leadership College initiative means that a large number of online and blended programmes (http://ji.sc/GCU-guide-to-online-modules) are being developed at the same time. These courses are underpinned by the same eight principles as other programmes, and new techniques and materials are being tried. Lessons from this rapid development process are being cascaded to other curriculum teams via a practice sharing microsite within the virtual learning environment (VLE), and also through a rigorous process of peer review. A dedicated Online curriculum design guide (https://spark.adobe.com/page/MW6us) draws on this learning.
The post-graduate certificate programme is now being made available online to teaching staff based outside the UK, again driven by new partnerships. This means that all participants share the experience of learning online and in culturally and geographically diverse groups, and can make use of this in their own teaching. Students on traditional campus-based courses have been asking for a more consistent use of online assessment and feedback, and this has been tackled by working with academic staff who are already adopting creative approaches, and emphasising the benefits to students.

Moving ahead
The academic development team along with school-based subject experts have carried out a review of all the online and blended modules developed to date. This has allowed them to identify the skills that teaching staff are developing – such as creating online content and structuring digital activities – and where there are still some challenges.

Staff are encouraged to be online learners themselves – to take part in Twitter chats, join MOOCs, collaborate and use learning apps, away from the pressures of teaching. Regular drop-in sessions (the Coffee Club) allow for informal sharing of these experiences. The university is also part of the facilitation team for Bring Your Own Device for Learning (BYOD4L) (http://ji.sc/GCU-open-learning-event), a national online course for staff and students. Once a year, while this course is running, the academic development team hold daily drop-in sessions for staff to discuss and share in the online activities.

Opportunities and challenges for the future
The African Leadership Academy is a bold initiative for the university, and one that has thrown the digital capabilities of staff into focus. The need to develop course materials rapidly, flexibly, with attention to local educational cultures, and for delivery at a distance, have all challenged current curriculum practice.

Robust peer review of online courses has been identified as a key enabler. Early evidence suggests that this process helps staff to learn from one another, as well as providing assurance to students and quality assessors that online provision does not have to compromise academic quality.

The new strategies have moved digital capability up the agenda, but there are risks in raising expectations when staff time is more constrained than ever. Career progression still does not often rest on how staff have engaged with the digital agenda.

The team are now looking to develop short courses for staff that will use the digital capabilities framework to support initial self-assessment and will then provide practice in the areas identified as needing attention.

It’s often the softer skills, in terms of the tone you take in online interactions, the way you signpost and scaffold what is happening… So we have had a first iteration of our staff development around teaching online, but there are areas we know we need to concentrate on more.

We see it as an ongoing process, trying to get those phrases into common use, and then getting people to understand and be inspired.

Time and recognition are the challenges, not getting the up-to-date kit. The best technology will not have an impact on learning if people are doing the same things just slightly more efficiently.

There is also a lack of dedicated quiet spaces for teaching online or to develop online materials.

How you develop your teaching style and preferences online is important… and finding space has been a real challenge.
Lessons learned

» Running a survey of digital capabilities is a way of bringing key stakeholders together and building a shared understanding of the issues, quite apart from the value of the evidence collected. It also communicates to participants how the organisation is describing and valuing digital practices.

» New partnerships, especially with international institutions, cast a spotlight on a university’s ability to collaborate in digital spaces, and to develop and deliver courses at a distance. This can be both an impetus and a test bed for new approaches.

» Peer review is an intensive but effective means of cascading knowledge, in addition to its role in quality assurance. It is important that staff experience this process as having intrinsic value to them, and not as an imposition.

» Teaching staff should be encouraged to experience online and digitally mediated learning for themselves. Accredited courses for teaching staff provide intensive opportunities for digital learning, but short courses and one-off workshops can also be effective.

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For more information on all related resources please see the Building digital capability project page:
http://ji.sc/building-digicap