WONKHE

Capability for change – preparing for digital learning futures

MARCH 2025

In partnership with Kortext

Welcome to this report from Wonkhe and Kortext exploring how higher education institutions are responding to the distinctive pressures bearing down on their efforts to digitally transform in the domain of learning and teaching.

Increasingly institutional leaders are aware that just as the future student experience is likely to look somewhat different from today, organisational digital capabilities and working practices will also need to change. Institutions are ambitious for the ways that technology can support their aspirations to create inclusive, engaging learning environments from which students emerge prepared for their future lives and careers. Effective aggregation and deployment of data to inform strategy and enhancement activity is a key element of their ambitions. But they are also grappling with a legacy of fragmentation both on a technological level as outdated systems do not "talk to each other," and on a cultural level as departments and central teams also do not "talk to each other" – or may struggle to find a common language.

Our in depth conversations with sector leaders and experts have drawn out some insights about how these silos might be broken down. Some of this is about streamlining technology: choosing the core systems, platforms and applications that will enable the organisation to deliver on its strategic objectives. But as ever it is much more about culture change: about how university staff in particular are developed and supported to realise the most value from the technologies that are chosen – a process that will involve letting go of some long-held practices as well as adopting new ones. And about how the organisation systematically builds "horizontal" capability in the forms of joint working, collaboration and deployment of cross-organisational change agents.

Institutions that are able to build whole-organisation capability will reap the rewards in terms of the quality of student experience and the value that is realised from their technology investment. But increasingly it is coming to be understood that what is sought when making institutional decisions about technology is less strategic advantage and more about firm foundations that can enable educators to do the meaningful work that makes the most difference to students. Too often technology has increased complexity; institutions will more readily learn collectively how to reduce that burden at the pace that is required.

Technology providers have their part to play in understanding the subtleties and nuances of higher education's challenges and remaining open to learning about how technology manifests in academic and professional teams' working practice. Supporting institutions to develop "proof of concept" to reduce the risks of bringing in new systems or platforms is essential. And the user communities that grow around platforms like Kortext have an enormous value of their own to enable shared learning and development.

We hope that this report fosters useful conversations within and outside your institution.

Debbie McVitty
Editor, Wonkhe

James Gray
Founder and CEO, Kortext

Contents

Introduction

Digital transformation is never concluded. There is always scope for development, refinement, enhancement, embedding, and upskilling. But the quality and shape of digital transformation in the current moment for UK higher education is distinctive.

The financial pressures facing universities across the UK speak not just to a period of challenge – though there have been very material challenges with the Covid-19 pandemic, rapid inflation, and associated increases in costs, as well as instability in immigration policy. The broader backdrop is a fundamental structural weakness of the core business model in which a growing mismatch between income and costs for teaching UK students is increasingly propped up by a reliance on international recruitment. Successive governments have been reluctant to increase the unit of resource, whether through direct funding or via the student fee, indicating that while the sector may continue to advocate for additional public support, an injection of public funds is not to be relied on for long term institutional sustainability.

The higher education sector is seeing macro changes in society that are reshaping public conceptions of the value that is realised from higher education study, and student expectations of what higher education engagement looks like. Institutional strategies seek to build student experiences of engagement, equity, inclusion, and belonging – balanced with flexibility and the ability to study alongside other commitments. And interrogation of the value chain in returns to students in the form of education gain, and the development of skills, capabilities, good employment prospects and ultimately, a fulfilling career, are increasingly focal points for institutional strategic thinking, reflected to some degree in policy instruments like the Teaching Excellence Framework.

"The higher education sector is seeing macro changes in society that are reshaping public conceptions of the value that is realised from higher education study, and student expectations of what higher education engagement looks like."

The rapid emergence of artificial intelligence as a mainstream consumer technology has also had a disruptive impact on learning and teaching – prompting fundamental questions about how institutions can best assess students' learning and skills, and opening up opportunities for different ways of thinking about learning itself and the ways students are supported to achieve it.

The implications for digital transformation

The current reality shapes digital transformation agendas in two ways that are potentially in tension with each other. Institutions are seeking to reduce their costs to balance their books, especially where hoped-for recruitment numbers have not materialised. This can frequently mean mothballing planned projects and reducing headcount, with direct impact on digital investments and expertise. But to be sustainable in the long term, institutions must continue on their journeys of transformation – with the associated investment – to create a student experience that remains high quality, engaging and inclusive, and as such, attractive to prospective students, including in international markets.

"To be sustainable in the long term, institutions must continue on their journeys of transformation – with the associated investment – to create a student experience that remains high quality, engaging and inclusive."

Managing these tensions will not simply be a matter of implementing cost controls and asking staff to do more with less. It will mean in most cases significant streamlining, maximising efficiencies and having a very clear sense of where and how value is created for (and with) students. This shift isn't about technology per se – it's about reimagining the student experience – but there is

no plausible version of the future in which the bulk of the student experience isn't experienced via digital technology, whether it's accessing learning resources, engaging in learning activity remotely, soliciting academic or wellbeing support, or conducting transactions with the institution such as booking a room or registering for a module. That doesn't mean that in-person encounters won't continue to be vital opportunities for connection, meaning-making, and intellectual development, but that these times most likely will not constitute the majority of time that most students spend engaged in learning, and will themselves be supported by technology to enable those encounters to be as meaningful as possible.

"There is no plausible version of the future in which the bulk of the student experience isn't experienced via digital technology."

Some leaders are using the term "digital dexterity" to describe the organisational qualities required to deploy technology on an ongoing basis to achieve strategic goals. The idea of digital dexterity brings together a few different concepts: both the organisation's grip on the link between the organisation's performance (however understood) and the technologies it uses to achieve its objectives; and the degree of efficiency, agility, and innovation it is capable of mobilising in pursuit of those objectives. Higher education is self-evidently on a journey towards digital dexterity, with no institution realistically yet able to say that it is confident of its ability to adopt and deploy at pace the technologies available to it in the service of operational and strategic objectives. However, especially since Covid-19, the sector is making rapid positive strides on that journey.

Jisc's digital transformation framework and digital maturity model[1] describe in depth all the ways that digital transformation touches every aspect of an institution's activity. That whole-institution approach highlights the necessity of thinking in terms of whole-institution capability. To achieve real change and impact, particularly when finances are constrained, institutional leaders must be able to agree on a common agenda for change, and ensure that every individual involved has the capability, the opportunity, and the motivation to change what they are doing. In higher education, with its traditions of professional autonomy, dispersed academic departments, and internal hierarchies, a proposition that sounds straightforward can be very hard to accomplish in practice.

Preparing for change specifically in the learning, teaching and student success domain also requires the bringing together of different kinds of knowledge and leadership – at the executive level the pro vice chancellor for education and CIO or their equivalents, with a similar need for open dialogue and joint working between "digital" and "pedagogy" at every level of the institution – often requiring the dismantling of long-established silos and distinctive ways of working between those two domains.

To explore how institutions are approaching these challenges in practice, between October 2024 and March 2025 we hosted two private round tables with senior leaders; one with e-learning professionals, kindly facilitated via UCISA; and one with students' union representatives. We also held a number of interviews, informal conversations, and shared some work-in-progress findings at three Kortext Live leaders' events in January and February 2025, and invited reflections from those in attendance.

This report draws on those conversations to suggest some ways of thinking about organisational capabilities for learning futures. We are hopeful that it can spark useful discussions not only about the organisational digital technology requirements but about the cultures in which decisions are made and implemented, and how to support broader and deeper cross-organisational collaborations in the service of student success.

"Institutional leaders must be able to agree on a common agenda for change, and ensure that every individual involved has the capability, the opportunity, and the motivation to change what they are doing."

Institutional ambitions for the future

Operating in a more digitally mediated world changes students' expectations of their learning and teaching environment. Once it is possible to access learning resources and materials online and remotely students start to expect higher education to enable them to do so. As industry practices change and technology is adopted in the fields that students will be employed in, students expect their courses to prepare them to operate in those professional environments. And once artificial intelligence starts showing up in every platform and application students are using, it becomes much harder to argue that students should not be permitted to experiment and develop knowledge of these tools.

"Once artificial intelligence starts showing up in every platform and application students are using, it becomes much harder to argue that students should not be permitted to experiment and develop knowledge of these tools."

But higher education institutions are now not only thinking about these different elements in isolation, responding to changing demands. They are trying to think about what the future of student experience will look like and the affordances of technology in shaping that future – though it is often hard to find the time and headspace to have the sort of in-depth discussion and deliberation that the question demands.

A consistent and engaging student digital experience

The higher education sector is justly proud of what was accomplished in the online pivot during Covid, but there is increasingly a recognition that what was of necessity sufficient for a crisis situation in terms of online delivery will not be adequate as a long-term plan. Institutional leaders want the online aspects of their learning and teaching to be engaging, well designed, and flexible enough to accommodate students' complex lives.

Development of students' digital capability, especially with AI, are expected to be woven throughout curricula and the digital learning environment. This means not just that students will be exposed to industry-relevant tools and technologies, though this is one of students' expectations, but that professional standards of digital practice and opportunities to develop critical awareness of the role and function of technology in society are becoming standard.

AI is expected to facilitate a much more seamless engagement with the institution through the use of chatbots and natural language search, allowing students to rapidly find the right information and not become stuck in a long email loop or clicking through from page to page on their institution's website. Students will increasingly use AI study tools to support their independent learning. In both cases, institutions will need to consider what tools to make available to students and how to support their ethical use – especially where the alternative is tolerating a digital divide between those with ready access to high quality tools and those using the free, but sub-optimal tools available on the public internet.

> "Students are very eager to use AI because they see it as improving their professional skills. AI tools are very popular, especially among international students. We know students will use AI whether the institution is ready for them to do it or not, and there is appetite for the university to invest in students using it rather than pushing them to go the backhanded way."
> — *Students' union representative*

The models for accessing education are expected to flex – and indeed, are already changing – with micro-credentials and other shorter courses becoming more widely available, and putting pressure on the capability of legacy systems to recognise and manage these. While the government's specific plans for the rollout of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement remain opaque, the assumption of flexibility of access and portability of credit baked in to the idea suggests that these things are felt to be desirable and will become a more permanent feature of higher education provision, even if the specific application of those principles is currently somewhat undercooked.

Getting this right opens up the possibility of a much broader offer and extending institutional reach well beyond the traditional learner into local communities and with global partners. But this notion of extending reach and opening up opportunity within the constraints of the resource that is currently available only makes sense if there is a reasonable degree of automation baked into the core systems, allowing students to self-serve in the functional aspect of their courses, and educators to focus on creating engaging learning experiences, with backstop options designed in for those who need additional support.

"Getting this right opens up the possibility of a much broader offer and extending institutional reach well beyond the traditional learner into local communities and with global partners."

> "We have this sort of history of higher education being very much one person with one student, with one teacher, that kind of a sort of relationship, or small groups, or something like that, and in some cases that works well and is sustainable. But if we really do want to use higher education as an engine for growth, for accessibility, it has to be in numbers, and technology can help us there." — *Institutional leader*

> "We've got to have these different income streams, whether it's through short courses, or micro credentials, we've got to offer that added value. And so I think this [need] can be used as the lever to actually make us think differently and to use some of the online tools to do things differently in terms of how we deliver the curriculum because we haven't really got a choice anymore. We've got to adapt to survive." — *Institutional leader*

> "Those three years aren't the alpha and omega of your learning experience. I think if we can allow ourselves to bleed into the before and the after through, probably micro credentials in some form, and have a more dynamic regulatory space that will flex around that, have the core credit stuff and then have this other stuff that's a much more dynamic offer, and really realises the benefits of micro credentials." — *Institutional leader*

One underpinning aspect of this is that the design of student interfaces should have an element of consistency – students should not have to look in different places for the same core information for different modules, for example. Nor should the institution be supporting multiple bits of software for different courses if it cannot afford to do so. Deciding what needs to be consistent and standardised and what should be flexible and available to educators to design for themselves is therefore important, as is ensuring the information that is available to systems to draw in, especially those that are designed to be student facing, is accurate and up to date.

> "We have had a lot of success in education in recent years but it's really clear from what students are telling us we need to be consistent. Lots of colleagues hold knowledge that should be on a system. Implementing a curriculum management system is fundamental in terms of having visibility of what is going on and having the right kind of coherence." — *Institutional leader*

Data supporting personalisation

A core opportunity for higher education institutions is building the capability to be responsive to diverse students' needs in learning, teaching and student support, at the scale at which contemporary higher education operates. An individual student will almost certainly have positive and supportive interactions with a lecturer or other member of institutional staff during their time in higher education, but such encounters are unpredictable, may not be desired by some students, and may put undue pressure on institutional staff if they are relied on for ensuring students are able to stay on course and succeed.

Building personalisation capability into digital systems means that students can intentionally tailor their digital learning environment to suit them and/or that the system is able to pull in data about the student to inform how it interacts with them. In principle, the ability to do this should create a more inclusive learning environment and one in which students with diverse needs have a greater chance of success.

"We have had a lot of success in education in recent years but it's really clear from what students are telling us we need to be consistent."

> "There is lots of support with developing digital knowledge, and lots of free courses. Students' frustration comes when there is different information on different platforms and they have to track things down. Students feel that the platforms ought to make their lives easier, and be intuitive and designed with the user in mind, but they aren't always."
> — *Students' union representative*

> "Mental load for me is one of the ones that I'm really focused on because I think that's something that's so significant that might be underlying and and might not necessarily be the thing that [students] speak about a lot, but it's actually something that's that's always on, that kind of mental load of not knowing where you are, not knowing what you need to do."
> — *Institutional leader*

"We can't continue with this sense that different people hold different information. Students expect us to know things about them."

Many institutions have student records systems, curriculum management systems, CRMs, VLEs and much more besides. The result is often that the institution holds vast amounts of data, but the lack of integration of those systems can mean that it is very hard to feed any given system data of sufficient quality to create opportunities for personalisation and system-level responsiveness to individual students.

> "There is no such thing as a single student experience anymore. I think there are very personalised student experiences, expectations of personalised staff experiences at least at a minimum. So I think just doing something which is completely unified is almost an impossible ask."
> — *Institutional leader*

> “We can’t continue with this sense that different people hold different information. Students expect us to know things about them.”
> — *Institutional leader*

> “We’ve really got the opportunity to encourage students to be true independent learners and to offer a much more personalised experience, and help them understand what skills they have, and what they need. I think, also, that whole aspect of social mobility, and actually being able to deliver really high quality education both on and off campus in a much more accessible way, for students to engage with in a way that suits them, is something that I’m really excited about.”
> — *Institutional leader*

Data and AI supporting organisational responsiveness to students

The other side of the data agenda relates to what institutions know about students and what they do with that information. As students apply to and take up a place at their institution, interact with the VLE and physical learning environment, choose modules, sign up to extracurricular activities, access services and so on they leave digital traces that are available for interpretation.

“In practice, the proliferation of legacy systems makes it very hard to create a data ‘pool’ that can be interrogated.”

Learning analytics systems seek to make sense of some of that data, particularly to flag where a change in student engagement patterns could signal a student in need of additional support. Case management systems can bring together where students are struggling with a number of different and potentially related issues to allow effective sharing of information across the institutions and more effective support interventions.

But it should in theory be possible to deploy the available data from a wide range of sources – within carefully managed ethical frameworks – to gain a better understanding of patterns of activity at every stage of students’ journey, and use that insight to drive organisational decision-making. AI tools can help to interrogate these large datasets and identify patterns that could be less visible to the human eye, in principle enabling institutions to manage this complexity and respond more quickly.

“We’ve got huge amounts of information, minimal access to it and minimal ability to utilise it to make good decisions.”

In practice, the proliferation of legacy systems makes it very hard to create a data “pool” that can be interrogated in this way. Without good quality data, institutions cannot be confident that they are able to pull out good quality insight.

> “I think the most positive use of digital is probably with the reports we now have – that’s probably the thing where people get most excited and really enjoy being able to see data, being able to use it to look at, say, what are the student recruitment trends on the courses? What’s the retention looking like?...People are actually using it now and they’re very positive about how that can be used to see the student experience, as a way to look at the trends and look at where there may be issues...I guess the point of that is, when people see the data is actually enhancing what they can deliver. It’s not seen as a task or another process, it’s actually helping them to deliver what they want to be doing and doing their jobs better.”
> — *Institutional leader*

> Data quality is the bit that seems to be the key because the analytics piece then allows us much more insights into what's going on. We can do better evaluation of what's working, what's not working; we can feed that back into business processes, teaching and learning, student experience. So I think everything is downstream of that. And then we can think about how we plug AI into that to speed up those decisions. How we then use that to improve teaching, learning, and the student experience as well." — *Institutional leader*

> We've got huge amounts of information, minimal access to it and minimal ability to utilise it to make good decisions...it's no point having the data if you don't know what to do with it, and AI only makes the data worse. If you have bad data, AI is useless. There's genuinely no point in having an amazing AI strategy if your data strategy's in the bin." — *Institutional leader*

Breaking down silos, creating space

The higher education leaders we spoke to were generally very excited in principle about the prospect of digital transformation creating new opportunities for high quality learning and teaching. But in different ways technological and organisational legacy silos were hampering their organisational ability to achieve their objectives.

"A big issue for us is that our tools don't talk to each other. For example, getting marks from a student record system into a VLE isn't easy."

This could take the form of technical challenges: a lack of a joined-up ecosystem in which different platforms do not readily interoperate, meaning that extraction of data from one platform to deploy in another requires a manual workaround. It could be about the proliferation of different applications, or legacy hardware, all requiring updating and maintenance, creating inconsistencies in student experience and increasing security risks.

> Over, I don't know how long – many, many years – different bits of the institution have started to use different technologies. And there's quite a lot of stuff going on that's just run by one or two programmes or one or two areas. I don't know why we ever allowed that. But we did, and that is the situation that we're in now. We're trying to rationalise the whole thing and make it much more consistent so we have a much more consistent student experience. So one set of students isn't using one bit of software and another student, another platform or whatever. And this is obviously really quite challenging." — *Institutional leader*

> A big issue for us is that our tools don't talk to each other. For example, getting marks from a student record system into a VLE isn't easy. Drawing module descriptors and learning outcomes into the VLE should be bread and butter stuff so educators can focus on effective learning design, but it's not happening." — *E-learning professional*

> Different parts of the institution use different software. Not all of it is available in the central library or accessible remotely, which isn't great for our commuter students. I'd like to see some streamlining and consistency around different apps for different subjects, picking one or two core apps that everybody uses." — *Students' union representative*

Behind these technical challenges though, was a sense of disappointment or frustration that to some extent the existing technological capability, or the way that technologies had been implemented in the past, had not yet delivered on the promise to streamline processes, achieve efficiencies or create additional bandwidth to allow focus on the most high-value activity. Some interviewees felt that a historically siloed approach and a lack of institution-wide approach to digital transformation had created inefficiency, duplication, and complexity, while others pointed out that the transfer of processes into a digital environment mainly has had the effect of overloading academic staff rather than improving processes.

> The final priority, I'd say, is where digital transformation can be a solution to, or a help in terms of providing better processes more broadly. So the inconsistency is around the digital but it's usually because our own processes, anyway, are siloed and inconsistent." — *Institutional leader*

"A historically siloed approach and a lack of institution-wide approach to digital transformation had created inefficiency, duplication, and complexity."

> I think the problem always is when we hope something's going to make it more efficient. But then it just adds a layer of complexity into what we're doing...I think that's what we struggle with – what can genuinely deliver some time savings and efficiencies as opposed to putting another layer in a process?" — *Institutional leader*

> Burden is a real issue. The systems that have come in do not solve problems, they create more admin because staff spend too much time on self-service technologies such as form filling. Consistency between systems is ridiculous, particularly for programme leaders. In other workplaces you might have to engage with maybe ten different systems – ours might have up to fifty. It's actually deterring staff from doing things like arranging field trips...Self-service is not more efficient, in fact it's probably less efficient. Consistent interfaces would help. We need to actually research this and understand how to address it." — *E-learning professional*

> If we can get these tools working efficiently to be able to save time, then that does give more time for the bits that, certainly on the academic side, people want to be doing more creative work. If we can use AI and technology to free up, and they can do more of the routine stuff, the housework kind of tasks that need to be done, and that does free up time for academics to be doing more of the scholarly things they want to be doing, anyway, and that will take some of that burden off." — *Institutional leader*

> How do we create an environment where we're allowing people to feel like they are the arbiters of their own day to day, that they've got more time, that they're able to do the things that they want to do?...So that's really an excitement for me. I think there's real opportunity in digital to enable those things and create the next generation of learners." — *Institutional leader*

Organisational digital capability for learning futures

Higher education institutions may be grappling with complex cultural and technical legacy issues but they are rich in insight about what will be required to prepare for the future of learning and teaching. Few are sanguine about the scale of change expected, and the cultural shift that will be required:

> At the moment I see myself and my colleagues trying to cling to what we always did and what we always know. And I really do think the whole future of what we do and how we teach our students, and what we teach our students is going to accelerate and change very, very quickly now, in the next five years." — *Institutional leader*

"Ultimately, realising the value of technology investment requires proactive devolution of responsibility for deploying that technology in context to improve learning and teaching."

Running through all our conversations was a tension, albeit a potentially productive one: there needs to be much more consistency and clarity about the primary strategic objectives of the institution and the core technology platforms and applications that enable them – but the effect of, in essence, imposing a more streamlined "central" vision, expectations and processes should be to enable and empower the academic and professional teams to do the things that make for a great student experience.

Ultimately, realising the value of technology investment requires proactive devolution of responsibility for deploying that technology in context to improve learning and teaching.

> "Where data has been used before it's very much sat with senior colleagues in the institution. And you know it's helped in decision making. But the next step is to try and empower colleagues at the coal face to use data in their day to day interventions with their students, our personal academic tutors. How can they use the data to inform how they support their students? And then finally supporting the students as well because they'll have access through some of these platforms to their own data about their own studies and where they're at."
> — *Institutional leader*

"We end up going down this route because it's easier to bring in a piece of technology than it is to actually go back to the more difficult questions about what is the core of academic work that we want people to do?"

Silos arise when the various constituent parts of the institution fail to recognise those aspects of organisational life that need to be shared:

> "The reason why people work in silos, and why they're so difficult to actually deal with is because not everybody has the same vision of what they're trying to achieve...So one of the things that we're trying to do is to develop a shared view of what we as a university are trying to do. You know, we are all responsible for students, success and attainment."
> — *Institutional leader*

Successfully navigating this tension means a much more robust and sophisticated negotiation between leaders and departments/subject areas – reducing constraints and creating new freedoms and opportunities in areas where there is real value to be gained in students' learning experience, and in exchange reducing or removing the power of departments to insist on doing things a particular way if there is no obvious collective value to be gained or if the value is insufficient to cancel the efficiency gains of everyone doing things the same way.

"The reason why people work in silos, and why they're so difficult to actually deal with is because not everybody has the same vision of what they're trying to achieve."

In a changing higher education environment in which many of the longstanding assumptions about the ways things are done, everything has to be up for discussion and scrutiny – which will inevitably be uncomfortable at times. One highly astute leader explained the cultural shift required in terms of the difference between the objective being to roll out a system, with all the attendant compromises and workarounds, and achieving core objectives around quality and student experience:

Staff engagement and capability

There is a consistent thread of concern among institutional leaders about limitations in the digital skills of institutional staff – though frequently tempered with a sense of empathy of the challenging environment educators are working in, the pressures on their time and the complexity of the digital landscape they have inherited.

> "One of the things that I am most concerned with is the very, very variable digital skills of our staff in teaching students... so obviously generative AI is something that's come up. And you see that maybe 30 per cent of our staff are very interested in this, who really want to, you know, show students how to use it. And they're very enthusiastic. And the remaining 70 per cent put their hands over their ears and go 'We've got to stop students from using this.' Well, you know, we're not going to do that. So that's an example, but you could say that across pretty much all the digital things in the university that some people are much better at using digital tools than others and teaching and using them. So that for me is a particular pain point." — *Institutional leader*

While simply refusing to engage in technological change is hardly a reasonable professional strategy to adopt, leaders are mindful that there is limited value in incentivising surface compliance either, when the wider goal is about embedding real change. Discussing this issue with e-learning professionals, the point was made about the limitations of much training provision:

> "So much training focuses on how to, rather than context specific exploration of how to meet the needs of staff and students." — *E-learning professional*

"Leaders are mindful that there is limited value in incentivising surface compliance either, when the wider goal is about embedding real change."

> "I think sometimes in those conversations, and particularly where in the past we've brought in a system, we've not really changed the processes around it, or we've used the discipline differences in a way to go, 'well, we can only use the system in partial ways.' Then we've kind of lost sense of really what we're trying to do...We end up going down this route because it's easier to bring in a piece of technology than it is to actually go back to the more difficult questions about what is the core of academic work that we want people to do? What does that look like? How is that changed by the changes in technology? And I think we're really facing much more of a crunch point now because of the way the technology is developed, because of the sort of data that we want to to bring together, because of this push on consistency and a really good and high quality student experience, but also the staff skills that need to then meet that. We can't just bring in a system in the way that we did before – we've got to be really, really clear on the vision, the priorities around that. But then that means some really uncomfortable changes for processes, for the way people are working." — *Institutional leader*

Attending training on the correct use of a particular system may be necessary at times but it is much less engaging and meaningful than a holistic assessment of the learning context and where the technologies available can be more readily deployed to enable academic and professional teams. Realising value from technologies requires people to not only know how to use it in the sense of what buttons to press or what processes to follow but understanding of the capabilities of the technology and how those relate to the things that the educator cares about.

> "There are lots of questions about whether we have the right technologies, driven by IT. I would like to reframe the question as to whether we are getting the best use of the technologies we have. The bit where you understand and begin to develop use of the tech often gets squeezed out, if things don't work right away people get turned off but it's not a toaster, not just plug and play." — *E-learning professional*

IT, digital and data teams, in this landscape need to think in terms of how the capabilities that have traditionally sat with them can be devolved. An authentic business case for a particular bit of technology therefore rests less on the particular functionalities of the platform but whether there is a plausible critical path to the right people being able to deploy it to improve the student experience. IT teams may construct the "walled garden" or ecosystem that puts boundaries around the systems, platforms and applications that are supported in the institution. But value is more systematically created across the organisation when those academic and professional teams who work directly with students are able to use the technology available creatively to enhance their practice and to problem solve.

> "One of the things that I see coming down the tracks is that we can't be the solutions provider for everybody all of the time. The university is just too complex. There's something about enabling people with boundaries to find their own answers...If we can get those things out into the wider community, it will unlock so much efficiency in an organization, because, as an IT team, I cannot do that for everybody. Yeah, okay, I've got some fantastic people that know loads of stuff, but there is no way they can do everything for everybody, and they never will be able to. So it's about, how do we maybe become consultants and guardians rather than necessarily always the provider?" — *Institutional leader*

"Value is more systematically created across the organisation when those academic and professional teams who work directly with students are able to use the technology available creatively to enhance their practice and to problem solve."

Thinking, therefore, less in terms of deficit models or a fixed basket of digital skills that must be acquired, and more about the support staff may need to do the things they want to do, could help to change the culture around digital capability. This shift in mindset also assumes that staff are given space to think seriously about what they want to do and work through what additional skills or knowledge they may need to be able to do it – for example through linking explicitly to annual objectives. As one institutional leader put it: "It really is about people taking ownership of their own knowledge and expertise."

Organisations that want their staff to be realising value from their technology investments need to accept that they need to signal meaningfully that professional development of digital capability is important, and recognise those who do it:

> "It's not just training. It's about this as being something really important that people need to spend their time on. I think sometimes staff know that they need to change what they're doing, whatever it might be. But they get caught in the academic cycle. So every year it's like back to teaching again, really, really large groups of students, they haven't had the time, and it's not prioritised in their workload model or whatever it is to go and think about how to do things differently, so don't really know where to start. So then they get caught in this constant cycle around it." — *Institutional leader*

Being realistic about what the expectations of staff are is also essential: the difference between the baseline shared expectation and the support that will be offered to enable enhancement:

> "You need to establish minimum benchmarks and get everyone to that place, and then some people will be operating well beyond that. You can be clear about basic benchmark expectations around student experience – and then beyond that you need to put in actual support [such as learning design experts] to implement the curriculum framework." — *E-learning professional*

Giving people more responsibility – and associated accountability – also means reframing the culture around performance. Few projects, especially those that are experimental, that bring together people and technology in new ways, or that seek to test ideas, work as expected the first time. Higher education remains an environment in which a high value is placed on predictability and elimination of risk.

"It needs to be possible to be recognised and rewarded for honourable failure – well designed hypotheses that do not in the end come off as hoped, but from which there is organisational learning to be gained."

When institutions are going through redundancy processes some staff understandably pull back even more strongly into this safer space. It needs to be possible to be recognised and rewarded for honourable failure – well designed hypotheses that do not in the end come off as hoped, but from which there is organisational learning to be gained. Leaders need to role model this way of thinking in order to create greater security for staff:

> "Show all your working out, show all the mess, show the bits that didn't work that didn't go well, be confident and not fear failure. I think encouraging people to go, 'this isn't a failure, this is an iterative learning moment.' It's difficult in the sector at the moment, and certainly within our organisation, because people want to present their best side because they're worried about jobs. But actually, if you're willing to embrace that leadership mindset of 'I get things wrong. We all get things wrong. We learn from it. We move, we iterate.'" — *Institutional leader*

Leadership and strategy

Some useful principles for organisational leaders emerged from our discussions, much of which can be boiled down to making good strategy ie ensure the right voices are heard in strategy design and implementation, set priorities, resource them, and invest in understanding what happens next.

Some leaders noted that they had brought together estates and digital professionals with academic staff in key committees to ensure strategic alignment between different parts of the institution. Whether higher education institutions should hold a place at the top table for a digital leader remains moot; the answer will depend on the organisation. But if there is a digital knowledge deficit in the core executive leadership team then there needs to be a clear line of insight into that team to inform decision-making:

> "My personal view is that, [senior] people are often very supportive, but they don't actually fully grasp what that means in terms of supporting digital transformation through effectively. So there's absolutely more work to do across higher education, leadership and what it means to think through digital transformation fully." — *Institutional leader*

Similarly, the discussion over whether an institution requires a standalone digital strategy is also moot – that approach will suit some organisations and not others. But a failure to connect digital strategic objectives to wider organisational objectives, or the tolerance of a proliferation of strategic objectives with no clarity over the outcomes or the core priorities is a recipe for frustration and stasis:

> “The old strategy is fairly similar, I imagine, to many digital strategies that you would have seen – it talks about being user focused, talks about lean delivery, talks about agile methodologies, product and change management and delivering value through showing, not telling. So it was a very top level strategy, but really not built with outcomes at its absolute core, like, what are the things that are genuinely going to change for people, for students?” — *Institutional leader*

“A failure to connect digital strategic objectives to wider organisational objectives is a recipe for frustration and stasis.”

Students need to be fully integrated as stakeholders in the development of digital strategies – if institutions are serious about students being partners in their learning experience, then each team who needs to engage with students will need a clear sense of what that means for their workflow and professional practice:

> “IT are interested to engage with us but in the sense that ‘we want students to report issues’ – it’s not always clear what is going to be done about it. I want to see them involving students in development; more collaboration and co-creation.” — *Students’ union representative*

Another students’ union representative added that relying on students to report issues is a strategy that is likely to lead to a lot of disaffected students, as most would be unlikely to report minor problems given the other pressures on their time. Nor are traditional course rep systems likely to surface issues in a timely way. They suggested that one model for student engagement in digital development could be as paid user-testers.

Having determined the priorities and considered their implementation there are obviously resourcing implications, which need to be taken into account:

> “Nobody bats an eyelid at spending 50 million or 100 million per annum on physical buildings. Everyone gets very concerned when we say we want to spend 10 million on digital transformation or systems. And I think it’s also reminding people that the digital estate is as important, if not more important, than the physical estate.” — *Institutional leader*

But there is a further resourcing implication, which is in considering what scholarship activity will need to be supported to enable the organisation to develop and evaluate its practice in a genuinely credible and evidence-informed way:

> “We’ve got a number of PhDs and researchers in the team, I think being able to bring the evidence to bear in a meaningful way that makes sense to academics is really important. There’s no way they’re going to do it unless they see the value in it. So I think being able to present things in a scholarly way is really important in influencing the academic side of things. Using the data to build business cases is important as well.” — *Institutional leader*

“IT are interested to engage with us but in the sense that ‘we want students to report issues’ – it’s not always clear what is going to be done about it.”

Breaking down silos

Decisive leadership may be successful in setting priorities and streamlining the processes and technologies that underpin them; strong focus on professional development may engage and enable institutional staff. But culture change will come when institutions find ways to systematically build “horizontals” into the silo system – mechanisms for collaborative and shared activity that bridge different perspectives, languages and disciplinary and professional cultures. Institutional leaders in particular had a number of practical examples of how they were doing this.

Building shared thinking and activity around responding to a new and shared interest/challenge (in this case, AI):

> "The thing that it's helping us do at the moment, particularly using AI as a tool is, it's bringing people together. It's actually helping us break silos. Because initially, there were silos: research people doing their own thing, comms and engagement doing their own thing, IT doing their own thing. But by developing a roadmap around it we're saying, what does it mean to be working together on something from the very beginning? So I think there's a real excitement and opportunity around that as well."
> — *Institutional leader*

"Culture change will come when institutions find ways to systematically build 'horizontals' into the silo system."

Business partnering to support deeper understanding of academic objectives and break down language barriers:

> "I think, in terms of that digital dexterity, in terms of people speaking the same language. So what we find is that how our IT colleagues or our digital colleagues talk around equipment, what's needed, what's not needed, is a very different language to how our academics or professional service colleagues talk. So the same kind of problem was there. But actually, people were talking in such a different way that we weren't actually finding the same solution. So on a very practical level we went down business partnering with the faculty. So each faculty had a digital business partner so that those who worked with the faculties could report to the centre and say, actually, this has been an issue. They *are* right, you know, every time they put in a works request, and you have been telling them they've got it wrong. They are actually right. It's just they need to have phrased it in a slightly different way."
> — *Institutional leader*

"I believe cultural change will happen by osmosis, in a way, it will happen with people, because you'll be working with people day to day, supporting each other towards delivering against an objective."

Deploying digital expertise in academic business processes such as recruitment panels:

> "I believe cultural change will happen by osmosis, in a way, it will happen with people, because you'll be working with people day to day, supporting each other towards delivering against an objective rather than feel like digital taking something away and doing it over here. So really embedding digital teams, digital skills, digital people into an established environment to support them, working with them to deliver against their objectives." — *Institutional leader*

Deployment of change agents with a skillset and remit to roam across boundaries:

> "That's how I operate: individually as part of a team, but moving them in amongst different departments, different demarcation lines, and kind of just forming partnerships here, there, and everywhere, and trying to sort of lead and push forward and influence. So I work semi strategically. I report to the PVC on a number of things, but I just kind of move around and try and persuade people that this is the right thing to do. It seems to work." — *Institutional leader*

How technology providers can help

Higher education institutions are likely to want different kinds of relationships with technology providers depending on their strategic importance to the institution's plans; where the system or platform is mission-critical and the spend is large, institutions want to see technology providers being prepared to act as long term strategic partners rather than simply as suppliers.

Most large technology providers are very supportive of the sector and invested in its success, though higher education institutions sometimes feel there can be a power imbalance between the technology providers and the institutions, and argue that institutions should band together more to correct that imbalance.

The nature of external technology providers is that they develop a product that is designed to meet a shared need – the consequence being that any given product will not be designed exclusively for any one institution. On occasion higher education institutions have responded by building their own technologies, but this is a highly laborious and expensive approach, so is probably only worth it if there is no "good enough" product available off the shelf or if the returns in terms of strategic gains are so significant so as to make the effort worth it. Increasingly, when finances are tight, it makes much more sense to purchase and implement a good quality product from an external supplier and gain additional benefits from the relationship such as ongoing support and insight, entry to a wider user network to enable shared learning, and input into future development.

The stakes can be very high in deciding how to invest in technology – one way that technology providers can support institutions is by working with institutions to roll out their technology on a small scale to pilot and develop proof of concept rather than insisting on multi-million pound deployment straight out of the gate.

It is enormously useful for technology providers to understand the nuances of the challenges facing higher education and how they play out inside institutions. In particular it is vital that technology providers understand how their systems and platforms are actually being used and what higher education professionals value about it, which may be somewhat different from what was envisaged at product design stage.

"One way that technology providers can support institutions is by working with institutions to roll out their technology on a small scale to pilot and develop proof of concept."

To give an example of how the technology sector can sometimes come across, one e-learning professional commented, "Some technology companies look for easy problems to solve, they are not invested in issues of equity." To be a great partner to the higher education sector means having a deep understanding not only of the technological capabilities that could help the sector but how these might weave into an organisation's wider mission and values. In this way, technology providers can help to build capability for change.

WONKHE

Wonkhe
31-35 Kirby Street
London EC1N 8TE

www.wonkhe.com

In partnership with Kortext Est 2013