DIGITAL EDUCATION
STRATEGY 2023-27

UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

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Foreword

This is the University's second Digital Education Strategy. The first, covering the period 2016–20, identified the most promising ways in which digital tools can be used to enhance an Oxford education. However, without dedicated resources or an implementation plan, progress with its objectives was incremental, until the COVID-19 pandemic forced more rapid change. This second strategy seeks to learn from the experience of the first, and from the pandemic.

The working group consulted widely in developing this strategy and took full account of feedback received. Key messages were that:

- There is huge capacity for innovation in teaching across the university, with many brilliant initiatives launched every year – the best examples are truly inspirational

- Technology-enhanced initiatives should complement and not replace our traditional strengths in small-group, in-person teaching

- In some areas, University-wide consistency of practice is desirable, but in others there are different priorities and a need to adopt available tools selectively

- New developments need to be properly resourced, in terms of both systems and staff time

- There's a need to walk before we can run – many underpinning IT systems lack functionality and these need to be fixed before moving on to more ambitious objectives.

This strategy therefore starts by emphasising the need to fix the basics across the collegiate University. Beyond that, it aims to enable digital approaches where they are desirable. There is some emphasis on the development of central systems with the aim of promoting efficiency, but no intention to dictate to creative academics who know their own subject.

While the strategy explicitly links to existing educational goals, it also builds on lessons from the pandemic, when colleagues came to understand both the advantages and disadvantages of a digitally supported education. Many aspects of teaching suffered, and have since benefitted from a return to an in-person mode, but there were some positive outcomes as well. In particular, while learning remotely brought challenges, many disabled students found that some features of the University's teaching practices became more accessible and inclusive, when forced to make greater use of digital approaches.

It is important to be clear that the Digital Education Strategy does not have its own implementation budget. However, throughout its development, there has been close collaboration with the broader Digital Transformation Programme which aims to make a step improvement in digital provision across a range of university activities and processes. This Strategy will play a key role in the prioritisation of funded projects within the Digital Transformation Programme.

Future developments in the digital world will continue to inform how and what is taught at Oxford. We believe that the Digital Education Strategy is both foundational and ambitious. If successful, it will enable the use of digital technology to the benefit of both students and staff. And it will enable innovation through digital means to enhance Oxford's traditional educational excellence.

In closing, we wish to offer our heartfelt thanks to all the members of the working group for their excellent contributions during a very busy time, and to the many people across the collegiate University who have engaged in consultations over the past year.

Professor Sir Nigel Shadbolt, Chair of the Digital Education Strategy Working Group

Professor Martin Williams, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Education)

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

The purpose of the Digital Education Strategy 2023–27 is to identify where digital education has the potential to facilitate achievement of existing education commitments, and to focus the investment and activity necessary to consolidate and embed digital provision to support these aims.

Digital education

Digital education is understood as the purposeful use of digital tools and technologies to support the processes of teaching, learning and assessment for all students whether undergraduates, postgraduates, research students or lifelong learners. As such, the strategy encompasses a broad range of activities including the provision of bridging resources for offer holders, supplementary teaching materials and activities for current students, skills modules for research students, and a portfolio of distance learning courses for lifelong learners. Digital education also includes remote or hybrid participation in teaching, assessment or supervision, either for occasional flexibility or as a response to local or global events.

Aims

For all its hardships, the pandemic has accelerated Oxford's transition to new technologies, transformed our libraries into global digital hubs and shown us new ways to teach and foster lifelong learning.

(Professor Dame Louise Richardson, VC's Oration, 2022)

The use of digital education tools increased rapidly at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. All students now have access to a core digital learning platform (based on Canvas) which offers possibilities for greater flexibility and accessibility of learning activities and resources. The consultation undertaken to develop this strategy highlighted the need to get the basics right in terms of ensuring the digital and physical infrastructure is in place and performs as needed, providing the foundations for digital education. The strategy aims to consolidate and embed those tools and practices which have been adopted at speed, and to sustain new areas of growth and successful innovations, where they support Oxford's existing educational commitments. The traditional forms of small group teaching, close supervision and support, and access to world-leading academics remain central to Oxford's personalised educational approach, which is enriched by access to our libraries and collections.

The previous Digital Education Strategy (2016–20) identified inclusive provision as a key area for development, noting that 'departments and faculties should be aware of the potential that digital technologies hold to promote inclusivity in their education programmes, particularly for students with disabilities.' The University's commitment to adopt exemplary inclusive practice in fulfilling the Public Sector Equality Duty is expressed within the Common Framework for Supporting Disabled Students. While learning remotely was challenging for many students, the ways in which digital tools supported continuity of teaching through the COVID-19 pandemic, exemplified a more flexible and inclusive approach to education at Oxford. The strategy aims to facilitate the development of tools and services that will enable departments to choose how to use digital tools to reduce barriers to accessing and participating in Oxford's education, and

support every student to reach their full academic potential.

While most teaching in Oxford will remain in-person, offering blended or online courses is one way that some departments are choosing to extend their reach, both to support lifelong learners and to engage new audiences. The consultation revealed the extent to which departments are using digital tools to extend access to educational resources, providing flexibility for local lifelong learners, continuing professional development for part-time learners, and access to Oxford's rich collections. There is a need to support such activities by making available a choice of platforms and services for departments. The goals and actions collected by the working group draw on the experiences of those departments who have been leading the development of online courses, thus providing a roadmap for future development.

Experimentation and innovation are key ways in which teaching can adapt to meeting the changing needs of students. For example, realisation of the University's Strategic Plan commitment 'to equip students with the values, skills and intellectual discipline that will enable them to make a positive contribution to society', needs to take account of the digital age in which we all now live and learn and work. Disciplinary research and scholarship are increasingly shaped by digital methods to collect and analyse data, collaborate with colleagues and engage with research audiences. The consultation showed that while Oxford's creative educators continually innovate, sustaining and spreading digital innovations are too easily neglected and require the most support. The strategy aims to create an institutional environment for digital education in which innovation is supported and experiences are widely shared.

Definitions

Terms used in this strategy

Digital education: the purposeful use of digital tools, technologies, pedagogies and practices to support the processes of teaching, learning and assessment.

Emergency remote teaching: the approach to teaching at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, when students were expected to engage with familiar teaching and learning activities from a distance.

Hybrid teaching: live teaching where some students are physically present in the same venue, and some are simultaneously joining remotely.

Online courses: courses, units or programmes of study designed for a fully online experience, allowing students to participate from a distance.

Flexible and inclusive teaching: educational approaches which recognise and minimise the barriers that hinder student learning and participation.

GOALS AND PRIORITIES

The strategy is organised around four goals:

1. Provide the foundations for digital education
2. Enable a more inclusive educational environment
3. Extend the global reach of Oxford's educational opportunities
4. Support experimentation and sustain innovation in digital education

Each goal is supported by a summary of actions generated through the consultation activities and prioritised by the working group, which will continue the programme of work launched by the previous Digital Education Strategy. It is for departments, faculties and colleges to decide how to engage with this ongoing programme.

The strategy concludes with a short commentary on the investment and other enablers necessary for implementation.

Goal 1. Provide the foundations for digital education

To invest in the physical and technical infrastructure and local resources necessary to support an excellent academic experience for all our students

Securing the foundations for digital education underpins the existing commitment to offer an excellent academic experience for all our students (Strategic Plan, Education Commitment 2). To maintain excellence where digital education is employed, it is necessary to address some core needs in order for digital systems and platforms to function well.

Student feedback collected for the scoping phase of the Digital Transformation Programme pointed to a digital experience that is fragmented across different student-related information systems, where course information and resources are inconsistent and can be hard to access, and fundamental aspects of IT provision are disjointed.

Efforts to enhance existing infrastructure and join up the systems that support digital education need to reduce burdens on staff and students. This should be combined with a focus on developing skills and investment in local resources.

Priorities:

a. Continue investment in developing a holistic and integrated digital learning environment based on a centrally supported virtual learning environment (currently Canvas) integrated with additional tools and services (eg ORLO, Replay, Teams, Inspera).

b. Upgrade physical teaching spaces in collaboration with digital education experts, local IT/AV staff and academics, with options for different spaces, teaching practices and suppliers.

c. Develop people as digitally skilled practitioners, ensuring that local conditions allow staff to access tailored development pathways, which extend their skills in line with local requirements.

d. Support students to develop the digital capabilities they need to use digital resources and tools purposefully and with academic integrity, to participate effectively in their research and study, and to support their individual learning needs.

Goal 2. Enable a more inclusive educational environment

To employ digital education to help address structural inequalities in Oxford's approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, and evaluate their impact

The existing commitment to teaching informed by an inclusive approach to learning (Strategic Plan, Education Commitment 3) supports our ambitions to eliminate degree-awarding gaps and support student wellbeing. In recent years, the Disability Advisory Service has noted that 'the University has made exceptionally positive progress during the pandemic in progressing inclusive and flexible teaching and assessment practices.'[1] A flexible and inclusive teaching approach preserves the high quality, personalised education that is our hallmark, whilst recognising and minimising the barriers that hinder student learning and participation.

Student feedback collected during the pandemic reveals how digital tools can be employed to help students manage Oxford's demanding academic and social environments and complex ecosystem. Students reported that Oxford's high expectations can be mitigated by consistent and clear communication of expectations and deadlines, timely access to well-structured and accessible resources in a central portal, and flexibility in workload management.[2] With greater understanding of the barriers to participation that students face, tutors and lecturers are well positioned to choose how to embed common inclusive practices, depending on the specific needs and priorities of their discipline and their students.

Priorities:

a. Agree an evidence-based framework for digitally supported inclusive teaching, which departments can use to decide how to help students navigate the complex ecosystem of the Oxford educational environment and manage their workloads.

b. Design, equip and support physical teaching spaces to make them accessible to our diverse student community, such as improved sound and visual quality, the ability to make recordings, and join remotely.

c. Extend the range of supported assessments available to exam boards by investing in the tools, facilities and processes for their management, thus reducing the need for individual adjustments.

d. Optimise the use of digital tools and technologies to support students' academic transitions into and through undergraduate and postgraduate study.

e. Reduce the need to make adjustments for individual students by designing accessibility and inclusive practices into digital education platforms and systems, and providing communications and training that meet local needs.

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[1] See the Disability Advisory Service Annual Report 2020-21 available at
https://academic.admin.ox.ac.uk/files/disabilityadvisoryservice2020-21annualreportpdf

[2] See the Centre for Teaching and Learning's reviews of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic available at https://www.ctl.ox.ac.uk/project-reports

Goal 3. Extend the global reach of Oxford's educational opportunities

To support those departments that wish to make Oxford's rich educational opportunities available to a wider audience

The University mission is the advancement of learning by teaching and research, and its dissemination by every means. Support is needed for those departments that are developing online courses and resources. The main reason given by these departments is the potential to reach a global international audience, notably to reach students in low- and middle-income countries, and professionals who are studying and working at the same time. Departments with established portfolios of online courses are interacting with audiences from up to 176 countries.

This goal also supports the University's strategic priority for public engagement and knowledge exchange through 'continued investing in digital tools and infrastructure to be a leader in open scholarship and support open access to collections and research data outputs' (Strategic Plan, Engagement and Partnership priorities, para 20). The GLAM Digital Programme and the Bodleian Libraries Strategy (2022-27) have set ambitious targets to enhance access to digitized collections. Building capacity and capabilities to produce digital assets and develop online courses will facilitate the sharing of Oxford's educational opportunities more openly, such as those currently available through the Oxford Podcasts service.

Eliminating geographical barriers also enhances the experience for students in Oxford, who can engage with international experts and peers, take advantage of interdisciplinary curricula, and access physical resources remotely to enhance research-based teaching.

Priorities:

a. Provide those departments that wish to develop online courses with access to the partnerships, platforms, commercial models and services needed to accelerate their development.

b. Enter into University-wide partnerships with a range of internal and external preferred suppliers to provide different options for departments seeking platforms and support for online courses.

c. Develop governance and quality enhancement and assurance processes for online courses that maintain the distinctiveness and quality expected from education at Oxford.

d. Extend services to support course teams in the design of teaching, learning and assessment in online courses.

e. Invest in digital asset management platforms that extend the storage and sharing of open educational resources; and provide clarity on the copyright implications of sharing materials openly.

f. Agree ambitious goals and scope for an 'Open Oxford' initiative to support our aspirations for openness, propelling interdisciplinary discussions worldwide, and recognising the impact for potential students, current students, and lifelong and informal learners.

Goal 4. Support experimentation and sustain innovations in digital education

To support participatory engagement with digital technologies and novel pedagogical practices to ensure that teaching and the curriculum can adapt to meet changing needs

Oxford's existing education commitments include the ambition for teaching to be informed by 'the opportunities for innovation offered by digital technology' (Strategic Plan, Education Commitment 3). Many programmes utilise innovative teaching techniques and practices, some of which have been hastened by the pandemic and others by the increasing digitization of Oxford's museum and library collections. Where such innovations enhance Oxford's specific and diverse forms of teaching and learning and prove to be effective, there is a need to provide ways for these to be extended and sustained.

Both the GLAM Digital Programme and Bodleian Libraries Strategy (2022–27) aim to transform the digitization of their collections, providing new opportunities for teaching, learning, research and scholarship. Similarly, research methods in many disciplines are being transformed, with associated implications for undergraduate and postgraduate teaching.

The funding and operational plans for central platforms and services must accommodate the ways in which they are, or could be, used by departments to allow for experimentation and innovation at a local level.

Priorities:

a. Develop funding models, structures and networks that enable and sustain innovation in digital education.

b. Secure strategic partnerships with third party providers to allow early access to evaluate emerging learning technologies, such as immersive technologies.

c. Showcase excellent and innovative digital teaching and provide routes for these excellent teachers to be recognised and rewarded for their contribution to maintaining Oxford's outstanding quality of education.

d. Provide support and opportunities for sharing innovations in collections-based and objects-based teaching.

e. Work in partnership with undergraduate and graduate students to adapt education to their changing needs.

Investment and other enablers for implementation

The ways in which digital education is taken forward in the next period will be critical to its success. The success of the implementation of this Digital Education Strategy relies on much more than investment in digital infrastructure – it is also enabled by policy and process, people, and digital tools and services. There is a need to review and monitor the impact of the ambitions articulated in this strategy with respect to pedagogy, ways of working, skills, staff time, collaboration, change management, institutional environment and leadership. Collaboration between divisions, departments, colleges and professional services will be essential.

Priorities:

a. Establish or nominate an existing group with responsibility for oversight of the actions associated with the strategy.

b. Develop an engagement plan in such a way that departments and faculties are regularly consulted, and provide structures to support staff engagement such as time buyout, secondments and local champions.

c. Agree a set of principles to underpin implementation of the strategy to include, for example, ethics, data security and environmental sustainability.

d. Join up central and divisional IT governance and decision-making processes, and ensure that investment is sustained centrally and locally.

The working group developed an illustrative list of prioritised actions, mapped to enablers for implementation: policy and process; people; digital platforms, tools and services; and infrastructure. The investment needed to take forward these actions will be provided largely by the Digital Transformation Programme and the IT Development Plan.

Acknowledgements

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