Digital student exemplars
Enhancing the digital experience of students

This case study is relevant to the digital student challenge:

Deliver a robust, flexible, digital environment

Transforming the digital environment: resilient and robust systems and services

The **City of Liverpool College** is taking some radical steps to transform their digital environment, their services and business processes.

At the heart of this is a desire to bridge the digital skills gap between college leavers and the expectations of employers.

> *"The college is meeting the challenge set by employers head on by ensuring our students have access and leading edge teaching across a wide range of technical and IT solutions. By employing industry leading experts and partnering with leading organisations inside and outside of the sector we can ensure our students have the skills and experience they need to be employment ready."*

Amanda Parker, head of innovation, City of Liverpool College

Building a resilient and robust environment

With ambitions to introduce a greater variety of technologies into the curriculum and the overall learning experience, as well as to encourage students to bring their own devices (BYO) the college identified a need to improve the speed and resilience of its' digital services. Recognising that introducing BYO would put a strain on the existing college network which spans six sites some distance apart, the City of Liverpool College has become the first further education (FE) provider to sign up to Jisc's **shared data centre** for education and research. This will provide fast and reliable access to data from anywhere using cloud-based technologies.

In addition, the college has also become a Microsoft Academy with a Microsoft Showcase classroom based in the centre of Liverpool. This will give students and staff access to Office 365 and all the Microsoft Academy teaching and learning materials.

The college will use the data centre to launch a new shared service for accelerated transformation of FE organisations, called **SharEd.** The service offers a substantial portfolio including HR, facilities, finance, IT and management information systems, as well as professional services and consultation on innovation relating to learning technologies, support with virtual learning environments (VLEs) and classroom usage.

Improved efficiency

SharEd will have teams of staff who have time to look at innovation and, working together. SharEd users will benefit from partnership efficiencies and purchasing power.

> *"As a top ten national FE provider with over 22,000 students, we need to continually review how we deliver teaching and learning so that we can offer the best possible experience under increasing financial pressures. Using the Jisc data centre will allow us to achieve both aims, while passing the management of this service over to people who are experts in their field."*
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> **Alasdair Redmond, group CIO of City of Liverpool College**

Developing Bring Your Own (BYO)

A BYO policy will be introduced in September 2015 along with a scheme to put Surface Pro tablets into refurbished classrooms as standard.

Whether students choose to bring their own technologies or not, the college believes that everyone is entitled to a digital education and so has made tablets and laptops available on loan through the library on production of the student library card. The process for borrowing a device is the same as for borrowing a book except the equipment has to be returned at the end of each day.

The college also recognises that learning doesn't end when students leave the classroom and therefore ensures the libraries and learning resource centres are open throughout the year, offering 60 hours of access time during term time and 35 hours during holiday periods.

A rapid change of culture

Such a major culture change over a comparatively short period of time means that the college is also investing in initiatives to upskill both staff and students.

Smartrooms

One initiative that will support culture change is the introduction of five smart rooms (one for each of the college's teaching sites) designed to support flexible digital practices. The first smartroom is due to open in autumn 2015 and this will act as a blue-print for the other smart rooms and as a template more widely available through SharEd.

Smart rooms will be modern flexible teaching areas with different zones within the room to facilitate student-centred learning. They will be equipped with a tablet device for each student and each member of staff working there as well as a large touchscreen monitor and smartwrite surfaces that act like a digital whiteboard to aid group work. All of the furniture within the smart room will be on wheels to support flexible use and speedy reconfiguration. Further planned research and development for these rooms includes using sensor technologies to monitor usage and activity within the space, and their impact on teaching and learning.

Supporting students to use the new systems

Students will be introduced to Office 365 as part of their induction training and the college is confident that it will be something the students can easily use without barriers like complicated sign-on procedures. Staff will also have access to Office 365, which will further enhance collaborative working and learning, and workforce skills. The college recognises that students can appear confident but may need support to develop digital competencies and guidance on using the technologies in a respectful and professional way. Students will therefore receive training and support through their tutorial provision on topics such as being a responsible digital citizen and managing a professional digital profile.

The increased access to college systems and resources from outside the college is expected to significantly enhance the overall student learning experience.

Rebranding staff development days as VLE days

Previously staff development days meant a day off for students. The college has rebranded these as VLE days so although students don't have to come to college they are expected to work online. All teaching staff set their learners a task for the day that has to be completed via the VLE and submitted before midnight. The libraries and learning resource centres are open so that those without home access can still participate. VLE statistics showed that the students enjoyed the opportunity to work at their own pace and in a location of their choice. The VLE usage was only nine per cent lower than on an average college day and, after a slightly later start to the day than normal, the spikey pattern of peaks and troughs in VLE usage on a normal college day was replaced with more steady and constant use, with a late surge to meet the midnight task submission deadline.

Responding to feedback

Previously the Moodle virtual learning environment (VLE) was regarded as a digital filing cabinet that students found hard to use. After consultation with students and staff a new a new Moodle VLE has been introduced along with VLE quality standards that staff are required to adhere to, a new layout, use of tabs for each course page to prevent long lists and to make it possible for students to easily find what they need. The VLE is now mobile compliant and incorporates social media – something that is important as data shows a significant increase in students accessing college systems from mobile devices.

Student views are sought on a regular basis using a variety of methods including polls, focus groups and questionnaires. The library and learning resource centre staff also actively engage students in discussions to gain instant feedback. The learning resource centres are natural meeting points for students, making them a good place to hold student consultations on initiatives such as aspects of the proposed preferential purchase scheme (what devices they prefer, any training requirements, how much they would be willing to pay etc.). In addition, the queries coming through the central helpdesk are analysed so that if it is noted that people are struggling with any aspect of service provision the college can provide responsive support.

How does this meet the challenge?

» Students like to feel the institution is providing them with 'everything they need to succeed' and do their work in terms of access and infrastructure (eg fixed computers and printers), even if they have independent access

» The effects of the digital divide are monitored and addressed eg loan schemes, extended library and learning resource centre opening hours and support for students with low digital confidence

» Services and support are outsourced where there are clear gains, but are aligned to the college branding and identity

» The digital environment is robust and secure but is also flexible and open to innovative uses

» Investments in the digital estate are enabling the college to develop flexible and social learning spaces

» The reliability and speed of the systems is building staff and student confidence in the technology

» Students are being supported to think about how they present themselves, communicate and undertake professional or academic tasks in more open spaces

Find out more:

» Jisc news announcement on 3 August 2015: **First FE college joins national data centre for education and research**

» National **shared data centre**

» **SharEd**

» Educational Technology article on 5 February 2015: **VLE success at City of Liverpool College**

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