

# Nottingham Trent University:

## A continuum of support

### Background

**Nottingham Trent University (NTU)** ([ntu.ac.uk](http://ntu.ac.uk)) is a leading modern university of some 28,500 students with 4 campuses in Nottinghamshire, UK. It has consistently focused on supporting students into graduate employment and the 2015-20 Strategic plan, "Creating the university of the future" includes a commitment that every course will contain a mandatory assessed work-like experience by 2018. Internationalisation is another key theme, with students having an extensive range of opportunities to study and volunteer globally and to collaborate with students overseas. NTU is also one of the most sustainable universities globally winning a range of awards for its green credentials most recently being recognised as The UK's Greenest University for the third time in the 2016 People and Planet University League.

### Strategic priorities

In 2013 NTU was a recipient of Changing the learning landscape (CLL) ([jisc.ac.uk/rd/projects/changing-the-learning-landscape](http://jisc.ac.uk/rd/projects/changing-the-learning-landscape)) funding, specifically to make a step change in the university's approach to digital capabilities. That project identified four strands of work: two have been prioritised for further funding and senior management support. They are:

- » Developing and embedding a digital capabilities framework at course level
- » Understanding staff and student needs in order to provide a coherent '*continuum of support*' for digital practice

Since 2015 this work has been mapped to the overall strategic plan.

With funding constraints affecting the whole higher education (HE) sector, projects have to demonstrate efficiencies as well as enhancements. After CLL, a case was made for investing in digitally confident staff and students, who would '*do more with the IT available*' and would be more self-directed in adopting and adapting to new systems: '*we couldn't just keep employing additional trainers every time there was an update to Sharepoint or a new technology was introduced*'. The CLL project was originally inspired by the Jisc Developing digital literacies programme ([jisc.ac.uk/rd/projects/digital-literacies](http://jisc.ac.uk/rd/projects/digital-literacies)).



*For us that was really a founding piece of work... We realised we had to think about focusing on the broader piece, enabling people to become confident and competent with their digital capabilities.*

### Leadership of change

The Digital practice manager in the Centre for professional learning and development has day-to-day responsibility for this work. She works closely with the Head of organisational development (previously the Head of learning and development), the Director of digital technologies, Director of library and learning resources and Director of the centre academic development and quality. The Chief operating officer and Deputy vice chancellor are important champions for the digital framework.

### Actions for digital capability

Following the CLL project, which involved a digital capabilities audit, NTU has gathered more detailed evidence about how staff and students access support for their digital practice. This found that different kinds of support were not always well coordinated. The aim is to provide users with a '*continuum of support*', with different service areas signing up to the vision of a seamless user experience.

The **NTU Digital capabilities framework** (<http://bit.ly/2mOIIIG5>) was approved by the university executive team in 2015 and is actively promoted by the Deputy vice chancellor in her role as learning and teaching lead. The framework covers seven *areas of practice*, similar to the original Jisc Seven elements of digital literacy, with the addition of four *levels* for each area and sample *activities* at each level. The areas of practice, levels and associated development resources are available to staff and students from an NTU online workspace (NOW) learning room.

Every course offered by the university is currently undergoing a **'curriculum refresh'** (<http://bit.ly/2lwaDt3>), which requires consideration of digital capability alongside a range of other priorities for NTU graduates: i.e. employability and internationalism. This means that curriculum teams are seeing digital capability as a legitimate learning outcome, thinking about what it means in the context of their subject area, and designing authentic digital activities and assessments. The Digital practice manager says:



*[The framework] has really taken off and been positive... We have given staff a lot of latitude. We ask them to think about the framework and how they might incorporate some of the capabilities, but just having it in the conversation is a huge thing.*

The deputy vice chancellor agrees, recognising that:



*It gives us that common vocabulary and I think that is important: [it] allows us to have conversations on common ground.*

Another significant success has been a redesign of the Postgraduate certificate in academic practice. The framework is included in several taught sessions, and participants are asked to decide for themselves how they want to use it for the planning and design of student learning.



*So for example one student in their assessment showed how they had referenced the framework in their taught sessions. They were using it very positively, and we've taken that forward as a case study in course design.*

Respect at NTU (<http://bit.ly/2lvXEHX>) - an initiative in its second year, led by the Head of equality and diversity - aims to build a culture of respect and consent, including in online spaces. There are clear connections to the Digital capabilities framework, and the digital team has been able to support the initiative with resources on respectful behaviour in managing your digital identity and in using social media.

### Moving ahead

There are two new opportunities to revisit and revitalise the agenda at NTU. First, the 2016 Universities and Colleges Information Systems Association (UCISA) digital capabilities survey has brought new stakeholders to the table, including staff in equality and diversity, accessibility, and digital marketing, who see that digital capability is a strategic issue and that it intersects with their own agendas. Second, the **QAA report on digital capability and teaching excellence** (<http://bit.ly/2mcUsoJ>) has been recognised as an important document for reviewing activity in this area.



*It's a chance to have us getting different people back around the table again. This agenda is not going away.*

## Opportunities and challenges for the future

Both an opportunity and a challenge, digital capabilities are seen as touching on many of the university's strategies and processes, from research and teaching excellence to infrastructure and management.



*You do need to have a senior champion – if not several – but you also need to think about implementing it in many different areas. How do you co-ordinate that? So many different stakeholders have some ownership, legitimately.*

Although they might be seen as competing for attention in the curriculum, digital capability can be addressed in relation to other curriculum goals such as employability. Digital reputation, for example, is a popular topic for workshops, and a positive digital identity is an asset that students increasingly expect to gain from their time at NTU. Indirectly, staff and students who are developing their own digital standing and employability are also enhancing the reputation of the university.

Now that it has become established in curriculum planning, new uses of the Digital capabilities framework for staff are being identified. The HR department is considering whether it could be used in appraisals to help staff think about their digital expertise and how they would like to develop as digital professionals. And the digital marketing team have found it valuable to explore their collective strengths and staff development needs, opening the way for other teams to follow suit.

## Lessons learned

- » 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
- » 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

- » 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
- » 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 always 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.*

- » Digital reputation remains a strong motivation for staff and students to engage with the capabilities agenda. 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



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Any unattributed quotes in the text were provided and have been approved by the contacts above.



### For more information

on all related resources please see the Building digital capability project page.  
<http://ji.sc/building-digicap>