This paper looks at the emerging role of digital, its impact on institutional strategy and staff practice and also at the tools and platforms that are deployed. We aim to provide a platform from which universities and colleges can begin to integrate their approach to digital across their organisation, rather than treating it as a separate accessory to their core work.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first looks at strategy and how digital integrates with existing priorities. The second explores practice, the role of digital at individual levels and how people can be supported to make use of it. Then in the third section we look at platforms and tools, the changing nature of technology and how institutions can adapt and respond. We conclude with recommendations for effective ways of integrating digital into the current and future priorities and practices of an organisation.

Teaching and learning, research and innovation, partnership-building and public communication are increasingly reliant on technology. So, for senior leaders in education, it is essential that they are effective in their own use of digital and that they understand the practical uses and benefits of digital in leading their organisations and departments.

From the wider organisational perspective, the opportunities and risks presented by developments in digital technology must inform the full range of organisational strategies and be embedded into the core mission; and staff will need to be supported in their development, discovery and adoption of digital tools and platforms.
“Be brave and let people who know more about digital take the lead”

Karen Phillips, Deputy principal, Coleg y Cymoedd

“You’ve got to embrace change, you’ve got to experiment. We can’t live in the past”

Helen Meeks, Teaching fellow, Lancaster University
Institutional approaches around the use of technology for teaching, research and administration are often grounded in existing practices, where technology use has been introduced at evolutionary (rather than revolutionary) speed.

Strategic approaches to the purchase, integration and roll out of big-ticket items, such as the virtual learning environment (VLE), are well established and integrated. However, the increasing availability and affordability of technology means that staff and students now have far better access to technology - and to the benefits and possibilities offered by the rapidly evolving digital culture - than they had when many institutional systems and processes were deployed.

While the institution was in control of the ‘desktop’ computer in their organisations, or academic practice was constrained by the features of the available technology, institutional strategies (such as the IT strategy or the learning teaching and assessment strategy) could be developed and deployed to make the most of institutional technology. But the wider digital landscape is developing fast - and often in a disruptive way.

Every member of staff and every student can now publish work instantly and independently. They have the means to develop and populate their own digital space for teaching or research, and access to both information and content. It is also easier to connect and engage with each other, and at scale, than at any other time. As the tools for collaboration and communication get easier to use, and continue to offer more possibilities, critical institutional knowledge may be lost, misplaced or misused without coordinated planning that accounts for the institutional technology and also for instances where staff and students are using their own devices and spaces. Such coordinated planning is not happening widely in the sector, and at Jisc we are working across the sector to help put in place support for strategic thinking that includes digital tools, skills and spaces as in, for example, the digital leaders programme, now in its sixth iteration in three years.

Responding institutionally

Additionally, a coordinated approach to institutional strategies must be in place to take advantage of a landscape that is increasingly post digital: the digital environment is taken for granted, and ‘digital’ is no longer the most interesting aspect of a particular practice. For example, people no longer consider opening a Google Doc for collaboration or posting on a website as a ‘new’ or ‘innovative’ approach to work. We would argue that a research strategy or student experience strategy should already be looking at how digital is integrated, and what might be at stake, rather than cross referencing or deferring to a separate digital research or digital student experience strategy. Institutions will have multiple strategies across all areas of their business, each owned by different directors and senior managers. Digital is most effective when deployed within these strategies rather than alongside or as an addendum.

Key points

» Realising digital opportunities requires an organisation’s leaders to ensure that the right infrastructure, enabling strategies and policies are in place

» Opportunities and risks afforded by digital should inform all organisational strategies and also be embedded in the core mission

» A culture of innovation and of evaluating innovation at local level should be encouraged to ensure that the organisation is horizon-scanning digital developments
If an organisation’s strategic goals (in all areas) are to be realised, it is essential that its workforce can make informed choices about digital tools and technology - and use these effectively.

Our work with universities and colleges has demonstrated that many technology-related adoption issues can be attributed to people lacking confidence in their digital skills or fearing that digital behaviours may challenge aspects of their professional practice or identity.

Tools such as the Jisc digital capability framework and the Jisc digital discovery tool should be the first step in engaging staff with their own digital capabilities and confidence. This initial level of awareness will allow staff to reflect critically on their own knowledge and give them the confidence to apply a digital lens to existing practices. It can also provide essential opportunities to identify needs and facilitate exploration of new practices.

**The Digital lens**

Reflect and evaluate
Build a schedule for reflecting and evaluating the digital element. How can it be changed and built on? Should it be continued?

Identify
Identify individual elements of practice, strategy or process including existing tools and systems.

Deploy
Weigh different options, benefits and risks. Decide whether to deploy the digital element.

Explore
Look at options for adding a digital element, whether that means content, tools, moving to platforms (VLE, Yammer etc) or engaging with people in digital networks (eg Twitter).

Benefits and risks
Identify what benefits might be realised by adding digital elements and assess any risk.
The graphic on the previous page shows the digital lens approach to strategy, practice and process. The lens is made up of different aspects that need to be considered when applying digital to existing and intended structures. It is necessary to identify which element will be looked at in digital contexts - for example, a particular teaching practice. Different digital options should then be explored to gain a thorough understanding of the range of possibilities. The benefits and risks of each possibility should be carefully weighed before deciding to deploy. As with all change, it is important to reflect and evaluate the nature and impact of the changes caused by the incorporation of digital.

The digital lens approach can enable effective and transformational behaviours to emerge by helping staff to understand and develop their capabilities and confidence in the context of their own work. The results can include an improved status quo and the identification of new goals for individuals and their organisations.

**Supporting individuals**

Universities and colleges with a commitment to ensuring they have a digitally confident workforce will need to embed digital capabilities into recruitment, staff development, appraisal, reward and recognition.

**Key points**

- Leaders should develop confidence in their own digital capabilities, modelling the behaviours they want their staff to display.
- Staff development programmes should consider making more use of digital, modelling the use of tools such as VLEs and e-portfolios in delivering programmes.
- Any staff developers need to consider not just changes in practice but also the motivations that individuals might have to change, maintain or discontinue what they are doing.

**Academics don’t use just one tool to do something. There are a variety of platforms and many tools scattered throughout the landscape of academic work.**

Which tool and which platform they choose depends on many variables including the needs of students and/or collaborative partners in research, and the requirements of the university or college in terms of reporting and metrics.

It is important to create a professional development environment where the use of essential platforms and tools by all staff is supported and linked to key business goals. For example, ensuring that appropriate training is provided so that all staff can effectively and efficiently integrate the VLE into their teaching practice, or that staff with responsibility for pastoral care have access to (and training in) appropriate analytics systems.

There will always be core tasks that all staff have to do and that require the use of specific tools. Staff expect that they will be trained to use core systems. For example, all teaching staff should know how to use the gradebook in their VLE. Beyond that, staff will use other systems, platforms and tools as and when it suits their specific context. The organisation is responsible for facilitating an environment in which staff can confidently try (and occasionally fail) within digital environments so that they can innovate and grow their own practice in accordance with the larger goals of their academic institutions.
The need to allow for individual variation and innovation of practice requires an acceptance of non-institutional tools and platforms, including technology that students bring with them to campus and options that other institutions and organisations have adopted. The ethical and practical concerns around practices that are outside organisational controls need to be centred in organisational conversations about digital.

Universities and colleges should identify the core tools, platforms and technologies that they need staff to use and create a comprehensive training programme to ensure that they have the key competencies to use them.

Staff should be encouraged to experiment with new tools and technologies in a framework that is safe for staff and students and allows for failure. The context that staff work within is regularly changing so leaders with responsibility for IT must regularly review and reflect on institutional tools and how they are being used; they should also consider how to engage both staff and students in deciding which tools they need.

As digital continues to become essential to the core business of universities and colleges, digital strategy should be seen as in service to other business imperatives.

Technological innovation is happening at great speed and behaviours around digital are evolving rapidly as a result. These realities mean that organisations must choose strategic responses that are flexible and focused on the impact of digital change rather than on technology.

To be efficient and effective institutions must be able to meet the shifting operational issues brought about by digital in agile and adaptable ways that can be deployed and discarded as necessary, without impacting on the wider strategies or requiring them to be revisited.

Jisc continues to provide independent advice and guidance in these areas, as well as training for staff. Where it’s needed we also offer bespoke consultancy around digital change.

Going forward
Our guides and further resources

To find out more about delivering digital change, visit jisc.ac.uk/consultancy or jisc.ac.uk/contact/your-account-manager.

Building digital capability - http://ji.sc/building-digicap
Digital capability project blog - https://digitalcapability.jiscinvolve.org/wp
Developing organisational approaches to digital capability - http://ji.sc/developing-digicap
Building digital capabilities framework - http://ji.sc/digicap_ind_frame
Developing digital capability: an organisational framework - http://ji.sc/digicap_org_frame
Student digital experience tracker - https://jisc.ac.uk/rd/projects/student-digitalexperience-tracker
Design learning and assessment in a digital age - https://ji.sc/design-learn-assess
Digital capability institutional videos - https://ji.sc/digicap_films
Digital leaders programme - jisc.ac.uk/training/digital-leaders-programme