University of Lincoln: How digital are you?

Background
The University of Lincoln (lincoln.ac.uk/home) was opened in 1996 on a brand-new campus in Lincoln city centre – the first new city centre campus to be built in the UK for several decades. Two hundred million pounds has been invested in the campus, transforming a brownfield site into an award-winning research and learning environment for 14,000 students and 1,500 staff.

The university has a strong community focus, making many of its facilities available to the public, hosting free public lectures and a community radio station, and playing a lead role in the Lincoln Cultural and Arts Partnership. It leads the Lincolnshire Outreach Network, which encourages and supports young people from local schools and colleges to access higher education. Students contribute more than 15,000 volunteer hours every year to community projects in and around the city.

At the same time Lincoln welcomes students from over 100 nations and partners with universities and businesses around the world.

The university ranks just outside the top ten for overall NSS score, and has been commended by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for its approach to enhancing students’ learning opportunities. Lincoln is a top ten institution for teaching quality and for student experience, according to the Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide 2017.

Strategic priorities
The university’s Strategic Plan 2016–21 (http://ji.sc/UL-strategy-and-vision) has five themes, which include ‘Enabling Technologies, Excellent Research and Teaching Spaces’ and ‘A New Vision for Education’. Bringing these two themes together, an ambitious Digital Education Plan has been launched to ensure that the University of Lincoln has a digital education environment which not only meets our communities’ and stakeholders’ immediate needs and expectations, but which also positions us well to prepare for and negotiate an uncertain digital future with confidence. The Plan extends Lincoln’s ethos of ‘students as co-creators of knowledge’ into the digital space, placing a premium on open pedagogies and student-led production of open content. So issues of digital education are closely connected with practices of digital research and the public communication of ideas.

This approach requires staff to be confident educators and confident users of digital media for knowledge production. It also demands a highly flexible learning environment and digital infrastructure. The plan acknowledges these challenges:

‘Our staff and students will need more assistance and support to help them operate in, and take advantage of, this more complex and dynamic digital environment. [Our proposals] will require a clear plan for promotion, development, support and sharing through best practice.’

Lincoln’s success in widening access and opportunity means that students have a very diverse range of previous experiences in education, which may not have included self-directed study, or study in digitally rich environments.
Lincoln also places a premium on staff and student wellbeing. As in other universities, staff groups are concerned that digital working practices should not impact on their stress levels or their work-life balance. The university also wants to ensure that all its members are able to identify and deal with online abuse. So it is beginning to look at digital practice in the context of safety and wellbeing, and organisational culture.

Leadership of change
The Digital education (DE) team has recently been restructured to sit within the Lincoln Academy for Learning and Teaching (LALT). It comprises three members of staff, working closely with a student engagement team. There are strong links with support teams in IT, the library, student services (including careers) and with academic tutors. The team are responsible for delivery of the digital education plan and for certain deliverables in the learning and teaching strategy.

Actions for digital capability
In response to the ambitions and challenges presented by the digital education plan, the DE team formed a digital capabilities group in 2015 with representatives from digital education ICT, HR, the library, student services, and academic colleges. An early decision was taken to pilot Lynda.com.

A second project was to gather a better understanding of the digital capabilities of staff across the university. A few survey instruments were available, but they all seemed to focus on current technology use. The Jisc Digital capabilities framework (http://ji.sc/digicap_ind_frame) offered a different perspective.

Members of the DE team found out about proposals for a Discovery tool (http://ji.sc/discovery-tool), based on the framework, at the Jisc Digital leaders course (jisc.ac.uk/training/digital-leaders-programme). They signed up to trial the tool in beta, and it was made available to all staff for a period of three weeks in April-May 2016. A personal email from the Deputy vice chancellor invited staff to find out ‘How digital are you?’ and emphasised that the university was not tracking individuals, only supporting them to find out more. There were 422 respondents or around a 25% response rate, all of whom completed the survey in full.

The results have given the DE team a list of priorities for future workshops and development projects.

Perhaps the most important impact, however, is that people who went through the Discovery process now have a common language for talking about their digital practices.

We have such a diverse range of students including postgraduates in their 60s and 70s who might not have used a computer in earnest before.

It was the underlying skills and capabilities that we wanted. The ability to think around the task, so it’s more focused on the outcome rather than the tool you use. And of course that brought in the wellbeing element… which was missing from a lot of the frameworks.

A number of schools were paying for a licence and... the added value seemed huge, so we asked 100 staff and students from across the university to consider how Lynda.com could be used to support their personal development, their students and in their teaching. We had very positive responses and we hope to secure the funds to roll it out across the university from September 2017.

Overall we were really pleased... the results showed we had staff who were willing to try to resolve technical issues themselves, who saw the benefit of collaborative working tools and are interested in new technologies.
Those conversations have continued locally. Not long after the Discovery tool was rolled out, the School of Law decided to abandon traditional teaching completely for a week and concentrate on using digital tools to support learning instead. The School of Pharmacy followed. Lincoln International Business School began talks with the DE team about how to skill their staff and students to do 10% of learning online. So the effects have been subtle and local, but tangible and positive.

Moving ahead
Future development work will centre on areas where staff identified a lack of confidence through the Discovery process: areas such as social media, digital copyright, and developing open content. The aim is to use an updated version of the Discovery tool again around appraisal time so that staff can decide for themselves whether they have developed their confidence, or noticed any new development needs.

It was definitely worth doing. You’ve seen the things we’ve pulled out from the results that we need to work on. They are things we can easily fix. They are not insurmountable.

Opportunities for the future
The Digital education team is undergoing significant changes, but three areas of development remain – digital capabilities of staff, of students, and in the curriculum. A new project officer is being recruited to work specifically on digital capability projects, and Lincoln has developed a draft graduate attributes statement with digital capabilities likely to be included.

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The Jisc framework needs to be part of that, because it’s such a nice way of getting students to think about what they take out when they leave.

Lessons learned
» Addressing digital capabilities will require investment initially, not only because of the need to update technologies and networks, but because people need time to develop. This might require training teams or specialised developers, or online opportunities such as Lynda.com, or paid-for student mentors and academic staff secondments

There are also plans to use the different profiles, perhaps in collaboration with the HR department. A longer-term ambition is for digital capabilities to be included in the personal development review process.
Digital identity and wellbeing are effective routes to engage staff and students. They address people and their real-world practices, rather than roles and ideal behaviours. Digital change generates anxiety and stress, as well as interest and excitement – and both need to be acknowledged before personal development can happen.

If you get the one right person, the right senior person, that is essential. I don’t think people would have got involved because of an email from [us]... it was that one person with the right level of influence who got us to where we are now.

Not all digital practices need to be ‘innovative’ to be valuable. In fact learners need some continuity and predictability in their learning experience, as staff do in their teaching practice.

It’s about doing something in the right way and at the right time.

The digital university is not just the same organisation with more skilled people in it. Digital capability is an organisational change agenda.

We saw it as a way of getting people to think differently about themselves within the university.

It’s changing culture, it’s everyone agreeing this is something we need to do. That personally they need to do this to develop, and that the organisation needs to support them.

Have the most senior member of a team invite participants to an initiative or event – or go higher.

The digital capability agenda can be taken forward with small, pragmatic steps. That might mean workshops to ensure teaching staff use the virtual learning environment (VLE) more effectively, or feel confident with padlet or social media.

It’s not supporting the whizzy people and the fabulous technology – it’s just shifting up the general population.

Just using the VLE right, the VLE is a gateway drug and then they will move on to stronger stuff.

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Interviews were conducted with Marcus Elliott and Kerry Pinny to inform the development of this case study.

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