University of Southampton
Working in partnership with students

Background
The University of Southampton is a research-intensive institution on the south coast of England, founded in 1862 and a founder member of the Russell Group of universities. It is consistently ranked in the top ten of UK research universities and among the top 100 globally. Over 23,500 students attend the university, including 16,000 undergraduates and 7,000 postgraduates and researchers. A high proportion of undergraduates – almost 14% – are mature students, and more than a quarter of all its students are from outside the UK, making the campus a home to more than 130 different nationalities. In fact the university is committed to internationalisation as one of its four core principles, alongside sustainability, collegiality, and quality.

The university has had over 500,000 subscribers to its Massive open online courses (MOOCs) (http://ji.sc/US-free-online-courses), delivered in partnership with FutureLearn. It has built a reputation for educational innovation (http://ji.sc/US-innovation-in-learning) as well as being a world leader in specialist digital areas such as Web science (southampton.ac.uk/ws), GeoData, and Internet law (southampton.ac.uk/ilaws/index.page).

Strategic priorities
The university’s strategic aims are to maintain its high level of research excellence and funding, and the high quality of the student experience through all stages of the student journey, as reflected in the National Student Survey (NSS). Work is currently underway on the refresh of the Education strategy, which is designed around the new National student survey (NSS) indicators, with particular objectives to enhance the quality of teaching and assessment and to develop entrepreneurship and employability across the curriculum.

With such a strong focus on research excellence and reputation, digital scholarship is an increasingly important area of strategic focus. This means not only developing specialist research skills – for example through Southampton’s Centres for doctoral training (http://ji.sc/US-doctoral-training-centres) – but also ensuring that all research active staff are using digital tools and networks effectively.

There is a lot of talk about relating digital literacy to research impact. Impact isn’t just how many papers you have published but who is engaging with them and how you can measure that...

A recent social media ‘visibility’ scale (http://ji.sc/UL-LSE-social-media) from the London School of Economics (LSE) attracted interest at Southampton as a complement to established research impact metrics.

People felt that was an affirmation that it is OK to use social media, because it has an impact in terms of reputation and research impact, and that is one of the big drivers... So if you crowd source your reputation, everyone is playing a part: even students have a managed online presence, which produces data that raises your impact factor.
Work has continued in the library on development of the Information literacy strategy, and a draft Digital literacy strategy is under development to complement this. One strength of recent university discussions about integration and shared services is to draw together Library services, Academic development and learning and Teaching digital production to address staff and student development needs in parallel. This enables the interconnection between digital scholarship and digital learning to be explored.

Leadership of change
The newly created teams within the library, the university’s IT support service (iSolutions) and staff in faculties are working together to enhance student learning, support staff professional development and build educational partnerships. The connection between research and education enhances the distinctive characteristics of the learning on offer at the university, and the capacity for innovation, as shown by its extensive massive open online courses (MOOC) offering.

In addition to educational specialists, the university has a team of learning designers and media developers (http://ji.sc/US-learning-innovation-and-development) whose role is to advise and support staff in the production of digital educational materials. There are annual virtual learning environment (VLE) awards (http://ji.sc/US-VLE-awards) to staff making particularly innovative or educationally effective uses of the virtual learning environment.

Support for developing digital skills are provided by iSolutions (southampton.ac.uk/isolutions) alongside the thousands of online resources available through Lynda.com.

The university library provides development opportunities in information literacy and research skills, for example through an academic skills hub and resources for students accessible from LibGuides (http://ji.sc/US-libguides-southampton). In addition library teams provide researcher development opportunities embedded within doctoral college programmes and for specific research groups. The team also manage Southampton’s well-established ePrints (http://ji.sc/US-policies-and-information) open access institutional repository, where in addition to staff research outputs, all PhD and MPhil theses are deposited. ePrints enhances the worldwide impact of university research.

Actions for digital capability
Southampton has been leading the way with student digital partners since 2012. Its iChamps (student champions of innovation and digital literacy) were the subject of an earlier case study for Jisc (http://ji.sc/US-ichamps). With an initial proposal to fund one student for one year, the project received so many excellent applications that in the end 16 were recruited. Enthusiasm and numbers have continued to grow, with past iChamps mentoring each new cohort, and dedicated workshops to help them develop and share their skills. Their role has evolved in a number of ways. iChamps are now expected to identify, develop and lead their own projects, and to act as advocates. The focus of their work has moved from digital identity as branding to a deeper engagement with digital literacies and employability in the curriculum.

iChamps are involved in a range of curriculum and co-curriculum projects, such as the Business School project Students as Creators and Change Agents (http://ji.sc/US-students-as-creators). Their impact has been such that funding continues to be found, year on year, and the Vice president Education is an important advocate. Externally their reputation continues to grow, thanks to the part many iChamps have played in the Jisc Change agents’ Network (CAN) (http://ji.sc/US-change-agents-network).
Materials from the Jisc Developing digital literacies programme (jisc.ac.uk/rd/projects/digital-literacies) continue to be used to support digital literacies in the curriculum. Staff are using an app called Nearpod (nearpod.com) with arriving undergraduates to encourage them to share their expectations about technology in learning and teaching. This helps to shape their expectations, which often do not go beyond traditional lectures and exams. Workshops are run for staff and students to explore the theme of online identity, as this is found to be a motivating topic and a good place to start. The Jisc Digital capabilities framework is also being used to design workshops for the iChamps, and from 2017 to award them digital badges. The model is designed to provide quality assurance as well as personal development opportunities.

The badges and associated evidence can be collected in a simple, drag-and-drop e-portfolio from Pathbrite (https://pathbrite.com).

**Moving ahead**

In a further development, the digital training and badges are being offered to students engaged in a range of other activities. For example, discussions have been taking place with the Students Union about the use of badges to recognise volunteering activities, and the Medical Students Society are offering co-curricular badges. The broader aim is for all co-curricular activities, where organised training is provided, to consider the potential for offering badges to recognise the skills that the students are gaining.

A newly established role of digital scholarship and content innovation manager will be involved in the review of University of Southampton Students’ Union pathways to accreditation. Four hundred course leaders and representatives are trained each year. In the future, they will be learning how digital practices can support them in their role and building a portfolio they can take forward with them. Now that so many students are being exposed to the idea, it is beginning to spread.

The Change agents’ network has been so important for our iChamps. [Participants] have said to me that their confidence in speaking has gone through the roof, because I invited them to speak at CAN 2016 conference in Lincoln and there were 200 people there. One of them said ‘I used to stutter when I had to talk in front of people but I don’t do that now, because of the experience of meeting people from across the country.

I wanted to use it to get them to be more reflective about where they were at the start, because I know that they improve.

[So] the people who are doing the training for those [are incorporating] digital literacy. And getting the people working towards those things to get badges to evidence it along the way. Then build a portfolio. I could just bring it all together and then students who get these badges could apply to become an iChamp and I would have a pool to pick from.

The volunteering part of the Student Union wants me to create badges now, and the medical society are designing their own badge, and the chemistry society too. So I got that going... [as it] is a way of embedding digital literacies and practice into Student Union activities.
Having the practice and awareness of badges in the co-curriculum means that there is more enthusiasm for it in curriculum contexts. A badges project in the geography department has taken off and is being used as a demonstrator for other departments, leading to interest from health sciences and chemistry. Co-researcher badges are also being designed for PhD students, an important development at a university that prides itself on its research excellence and expects digital tools to have a scholarly application.

Networking beyond the institution has helped the iChamps to build their personal confidence and their digital practice. They have been invited to speak about their experiences and advocate for digital mentoring projects at other institutions. Seeing the project achieving public recognition has raised its status inside the university.

The long-term aim is to extend the university’s capacity for innovation through a more structured approach to support. Innovation is being linked in to strategy, and the evidence base is being built by capturing the results of innovation work. A project such as iChamps, which focuses on personal development and empowerment, is both agile and persistent, as those involved continue to grow and cascade their skills. As such it is a clear demonstration of the benefits which follow from digital engagement.

**Opportunities and challenges for the future**

Digital badges provide a new opportunity to embed digital capabilities across the curriculum and co-curriculum, and for students to see their value as transferable skills. In the Southampton context it will be important also to emphasise the link with scholarship and for badges to be seen as ways of scaffolding the development of academic skills rather than dumbing them down.

The new focus on enterprise and employability is an opportunity to engage iChamps outside of the curriculum, especially in helping other students to build their online profiles and be more reflective about their digital skills. But there are risks if this means moving them away from curriculum innovation.

I think the iChamps are about effective learning, and the fact that they produce great personal profiles is a by-product. The tools we produce [with iChamps] are designed to support students, but they are learning and reflecting more because of it.
Lessons learned

» Student digital champions should have an interest and influence in the projects they work on. Ideally this will be to produce an educational outcome.

» Southampton has found it extremely cost effective to support and train student digital champions relative to the impact they can have.

» Innovators need external networks, especially the opportunity to share with people in similar roles but different institutional settings.

» Digital identity remains a powerful motivation for developing digital capability and for engaging with digital initiatives. This is true of organisations as well as individuals.

» Digital innovators have to gain trust and credibility with academic staff. This can be done by ensuring that approaches are flexible and adaptable rather than rigidly imposed, and that academic staff can initiate ideas and projects, and requests for support, rather than having them imposed.

» Especially in research-intensive settings, digital literacy can and should be presented as a scholarship agenda.

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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