The University of Edinburgh

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Digital capabilities: making it easy for people to develop their digital skills
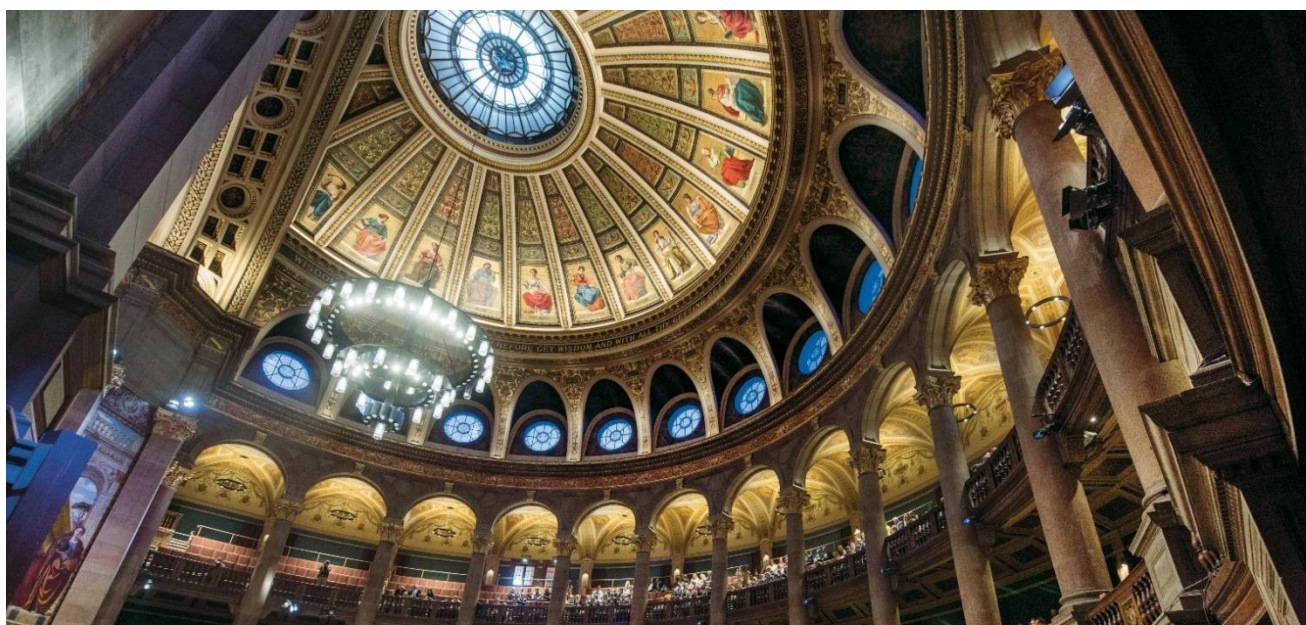

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Becoming a digital organisation

A change in approach to digital skills building is part of a larger, cross-institution drive towards digital transformation at the University of Edinburgh.

The university defines digital transformation as:

"The changes associated with the complete application of digital technology in all aspects of a modern university".

The importance of digital technology to the future success of the university and the role it plays in achieving better user experiences is clearly articulated. Digital transformation underpins several key strategic transformation programmes including service excellence; estates transformation; learning, teaching and the student experience; digital research services; and digital library services.

The digital transformation vision statement sets cultural goals and ambitions – three of the six aims specifically relate to digital skills development:

> *"Every educator is a digital educator*
> *Every student is a digital student*
> *Everyone plans and updates their digital skills"*

The University of Edinburgh, digital transformation (2017) (https://www.ed.ac.uk/digital-transformation)

As an example of what digital transformation looks like in practice, a new core human resources system is being implemented in 2020. The development of digital capabilities has been integrated from the start with project representation on the staff development and career and talent management workstreams. In collaboration with colleagues, this is helping to shape processes and establish new ways of working to develop workforce capabilities across the university.

Edinburgh has a new university strategy 2030 which is shaped by the university's values; the development of digital capabilities aligns with many of these. By investing in, and providing comprehensive digital skills development services, the digital skills team contributes to "supporting each other's development and career progress" and enables staff and students to "aim to achieve excellence in all that we do".

The importance of digital skills development for staff and students is also explicitly referenced in other key strategies including learning and teaching, human resources and information services.

> *"A cornerstone of our strategy to build a digital culture is that all staff across the university have a right to plan and update their skills. Within Information Services Group each staff member has an entitlement to a minimum of two digital skills training events or activities per year."*
>
> Gavin McLachlan, vice principal and chief information officer and librarian, The University of Edinburgh

Refreshing the digital training offer

The central position of the digital skills team within information services is helping to align skills development to the bigger picture.

The university had already developed IT standards and had offered a broad range of training for many years. The recent prominence and visible focus on digital skills development inside and outside the university inspired the digital skills team to take a fresh look at their services and the resources they had and consider how best they could make these available to fulfil the broader digital skills agenda. The aim was to develop a contextualised, self-directed learning experience that enabled people to take action relevant to their role and their needs.

The team started by looking at **Jisc's digital capabilities framework** and mapping their service,

training courses and resources to the six elements within the framework, and service development flourished from there.

> *"What are digital skills? The topic is so big and broad. I'd say that it's about being able to use technology safely and effectively and for the right thing, but that this depends on your role and the different things you are trying to do."*
>
> Jenni Houston, head of digital skills and training, The University of Edinburgh

The result of the review has been a clearly defined and restructured approach that makes it easy for individuals to take ownership of their digital skills development. The key output was the launch of the university's **digital skills framework** in September 2018, which is closely based on Jisc's **building digital capability service**. The framework provides structure to skills development and encourages users to:

1. **Evaluate** their current levels of digital capability using the **Jisc discovery tool**

2. **Reflect** on their development needs and **plan** their development journey using role profiles (a combination of **Jisc's role profiles** and those created for **specific roles at the university**) and through development conversations with their manager or supervisor

3. Use the university's bespoke **resource finder** tool to find and use learning resources appropriate to their needs so they can **develop** the skills they need

Customisation

The thinking and planning behind the approach has been extensive. Working in parallel with Jisc and the work of the **building digital capability service** has helped to validate this approach and provided energy and traction.

- **Role profiles** – **additional college and role specific profiles** have been created for academics and professional services teams in the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, and mapped to development resources specific to technologies and processes used in the college

- **Resource finder** – this tool brings together training events, activities and resources drawn from within the university, staff/student subscription services such as LinkedIn Learning, MOOCs and other freely available online content. Users can browse the database and filter by role,

a given digital capability or topic, delivery method and difficulty (beginner, intermediate or advanced). The tool is built using an Excel spreadsheet holding details of the resources and is hosted on WordPress as part of the digital skills framework. Resources are updated monthly

- **Structured learning** – To help users understand the breadth of digital capability and what it means for them, the digital skills team introduced a programme-based approach. Six different classroom-based workshops are aligned to the elements of digital capability, supplemented with beginner and advanced toolkits of resources and activities to develop skills. Participants demonstrate learning activity through a blog post and receive a digital badge on completion of each module

New digital capability initiatives

Aligning services with Jisc's **building digital capability service** was just the start of the journey. Since then, many digital capability initiatives have been introduced to increase the diversity of training and support available to staff and students. They include:

- Face to face training sessions developed and delivered by **student interns working as digital skills trainers**. A variety of training courses are delivered by students covering topics such as Python programming, LaTeX, reference management, Photoshop, social media and video editing. Sessions have been a huge success and have ensured the student perspective is accommodated; interns understand the subject and their peers and design courses accordingly. The student trainers are paid to work seven hours a week and gain valuable work experience

- Three **student digital champions** have worked in the digital skills team since January 2018 to promote digital skills development to students within their colleges. Champions work closely with the student association and use student-specific communication channels and social media to highlight how specific technologies and services can support their peers with their studies and research. Successes include developing communication networks with schools, the introduction of new social media channels and the launch of a digital skills day

- A blended programme called **Developing your data skills** was introduced in September 2018. This originated from an identified need for data skills for professional services staff and has been designed to reflect the data skills that people need in their everyday lives. The programme is based around freely-available online self-study resources that have been verified and collated into a step-through programme and

supplemented by optional face-to-face workshops to help embed learning. Participants also undertake a project to access, cleanse and analyse a dataset, and then present their data story. The programme spans three topics and three levels of difficulty. It takes approximately six months to complete with an estimated 25-40 hours of study. It has proven to be exceptionally popular with 20 cohorts of 15-20 people per cohort participating since launch

- An increased focus on **digital safety and citizenship** for Edinburgh students is being enabled and promoted though a new digital safety support role. A **#DigitalCitizen** campaign was launched on safer internet day in February 2020 to raise awareness and signpost **resources, guidance and events**. A steering group and community are being established to ensure long-term sustainability

- The redesign of **management and leadership development** programmes provided a timely opportunity to promote and embed digital skills development into these programmes. Closer collaboration with human resources has resulted in the inclusion of digital skills sessions and increased engagement with resources including the **Jisc digital leader profile**

- A programme of **foundation level digital skills training** was designed and delivered in spring 2019 in collaboration with the university's estates department to upskill staff with specific development requirements

The full breadth of provision offered by the digital skills team is set out on the **team website**.

Outcomes/impact so far

While work is ongoing there are some really positive signs of impact emerging:

- Digital skills are now recognised as an important aspect of wider cross-institutional work to effect a digital transformation

- Taking time to review and restructure the approach to digital skills development using a cyclical **evaluate-reflect-plan-do** approach that is clearly signposted to training and resources is enabling individuals to take ownership of their digital skills development

- Engagement for both students and staff is active and goes beyond participating – students and staff are contributing to the breadth of training available, designing and facilitating their own courses and developing role profiles specific to their needs

- A growing bank of skills development resources is now easily accessible drawing together a range of freely-available resources from within and outside the university

- Programme-based learning and ad-hoc skills development are both catered for

- During the 2018-19 academic year the digital skills team has delivered over 400 classroom-based training events to over 4,000 attendees (students and staff)

- There are over 10,000 active users of LinkedIn Learning for online digital skills development

Tips for others/lessons learned

- Aligning and mapping development opportunities to the Jisc digital capabilities framework provided energy and traction – it got conversations going and helped to establish a common language and shared understanding

- Breaking what you would like others to do into simple and clearly defined steps helps individuals to take action and get on board with digital capabilities development

- Use of student interns and digital champions is helping to engage students, ensure training offered meets their needs and is relevant as well as providing valuable experience for those involved. Clarity in terms of what the role involves, work expectations and having well defined support mechanisms helps maximise impact

- Start small and build by focusing on one area (whether a topic, user group or school) and piloting new ideas and services with them. Demonstrate success to gain engagement before rolling out on a wider scale

- A structured communications and marketing plan is essential to ensure that staff and students are aware of and engage with services

Next steps

- Build upon existing collaborations with human resources. There is more potential to integrate digital skills development with staff development reviews and broader human resource processes, for example by stating the digital capabilities required in job descriptions.

- Continue to employ student trainers and digital champions for peer-to-peer course development and service promotion, and to provide work experience

- Disseminate good practice and lessons learned from digital safety and citizenship work both internally and externally, for example at conferences

- Continue to promote and encourage engagement with online skills development through LinkedIn Learning, working with a student intern over summer to focus on student engagement

- Continue to have a digital skills lead on projects for upcoming software and systems rollouts to ensure that digital capabilities are included from the start to the end of the project

- Work with the local communications specialist and digital champions to maximise opportunities to promote digital skills development services across schools and business units

You may also be interested in:

Digital Skills on Twitter: @UoEDigiSkills

Digital Skills on the web: www.ed.ac.uk/is/skills