Summary

Situated midway between the high-tech hubs of Oxford and Cambridge, Milton Keynes College is focused on providing a high-quality digital learning experience for all its learners. To achieve this goal, and to be at the heart of the region’s economic growth, technology is becoming embedded into every aspect of college life.

The college’s journey towards digital transformation has brought about changes to the physical estate, introducing a parallel, whole-college CPD programme to improve the digital capabilities of its staff and learners.

Organisation

Milton Keynes is a medium-sized general further education provider on three campuses which offers a wide range of post-16 courses. The college was rated Good in 2017 by Ofsted and use of the VLE for independent learning is well established.

The challenge

Like all further education colleges, Milton Keynes’ ambitions have to be achieved within budget and time constraints – there is no magic button to press to transform the digital and physical infrastructure or the digital skills of staff and learners.

Nonetheless a clear strategic direction from college managers, combined with a carefully phased development plan and use of high-quality, free resources, has helped to ensure that everyone at Milton Keynes College can enter the digital world with confidence.

Milton Keynes College still describes its progress through its four-year transformation plan as an unfinished journey, but a journey undertaken with a map – a clearly defined plan that is still flexible enough to allow for experimentation and new discoveries.
Going mobile – stage 1

Changing the way staff and learners go about their daily work was the first stage in the college’s digital transformation. Digital literacy is learnt best through day-to-day practice, but that can only happen if both staff and learners can get ‘hands on’ with digital technologies.

Taking the plunge, college managers decided learning should go mobile. During 2015 – 2016, out went the serried rows of PCs in the large study centre, and in came shared, flexible learning zones on two of the college’s campuses.

In these newly revamped spaces, different types and levels of furniture now support a greater range of learning activities – quiet study in individual pods, collaborative work around tables with chairs on castors that can be easily reconfigured, and presentations to small groups seated on higher-level chairs around wall-mounted screens.

Banks of laptops on charging trolleys have replaced PCs, and a bring your own (BYO) policy has enabled users to bring their own devices if they wish to – of particular benefit for those depending on assistive or personalised hardware or software.

A redesigned staff working space followed, enabling teachers to experience a mixed-mode working space for themselves. Immersion by these means into anywhere, anytime working have had a significant impact on the way staff perceive digital technologies. Seeing the success of this initial trial, further departmental teams have since bid for capital expenditure funds to upgrade their staff working spaces to a similar design, despite losing personal working spaces and desktop PCs.

In some cases, schools have also applied to set up mixed-mode classrooms. From changing the way staff spaces were configured and furnished has come the confidence to experiment with mixed-mode teaching spaces, and even innovative technologies in the classroom such as virtual reality headsets.

As a model of transformation, this incremental approach to change has not proved difficult to escalate, and lessons learned have been invaluable preparation for a forthcoming new-build project. Key among these has been the value of a social networking tool to support staff making the transition to new ways of working.

“Going mobile had an immediate effect on the culture at Milton Keynes. Suddenly you could see learning happening anywhere, even in the college coffee shop. And introducing
Digital skills – stage 2

Changes to the digital and physical infrastructure to introduce flexible learning and teaching bring with them a parallel need for skills development. Milton Keynes’ e-learning team began this phase of their transformation initiative with a comprehensive CPD programme for staff, but avoided dictating which technologies schools should use. Listening to the preferences of subject experts, they believe, is the key to securing the buy-in of teaching staff.

However, providing choice also means supporting a more complex range of digital tools. At Milton Keynes College, alongside Microsoft 365 for education, (which comes with its own suite of integrated apps and classroom tools such as OneNote, Forms, Sway and Teams as well as the more familiar Office software), Moodle continues in use as the college’s VLE. Work is now in hand to create a single sign-on to enable users to move seamlessly from one platform to the other.

Penny Langford recalls how important it was during this phase of the project to have an online community to support people as they adjusted to changed practices – this is where the social networking tool, Yammer, its use spearheaded by the principal, really came into its own.

“Yammer started as a pilot and was added to the induction programme for new staff but – as is the way with social media – quickly snowballed on its own.”

Penny Langford

Embedding – stage 3

In 2018, in response to feedback, schools have taken back ownership of their own skills development, supported by a number of initiatives and resources. These have included a staff conference in which ‘expert’ staff demonstrated tools and techniques for their peers, and everyone had the opportunity to try out new technologies such as drones.

Heads of schools are now responsible for assessing the individual development needs of their staff, leading to further training if required, sometimes on an individual level. For this, Milton Keynes e-learning team has devised its own self-assessment tool using Microsoft Forms which is now mapped to our digital capability framework.
Further recommendation is to make full use of free online resources such as Microsoft 365 partners training materials.

To ensure digital capabilities become a fully embedded feature of college life, the team has implemented changes to the procedures relating to the recruitment, training and appraisal of staff. These include:

- Incorporating digital capabilities into the standards used in teaching observations
- Identifying at appraisal how well individuals have helped the college achieve its strategic goals for digital learning
- Providing short, online training opportunities and a community of practice to spur everyone on
- Building digital skills into staff induction; the college’s expectations of digital skills are also flagged up at recruitment
- Involving business partners in new developments
- Keeping a watching brief on digital capabilities, using the six elements of our digital capability discovery tool as benchmarks.

Where a skills shortage becomes evident, staff can work towards gold, silver or bronze awards on completion of relevant online training. Currently an initiative under development, the plan is for all staff to work towards the bronze award as the norm, building up an e-portfolio to present at periodic development reviews or appraisals.

Don’t forget the learners – stage 4

The next stage in the four-year digital capabilities plan for Milton Keynes College is to ensure learners have the same essential skills. A six-week online induction course takes newly enrolled learners through the basics. In 2017-2018, a student digital day (the equivalent of the previously mentioned staff conference) has added to the understanding and expertise of learners. A pilot of a student version of the digital capability discovery tool is to follow in 2018, with full roll-out planned for 2018-2019.

Ultimately, the college plans to introduce its own skills for success framework for its learners and business partners which will include, as in all other aspects of college life, embedded expectations of digital capabilities.

Tips

Milton Keynes College highlights the following tips for success for providers making the journey towards full digital capability:

- Pick systems and tools that help rather than encumber staff and students – there is a lot out there that is both high quality and free
- Provide incentives and elements of fun in your training programme
- Stress that digital skills are the entitlement of staff and students – these are skills you need to prosper in today’s digital world as well as in college
• Make sure digital is embedded in every aspect of college life – digital capabilities should never be seen as optional or marginal.

• However important digital skills are for individuals, the real benefit has to be felt in the curriculum, so develop a framework for digital and blended learning to incentivise innovation college-wide.

• Finally, promote opportunities for staff to network and support one another through a change programme.

“What is perhaps the most critical factor in a successful journey towards a digital capable college is ensuring staff have access to, and can use, online networking tools to share ideas and seek support. We have to recognise that skills development will be ongoing – technology never stands still, so peer-to-peer support will always be needed!”

Penny Langford

Find out more

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