Implementing the discovery tool with students and staff at Weston College

March 2021

Implementation story

Photo courtesy of Weston College

Strategic context

Weston College have invested heavily in the development of digital capabilities in recent years but wanted to better understand what digital skills were important to support learner employability and reflect the role of digital in the workplace. They also wanted digital practices and skills development to be a key aspect of the student experience. Alongside this the college wanted to ensure curriculum teams were making effective use of resources so they could target the right skills for the right teams.

The college were aware of the **building digital capability service** and had been using tools like the service **role profiles** and the **digital experience insights national reports** to guide their thinking. The decision to use the **discovery tool** in March 2020 was the next step to support the college's strategic plans to:

1. Develop the digital capabilities of staff and students by:
   - Building a mandatory staff development programme that combines broad cross-college requirements with tailored support for individuals and their roles
   - Embedding digital capabilities in learner study programmes for 2021
2. Use the data generated by the discovery tool to establish benchmarks, to monitor progress, inform resource allocation and demonstrate return on investment
3. Support and inform planning as lead partner for the West of England Institute of Technology which opened in autumn 2020

Planning for implementation

Two parallel work strands were established:

Staff
The college aimed to establish a mandatory digital development programme that met cross-college requirements and tackled the bigger issues as well as offering bite-sized, self-guided nuggets of training that staff could do independently.

The director for quality and workforce development and the director for technology, learning resources and progression skills worked with an existing team dedicated to supporting staff digital skills development as well as with digital advocates, a small team of coaches who work with teams and individual staff members. The digital advocates were briefed to provide support and ensure key messages relating to data privacy and realistic expectations were reinforced during implementation and to help staff make sense of the individual reports generated by the discovery tool.

A SharePoint site was created for October 2020 to provide a central continuous professional development (CPD) resource for academic staff with digital inclusivity and digital pedagogy promoted as key components. The site is designed around four core elements that promote the fundamental aspects of teaching and learning that the college would like learners to experience.

Learners
The individual development (ID) aspect of study programmes was used as the implementation vehicle for students. Study programmes are a key component of the learner provision in addition to whatever subject or course learners take and include digital skills as part of a broader development remit.

The academic development and learning mentor teams explored the **learner digital capabilities role profile** and mapped this to their existing study programme offer.

Further work to consider how best to address any gaps identified as part of the mapping exercise was carried out.

Engaging and supporting users

Guidance from the building digital capability service consultants highlighted that context is key; the way that staff and students are introduced to the discovery tool and the wrap around support offered are key to successful implementation. Similar approaches were followed for the two target audiences.

Staff
The starting point for all staff was to use the discovery tool to complete a digital self-assessment within the first two weeks of the academic term; either in supported online discovery sessions or independently.

In the online discovery sessions, staff were encouraged to experiment with the tool and reflect on their practice. The focus was on ensuring the process was positive and supported. The anonymity of responses was emphasised and clear messaging was provided to ensure that all staff were aware that there was no expectation for any one individual to demonstrate proficiency in every element and that their capability requirements would depend on their

roles and interests. Staff who elected to explore the discovery tool independently were supported by digital advocates to ensure they also understood these key messages.

Learners

The decision was taken to target level three students initially through their 'ID' sessions which form part of the study programme. It was important to the college that the discovery tool was seen as much more than a self-assessment exercise, and that it was recognised as being highly relevant to learners' future careers. Learning mentors led group discovery sessions for all level three learners during induction. The emphasis was on individual skills progression, finding out what learners were already good at, where they were developing and where they may need more support. The discovery sessions were well received by learners.

Feedback from learners about the induction session was very positive. It helped them to understand why digital capabilities and skills development were important, to differentiate from experiences in previous learning, understand the breadth of capabilities required by employers, set these in context and express their own development needs and aspirations more clearly. It also provided opportunities for learning mentors and tutors to tailor provision for specific vocational needs.

> *"The fact that the discovery tool is tailored to individual needs is important."*
>
> **Jon Hofgartner, director – technology, learning resources and progression skills, Weston College**

Impact

The discovery tool dashboard is enabling the college to identify strengths and development needs of students and staff and to focus finite training and support requirements more effectively, and at a more granular level (teams, subject, groups within subjects). For example, when analysing user data, the college has identified that further development in digital creation capabilities may be beneficial for staff. They can also see that previous investment in training to support use of communication tools and online collaboration has been effective.

Staff

350 members of staff attended an online in-service training day in January 2021 based on key themes from the data provided by the discovery tool dashboard. The day included 27 individual sessions and ran from 08:30 to 16:30.

> *"It was great to be able to tell staff that the training offered was based around the self-assessment they had done with the discovery tool at the start of the year – they could see the relevance and the connections."*
>
> **Jon Hofgartner, director – technology, learning resources and progression skills, Weston College**

Learners

After analysing the aggregated and anonymised results provided by the discovery tool, learning mentors liaised with tutors to identify opportunities to develop student digital skills in curriculum activities and projects. The focus is on making digital tasks relevant and ensuring the work done in the discovery sessions is reinforced and reflected in programme activity.

> *"The learner discovery session was really powerful – mentors and tutors could look at the dashboard data and identify strengths and development needs for their groups and build in appropriate opportunities in upcoming projects."*
>
> **Jon Hofgartner, director – technology, learning resources and progression skills, Weston College**

Embedding use of the discovery tool

The discovery tool dashboard is fully embedded in the overall CPD programme for staff and is used as a starting point for digital capabilities development. There are plans to invite staff to repeat their self-assessment using the discovery tool in the summer of 2021 and to reflect on their progress. This will benefit individuals and the college by providing valuable progression data and inform future support needs.

Having successfully trialled the overall digital capabilities approach with level three students, the college is now exploring what appropriate support will look like for level two and then level one students and to use this to help students progress to the next level.

Work has already started to embed digital capabilities development opportunities into higher education (HE) level three provision and the entire offer for this group has been mapped to the building digital capabilities framework with opportunities to offer 'step up' and bridging programmes to potential HE students.

Lessons learned

- In line with advice from Jisc in the initial start-up consultation, setting use of the discovery tool in an appropriate context proved to be a vital step in engaging students and staff. Reinforcing the anonymity of the data and reassuring participants that no one person is expected to be proficient in all areas is also important

- Offering tailored support beyond simple deployment of the discovery tool is essential, as is encouraging users to take time to reflect on their use of the tool and what this means to them, and their subject/practice

- Stakeholder engagement through key personnel like learning mentors, tutors, digital advocates and workforce developers extends reach and builds common understanding and momentum across the organisation

Next steps

The college is continuing to monitor data and implementation of the discovery tool and broader support for digital skills development.

Examples of the digital practices highlighted in the teaching staff role profiles for academic staff are being used to inform the organisational development strategy and are feeding into human resource and recruitment processes such as updating job descriptions.

Weston College is also the lead partner for the West of England Institute of Technology (WEIoT) partnership. The WEIoT will significantly influence skills development and innovation on both a regional and national basis and the WEIoT strength is working collaboratively with other institutes and employers. Digital capabilities development is fundamental to achieving the partnership ambitions and will provide a solid platform on which to build.

The College is committed to a forward focus on planning for learning and developing effective digital curriculum:

> *"Our education technology strategy has ensured the resources, support and facilities are well-aligned to realise flexible and innovative approaches to curriculum delivery for the future. The college's medium and long-term vision for digital education will respond to the national demand for highly flexible, responsive and accessible learning opportunities, underpinned by skilled digital practitioners and outstanding learning resources."*
> **Dr Paul Phillips CBE, Principal and Chief Executive, Weston College Group**