‘Digital by design’

Piloting the digital capability discovery tool: The Open University

Participating in the pilot of the digital capability discovery tool (http://bit.ly/digcapdiscovery) came at an opportune moment for The Open University (the OU) (open.ac.uk). The university is currently engaged in a ‘radical redesign’ process (open.ac.uk/media/fullstory.aspx?id=31472) process with a focus on digital innovation as a means of transforming teaching and learning to offer flexible and personalised education, a streamlined curriculum and organisational efficiencies.

The university recognises that training and support for staff is an essential aspect of the redesign process and has been proactive in developing organisational approaches to digital capability (read their case study on developing a digital mindset (http://ji.sc/CS-OU-digital-mindset)). In addition to contributing to the development of a tool for the wider UK education sector, being involved in the pilot offers the OU additional insight into current levels of staff digital capabilities and provides anonymised data that can be used to establish a baseline picture and inform planning.

Pilot approaches

The pilot focused primarily on staff involved in supporting student learning, either via involvement in module design, development and production or those involved more directly in student support. 180 staff have taken part in the pilot so far. These include staff from the library, technology enhanced learning (TEL) team, central academics and associate lecturers.

Project lead, Jo Parker, a senior library manager at the OU, felt that it was important that the library and TEL teams experienced the discovery tool personally before asking others to use it. Team meetings and focus groups were used as opportunities to explore the tool. Jo also used existing networks and engaged specific teams using key contacts to reach as wide a range of staff as possible.

One innovative approach involved a focus group where participants were asked to write either love letters or break-up letters to the discovery tool. This activity triggered some highly reflective and thought-provoking responses, eliciting a depth of feedback that perhaps more traditional approaches may not have achieved.

Outcomes

The pilot process has raised awareness of how central digital capabilities are to more agile ways of working. Colleagues across the university are talking about digital capability development and acknowledging that enabling students first involves enabling staff.

“We want to transform the University of the Air envisaged by Harold Wilson in the 1960s to a University of the Cloud – a world-leading institution which is digital by design and has a unique ability to teach and support our students in a way that is responsive both to their needs and those of the economy.”

Peter Horrocks, vice-chancellor of the Open University

“The discovery tool has facilitated discussion across the institution - enabling both individual and strategic level conversations.”

Jo Parker, senior library manager at the Open University
Key lessons learned

» Having access to a ready-made tool developed by those with national and international expertise was helpful - it added credibility and came with an acknowledged academic standing.

» Piloting the tool and testing the reaction across a range of staff roles has been an important part of the process. The OU’s structure is based around distance learning and includes roles for module writers, editors and production that may differ from those found in other organisations. Testing the culture and starting to understand the starting points and challenges is useful in informing the bigger picture.

» Tailoring the wording of the call to participate in the pilot to key audiences helped to highlight the relevance of the tool to specific roles and groups.

Next steps

The OU intends to use the anonymised data from participants in the pilot to inform wider strategic planning including provision for supporting students and staff to develop their digital capabilities. There is also potential to explore how the tool could be used in different contexts, for example, to support voluntary discussions between staff and managers to inform individual and team development plans.

Jo will be disseminating the outcomes of participation in the pilot internally and also hopes to get more people involved in using the next iteration of the discovery tool which will be released in December 2017.

Contacts

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