

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