Background
Located in the north-west of England, Lancaster University is home to over 12,000 students in nine colleges. It is consistently ranked in the top ten of UK league tables. As well as attracting students from over 100 countries, Lancaster has developed partnerships with institutions in 24 countries around the world.

Strategic priorities
The university’s Strategic Plan for 2020 (lancaster.ac.uk/strategic-plan) sets out ambitious targets for the university as a global institution, including for each department to be among the top 100 in the world. Digital Lancaster (http://ji.sc/LU-digital-information) articulates how digital practices will enable the university to achieve its targets, with five key ‘digital enablers’:

» Digital fluency: to ensure our staff and students have the digital skills they need

» Digital infrastructures: to ensure we have the technology, people, services and infrastructure needed

» Digital innovation: to maximise the opportunities offered by digital technology

» Digital governance: to integrate Digital Lancaster into the university’s existing structures

A digital services stream is also moving Lancaster towards a ‘dot.everything’ approach whereby all processes – from student admissions and assessment to requesting travel and managing payroll – are carried out online. This means updating systems and practices, and ensuring everyone has the digital skills they need to carry out their role.

In the next iteration of the strategic plan there is a further focus on distance and online learning and on supporting learners at partner institutions who may never attend the physical campus but deserve an equivalent learning experience.

Leadership of change
Leadership of the digital strategy is located in Information system services (ISS) but is overseen by the IT Strategy Committee whose members include senior managers from across the university. This means that service and infrastructure issues are addressed at the same time as issues of individual development and organisational culture.

The Digital fluency steering group is made up of senior staff from the library, student experience and the colleges, the directors of HR, staff development and IT, and a representative of the student union (LUSU). Having so many senior staff involved has given digital capability issues a high profile. It also means that an inclusive approach is taken, with the digital skills of manual and professional staff considered alongside those of academic teaching staff and researchers.

We have a ‘recruit the best’ strategy. HR is asking, what does that mean in a digital organisation?
Actions for digital capability

A first step has been to develop a Digital fluency framework, based very closely on Jisc’s six elements of digital capability (http://jisc/digicap_ind_frame) and with the same aim of being relevant to everyone in the organisation. This will help to answer the questions:

» What digital skills are needed to work or study at Lancaster?

» What digital capabilities are employers looking for?

» How do we define ‘digital fluency’?

Developing the framework and completing the UCISA Digital capabilities survey (ucisa.ac.uk/digcap) have allowed the steering group to build a clearer picture of current provision and to prioritise available resources. Initially activities have focused on two areas: embedding digital activities into learning, teaching and assessment (LTA), working with academic staff in departments; and developing free-standing skills provision for students. The framework has allowed both to be taken forward more coherently.

Established uses of digital technologies in LTA were already covered in the post graduate certificate of academic practice and in educational development programmes for academic staff. A new development was to offer bursaries for staff/student projects (wp.lancs.ac.uk/digital-bursary) in each department to explore new digital approaches. Staff who have been involved are sharing the ideas and outcomes within Lancaster - and in some cases beyond - while the students have become digital ambassadors (http://jisc/Lancaster-digital-ambassadors) in their own right.

In terms of digital skills, the Digital fluency framework was launched at the same time as an institutional review of learning support and development. This led to the launch of an integrated learning and skills development website (lancaster.ac.uk/learning-skills), bringing together all the training and support available from ISS, the library, and academic skills tutors alongside some other provision from departments and faculties.

Meanwhile IT Services are redeveloping their face to face training and print guides as stand-alone online units that students can access directly from their desktops via Moodle. Having the units available in Moodle allows lecturers to link to them from their modules too.

The next step is to provide a coherent pathway through these materials, using the Framework to ensure that all areas of digital fluency are covered. Students successfully completing this pathway will be accredited with a Digital skills certificate that will appear on their Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR) transcript and can be used towards the Lancaster Award. Materials will largely be online to meet the needs of students who are not on campus, either because they are studying overseas or because they take the certificate as a pre-sessional to prepare themselves for studying at Lancaster. The certificate has been identified as having tangible benefits for LTA staff as well.

An example is the work we’ve done with a lecturer in the Management School. He can see [students] are already getting credit for doing [statistics using] SPSS within the Lancaster Award, so, so he doesn’t have to assess these core skills, and can focus on how they are being applied to the subject-based problems.

On campus, online provision is augmented with face-to-face sessions in ‘bite-sized chunks, throughout the day’ so that students can drop in to those they need. These sessions have been relocated to the Learning Zone, right in the middle of campus, which has become a hub for informal learning development and group work. Working with staff in the library
and the IT Service desk, with only a few changes to the furniture and signage, and the development of a new learning skills website, IT Services have been able to make digital skills support sessions more visible and accessible, and awareness among students is beginning to grow.

That is what we wanted in terms of both an online presence and the f2f space in the learning zone – a critical mass of awareness. For it to become the logical place to go if you want f2f support, and to visit the website if you want online support.

Lancaster carried out a small-scale early trial of the Jisc Digital capabilities discovery tool and there is still enthusiasm for a self-assessment approach, (http://ji.sc/discovery-tool) based on the framework and linked through to local resources. However, the feeling is that this needs to be customised to local needs, and that support materials must be robust and comprehensive before expectations are raised.

Finally, there has been a change in the culture of IT support so that service desk staff see themselves as coaches first, and as technicians second.

When someone has a problem, instead of just fixing it, we are encouraging the service desk to help people to work out how to help themselves, such as where to look for online help, recognising good websites, etc. Then the next time that person has a problem they will be able to search for a solution, recognise what is a good or bad solution, and analyse the problem before they start.

Attention is now also turning from academic staff and students to other groups of staff. Directors of professional services have been impressed with the framework and its potential to be used in staff appraisals, role analyses, and for staff to assess their own development needs. They are keen to profile some of the roles within their teams and to monitor their collective digital strengths and requirements. There is likely to be a digital skills certificate for professional staff, linked to the Framework but with different baselines for different roles. Some work has already started on this.

Lynda.com online learning has been trialled with staff and students, and there is an ongoing debate about which aspects of digital support should be offered ‘off the peg’ and which require Lancaster-specific resources, or at least adaptation to local needs.

Moving ahead
A new initiative is to work with lecturers to produce lists of software that students will need for their course, so that this becomes as natural a part of course preparation as the production of a reading list. These will also be linked to the online support units.

We got a lot of feedback from a focus group with mature students saying they wish they had developed some of the software skills they need over the summer before they started, so they could arrive with the skills already in place and not be struggling to keep up.
Opportunities for the future

Lancaster’s Digital strategy gives equal weight to digital infrastructure and to the development of digitally capable staff and students – and both are recognised as critical to meeting the organisation’s goals for the future. This presents huge opportunities, but also entails high expectations. The scope of the project is very wide – building digital fluency among all staff and students, for all the core functions of the organisation. So there are challenges in developing manageable short-term plans and identifying where to pilot new approaches.

The risk is being mitigated by focusing on different groups of staff in turn, and identifying the role that off-the-peg resources can play within Lancaster’s bespoke framework.

Lessons learned

» Rapid progress can be made through use of a coherent, high-level framework – institutionally owned but mapped to developments beyond the institution (eg Jisc, EU)

» A senior steering group makes it easy to achieve awareness, and ensure shared contributions to and ownership of the strategy. But there needs to be constant movement from high-level strategy to detailed planning, resourcing, and implementation

» Accreditation has several benefits, for staff as well as students. It offers a personal incentive, it demonstrates organisational commitment, and it provides a coherent pathway through disparate skills and contexts of practice

» Different groups of staff have different capability needs, and different motivations to develop. (eg digital skills for everyday life are motivating for staff who make limited use of digital technologies in their work; professional identity issues for professional staff; meeting the needs of digital students for academic teaching staff; research excellence and reputation for academic researchers; employability and accreditation for students)

» Developing extra-curricula resources and accreditation for students can support the digital curriculum, if teaching staff are encouraged to see these as preparing students for authentic digital activities in courses of study

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Any unattributed quotes in the text were provided and have been approved by the contacts above.

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