Case studies: journeys towards digital capabilities

Lessons learnt, Helen Beetham (March 2017)

This brief report draws together all the ‘lessons learned’ from the 15 Jisc Digital capability case studies (published March 2017). You will find the full list of participating institutions at the end of the report. Although they are expressed in a general way, the lessons will not all be applicable at other institutions. Please use these links and your knowledge of your own institution and sector to judge how likely it is that a lesson will transfer from the original context into your own.

Frameworks and definitions

A digital capabilities framework is not an end in itself but it can provide a common language for development, a benchmark for individuals to aspire to, and a checklist for staff and student support. (Nottingham Trent University)

A collaboratively-built, evidence based framework can have multiple benefits, such as:

» embedding digital literacies into professional development and accreditation, and from there into appraisal and review;
» developing a shared vocabulary and understanding across disciplines, teams and settings;
» building individual confidence through self-assessment against the framework;
» encouraging digital literacies to be embedded into the curriculum in a systematic way;
» having a foundation on which to build further discussions e.g. employability, flipped learning, accessibility, and the use of data. (University of Brighton)

‘Engaging with the framework sits with a general openness to incorporating technology into teaching practice’ (University of Brighton).

A detailed framework of digital competences can be used for recognition of staff and students. (Anglia Ruskin University)
A coherent model such as a LearningWheel allows staff to see clearly what is expected and to monitor how they are progressing. (Salford City College)

A coherent, high-level framework should be institutionally owned but can be closely mapped to developments beyond the institution (e.g. Jisc, EU frameworks, or versions of them). (Lancaster University)

Frameworks are powerful in practice when they are open enough to allow curriculum teams and professional services to interpret and contextualise them. (The Open University)

Examples from practice, shared through communities of practice, can be more persuasive than detailed requirements: ‘it’s the stories about practice that are most powerful’ (The Open University)

It is challenging to devise digital capability statements and levels that work across a wide variety of settings. The North Lindsey approach has been to offer generic ‘missions’ that individuals can make relevant to their role and subject specialism. (North Lindsey College)

Other strategic approaches

Digital capability is a whole-organisation agenda, but how it gets taken up depends on local factors such as departmental cultures, management styles, and how innovators are supported. It is important to find common ground between diverse stakeholders. ‘It’s about finding the right balance for the organisation between centralised and distributed. There is never one way of doing it.’ (Nottingham Trent University)

Once a strategic approach to digital capabilities has been established, it is easier to build links with other agendas such as respect, inclusivity, employability, digital identity and branding. (Nottingham Trent University)

Running a survey of digital capabilities is a good 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 describes and values digital practices. (Glasgow Caledonian University)

There are many ways in which individuals can be digitally ‘capable’ in their roles; similarly, there are many ways in which an organisation can develop digital capability depending on the established culture, rules, roles and divisions of labour. (Nottingham Trent University)

Digital capability projects can be led from a variety of different locations. The most common are e-Learning or Digital Education, the Library, and Educational Development (or similar), but the most effective involve senior members of several teams.

Having digital capabilities led from an Education Excellence Unit [or equivalent] gives academic credibility and curriculum impact. ‘It’s finding someone who can theorise and conceptualise in terms that academics understand… It’s those more academic credentials that I think are starting to make a difference. Because it’s an academic walking the walk’. (Bournemouth University)

A strategic approach should generate excitement and engagement around some shared themes, while allowing departments and services to interpret ‘digital literacy’ in their own terms and for their own students. (UCL)
Invest in comfortable shoes. Achieving change in a large organisation requires you to explore it and understand the different staff and student experiences within it. So walk around, see what’s going on, talk to people and provide opportunities for them to connect with each other. (UCL)

A senior advocate or steering group is very useful. But there needs to be constant movement from high level strategy to detailed planning, resourcing, and implementation. (Lancaster University)

Having digital capabilities work widely endorsed and strategically approved is useful, but it can take a long time. So there is a case for moving forward where there are opportunities, and allowing other areas to catch up. ‘We felt that if we went through all the committees we would miss the moment, and we wanted to hit the moment – the time when people were talking about it… We wanted to be agile rather than having it signed and sealed and then finding it to be out of date.’ (The Open University)

New partnerships, especially with overseas 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. (Glasgow Caledonian University)

It is important to have a strategic vision for the college and it helps for that to be driven at a very senior level. ‘In my view digital capability is a key skill for the current and future of our young people. It is at the heart of transformation of learning and enables learners to maximise their success not only with their studies but throughout their life and work in the future.’ (CEO and Principal, Epping Forest College)

A ‘one college, one team’ mentality ensures practices are openly shared, and collaborative initiatives can go forward. ‘[Otherwise] you have a team culture at curriculum level which may not be sharing and collaborating with others. That means duplications, miscommunication, basically a culture that is not as constructive as possible to address the challenges we are all experiencing because of globalisation, technology and the information revolution’. (Epping Forest College)

Development strategies

Whole-organisation approaches

An initial audit, overview or consultancy project can provide the momentum to kick-start a strategic approach to digital capabilities. (Bournemouth University)
Some colleges have invested in CPD at scale, allowing all staff to be brought up to a baseline level of capability. (SERC)

**Cultural change**

Projects around digital literacy may lose visibility over time but this does not need to be a problem. The more digital practices are embedded, and digital policies integrated, the less of a separate identity the issue needs to have. (University of Brighton)

Development work has to find its level. In Brighton, at the course and programme level, there were digital enthusiasts who were desperate to adopt the framework and take up the development opportunities. (University of Brighton)

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’. (University of Lincoln)

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

The North Lindsey culture is all about teams, and this is reflected in the approach to digital development. (North Lindsey College)

Many parts of the organisation will already be working on digital capability [even if they don’t call it that]. The key with any new initiative is to draw on that rich expertise and help it to become better articulated. (The Open University)

Involve existing stakeholders through shared events, collaboratively-developed materials, and some elements of a common language (which might be a visual language, e.g. badges). Setting out as if you are breaking new ground will only lead to resentment. (The Open University)

*There have been some interesting conversations about academic professional development frameworks that exist already, around communities of practice in the Faculties that we could use. It will be about defining what people need in general terms, but then using the language and mechanisms people use already.* (The Open University)

**Staff and student self-assessment**

An audit process based on self-assessment and linked through to self-paced learning resources is an effective approach to digital capability development. (Anglia Ruskin University)

It is challenging to devise competence statements that work for both staff and students, and across a wide variety of roles. This can only be done with the full engagement of stakeholders, to ensure the language and examples used are accessible to all. (Anglia Ruskin University)
At Anglia Ruskin, student competences were attributed to modules rather than to individuals, so all students passing a module gained a badge. Individual staff were able to assess themselves directly against the framework using the Digital Barometer. (Anglia Ruskin University)

We saw it as a way of getting people to think differently about themselves within the University... [It's about] 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. (University of Lincoln)

Self-assessment tools can achieve widespread uptake and engagement, but there may need to be alternatives (e.g. face to face drop-in sessions) for the staff who are most concerned about their skills and about the risks of being exposed. (University of Lincoln)

Developing resources

While a framework provides coherence to development, it’s still important to have a wide variety of tools and materials available, especially at a small scale that staff can easily pick up and try. These could include cue cards, toolkits, quizzes, bite-sized online resources and live app-shares. (North Lindsey College)

An effective way to raise the capabilities of a whole cohort of staff is to offer bite-sized activities that they undertake voluntarily, in their own time (e.g. ‘five minutes a day, for five days’), but in the same time-frame (e.g. the same week). This offers a good compromise between personal flexibility and the cohort effect. (Anglia Ruskin University)

Physical artefacts and real-world events (workshops, digifests etc) are important for raising awareness of digital initiatives, even though online resources may be more extensively used over time. (Bournemouth University)

Informal and peer approaches

Peer mentoring plus peer/student observation is an excellent route to improving digital practice in the classroom. Video records of good practice mean the learning can be cascaded beyond the people immediately involved. (SERC)

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. (Glasgow Caledonian University)

A cascade model of digital development makes good use of limited staff resources, and brings support close to where it is needed. (Salford City College)

Innovators need external networks, especially the opportunity to share with people in similar roles but different institutional settings. (University of Southampton)

The external perspective is really important for sharing experience and gaining confidence. (North Lindsey College)
Teaching staff should be encouraged to experience online and digitally-mediated learning for themselves. (Glasgow Caledonian University)

**Investing in accreditation and staff development**

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. (Lancaster University)

Accredited courses for teaching staff provide intensive opportunities for digital learning, but short courses and one-off workshops can also be effective. (Glasgow Caledonian University)

Addressing digital capabilities does require investment, 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. (University of Lincoln)

The digital capability agenda can be taken forward with small, pragmatic steps. That might mean workshops to ensure teaching staff use the 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.’ (University of Lincoln)

Digital literacy projects depend on professional development being strategically valued, and properly resourced. That means ‘people viewing their own professional development as important… just as important as their research.’ (University of Brighton)
Working with students

Embedding into the curriculum

Free-standing modules, 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. (Lancaster University)

A centralised and systematic approach to course design allows digital capability to be integrated thoroughly. But a more diverse and agile approach to course design allows faster innovation and more diversity, so the curriculum continues to keep pace with change. (The Open University)

By focusing on digital citizenship and participation, students can also be developing skills that will help them become effective lifelong learners, and that will be attractive to employers. (Hillcroft College)

Working with students as partners

Student digital champions should have an interest and influence in the projects they work on. Ideally this will be to produce an outcome that is related to their learning experience. (University of Southampton)

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

Digital badges are motivating for students and can be used across the curriculum and co-curriculum. Student champions are particularly valuable here, e.g. designing badges, piloting their use and encouraging their uptake. (Anglia Ruskin University)

Student change agents benefit from networking beyond their own institution. (Salford City College)

The student voice is essential: partnership from the Students’ Union or Guild has often been a key driver of change. (Bournemouth University)

Safety and respect are the foundations of digital participation, whether that is for learning or any other aspect of life. However, these do not have to be dull issues. They can be incorporated into curriculum subjects, and Safer Internet Day can be a festival of creative ideas. (Epping Forest College)
Motivation and reward

Different groups of staff have different capability needs, and different motivations to develop.

- Digital skills for everyday life are important to staff who make limited use of digital technologies in their work.
- Professional identity issues are motivating for professional staff in all roles.
- Meeting the needs of digital students is a priority for academic teaching staff.
- Research excellence, impact and reputation are key for academic researchers.
- Employability and accreditation are a significant motive for students (Lancaster University).
- Digital badges can be motivating for students. (Salford City College)

Have the most senior member of a team invite participants to an initiative or event – or go higher: ‘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.’ (University of Lincoln)

For staff, a positive digital identity can support research impact as well as professional reward, while for students there is the all-important consideration that employers and recruiters take increasing notice of how a candidate is visible online. (Nottingham Trent University)

Live events such as digital festivals, hackathons, seminars and showcases have real impact. Acquiring new skills may mean putting in some quiet time at the screen face, but the motivation to develop comes from engaging with other people in spaces defined by innovation, excitement, and open sharing. (UCL)

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. (University of Southampton)

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. (University of Southampton)

Especially in research-intensive settings, digital literacy can and should be presented as a scholarship agenda. (University of Southampton)

Teaching staff concerns need to be taken seriously and the benefits of engaging with new tools and systems must be relevant to them. (Salford City College)

Key moments for academic engagement include curriculum design meetings and annual faculty/department reviews (meetings, away days etc), as well as beginning to teach in new spaces and with new tools. (Bournemouth University)
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. (University of Lincoln)

Digital change generates anxiety and stress, as well as interest and excitement – and both need to be acknowledged before personal development can happen. (University of Lincoln)

Digital badges are a simple and effective way of encouraging staff to engage with a digital skills framework. One approach that has worked is offering badges for achieving ‘missions’, which are mapped to the Jisc Digital capabilities framework at four levels. (Anglia Ruskin University)
Infrastructure

The physical and virtual environment are critical for giving staff and learners’ confidence in their digital practices. It helps if the people responsible for digital capabilities are closely involved with space design and with IT planning. (UCL)

If the available virtual learning environments do not fit the ethos of your institution, develop something that does! (UCL)

The development of reliable, robust, standardised IT systems has many benefits in terms of administrative efficiency, and staff confidence in the systems they need. (SERC)

Staff and students are seeing the benefits of having learning-related data at their fingertips. Learners can monitor their progress, timetables and issues such as attendance; staff can monitor key metrics relating to their learners and courses. (SERC)

‘Grow your own!’ Recruit IT students as paid interns or as project team members until. Once they graduate, they may well want to stay on in a salaried role. They are often more loyal and they have an excellent understanding of user needs. (SERC)

Digital access can be especially valuable to students with additional learning needs – but can also present an additional barrier. Expect to invest in devices, and in digitising resources, as well as in intensive support (one to one if necessary) for learners to develop their digital skills. (Hillcroft College)

An up-to-date digital environment provides opportunities to engage local businesses directly in digital upskilling, as well as supporting learners with their digital employability skills. (Salford City College)

It’s important to address infrastructure as well as people’s skills. You can’t get people to try stuff if the technology won’t actually let them do it' (University of Lincoln)
Conclusions: doing innovation work

‘I think it’s always with us because innovation is always with us. It’s to do with confidence. You’ll always get some people more confident in engaging with new technology than others. And there is always going to be some requirement because although the technology will change, and people will continue to need support to engage confidently with innovation.’ (University of Brighton)

Case study institutions

» Anglia Ruskin University
» Bournemouth University
» University of Brighton
» Epping Forest College
» Glasgow Caledonian University
» Hillcroft College
» Lancaster University
» University of Lincoln
» North Lindsey College
» Nottingham Trent University
» The Open University
» Salford City College
» University of Southampton
» South Eastern Regional College (NI) (SERC)
» University College London (UCL)