Freeing students and staff from the confines of the classroom

With campuses throughout south-west Wales and others in Cardiff, London and Birmingham the University of Wales Trinity St David (UWTSD) is committed to delivering high quality blended learning – and to supporting learners and staff to develop their digital skills and confidence to study and work remotely. And when the COVID-19 pandemic sent almost everyone back home, this priority received fresh impetus.

At Jisc, we are working with the university to support their work to build digital capabilities. Their story so far is a great example of how a consistent, collaborative approach to engagement encourages take-up of assessment and training and helps people feel comfortable about exploring new ways of working.

Challenge or opportunity?
When the pandemic started, the university was about to adopt Microsoft Teams as its preferred collaboration tool. Its use skyrocketed from 600 individuals in March to 8,000 by April and requests to the IT helpdesk for support with this and other tools went through the roof.

“We had been offering staff training sessions but people are always busy and turnout can be low,” explains James Cale, director of digital services at UWTSD.

The university saw the lockdowns as an opportunity to build long-term resilience, so it created James’ role and recruited digital skills advisors and a digital skills technologist with funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) (hefcw.ac.uk/en/funding). They developed an overarching digital strategy and created a digital framework for blended learning (https://ji.sc/digital-learning). They adopted the digital discovery tool (digitalcapability.jisc.ac.uk/our-service/discovery-tool), developed a digital skills framework (https://digitalskills.uwtsd.ac.uk) based on the Jisc digital capabilities framework (https://ji.sc/CS-digital-capabilities-framework) and gave it a dedicated website to give staff...
and students a three-stage structure to:
evaluate their digital capabilities; reflect and
plan how to meet skills gaps and access
structured quality learning content.

Big launch
“The Jisc digital capability service gave us
ready-made solutions for the first two of these
stages and learning resources for the last one.
We also developed our own resources,” says
Sarah Jones, head of academic services at
UWTSD. “And then we went for a ‘big bang’
launch to everyone.”

That brought immediate positive feedback but
relatively few people went on to complete the
tool, so the university changed tack and now
they’re taking a gradual, highly collaborative
approach and focusing first on teaching staff.
For example, they have:

- Made the digital discovery tool (https://
digitalskills.uwtsd.ac.uk/Test-Your-Digital-
Skills) part of the induction process for
new hires
- Worked with HR on ways to get managers to
include the digital discovery tool in appraisals
- Run sessions with leaders and managers to
work out how to embed the tool into their
settings
- Surveyed teaching staff about blended
learning to understand how they feel about
taking a new pedagogical approach and
about how the university is implementing it.
The data gathered during this simple tickbox
survey is being analysed to plan training
needs and future engagement plans

“Our approach is about what people want from
us, not about what we want to impose on them,”
says Sarah Jones. “We want this to be something
people want to do and making it part of the
university’s ‘business as usual’ will help with that.”

After initially using Jisc’s generic role profiles
(https://ji.sc/individual-digital-capabilities) the
team is now developing bespoke ones and
they are running workshops with staff during
2021/22, both to keep them in the loop and to
encourage participation.
“We’re steadily getting more engagement with the new approach, and by early 2022 we had 200 staff members using the framework to develop their skills,” says James. “We don’t send out lots of written stuff about this. Getting out and talking to people works much better.”

Looking to the future
It is undeniable, believes James, that the pandemic created a ‘moment’ for the university to embed blended learning across its learning programmes and to give staff and learners the skills and the tools they need to be competent – and confident – with digital technologies.

“Like any institution, we have staff and students who are digitally savvy and others who are less so. Needing to work remotely has given everyone an insight into what might be possible if we can develop digital skills and confidence to make the most of current and emerging technologies,” says James.

UWTSD will use the positive experiences of early adopter teaching staff to cascade the programme to more staff and it is working with the Students’ Union to engage with learners. The first step with these will be to introduce LinkedIn Learning, probably in the first term of 2022/23.

The LinkedIn Learning resources are mapped to the discovery tool (digitalcapability.jisc.ac.uk/our-service/discovery-tool) so it’s easy to find relevant, high quality resources.

“So far we have been experimenting and benchmarking,” says Sarah. “But already we have the results of our 2020/21 digital experience insights survey (https://digitalinsights.jisc.ac.uk), and these show that 77% of UWTSD students rated their online learning experience positively, compared with a UK average of 66%.”

And, says James, “We’ll use all this data to help us plan our next steps and also to feed into other projects at the university, like how we invest in innovative teaching spaces and how we can alleviate digital poverty.”

To find out more about:

Jisc’s digital capabilities service:
digitalcapability.jisc.ac.uk

Or, contact your account manager
jisc.ac.uk/contact/your-account-manager