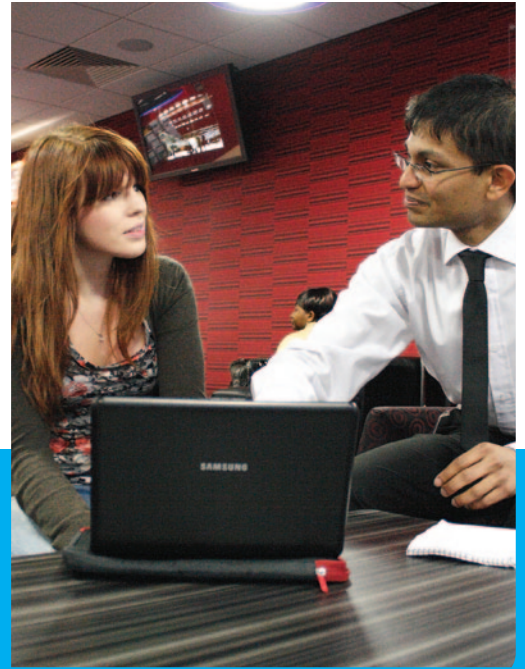


## Supporting Learners in a Digital Age

Briefing paper

September 2011



This paper describes the outcomes of a JISC-funded project, 'Supporting Learners in a Digital Age' (SLiDA). SLiDA explored how nine different institutions are helping students use digital technologies effectively in their studies, and preparing them to live and work in a digital society.

Digital technologies are essential to our workplaces and social spaces, and to successful study. The skills students need go beyond finding and evaluating information. They include communicating complex ideas in a range of media and sharing knowledge in professional or subject communities. Attending lectures, recording and reflecting on their progress, receiving feedback and keeping in touch with friends are just some aspects of the student experience that are now mediated by technology.

Opportunities for technology to support effective learning are many. But these changes are not without their challenges for learners and institutions alike. An earlier study (Learning Literacies in a Digital Age: LLiDA) found that institutions rarely took a joined-up approach to building students' lifelong digital capability.



### What are the challenges for learners?

Although many learners arrive at college or university with their own laptop or tablet computer and smartphone, few know how to use technology to support their learning at the appropriate level. Their expectations are limited by their previous experience and, while they have usually explored the social uses of their technology, they may have no idea how to use more advanced functions.

Technology owned by students may be old, and if it develops a fault they may not be able to fix or replace it. Students may be reluctant to bring valuable, bulky or heavy devices onto campus, especially if they use public transport.

Transitions are particularly difficult times for students when they have to take on new ways of learning and often of living too. New uses of technology, even such simple ones as submitting coursework electronically or accessing course information online, add to the adjustment time.

Students are often involved in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) support and consulted about ICT facilities. They are much less involved in designing the curriculum. Yet the evidence suggests that digital expertise is best developed and progressed through activities embedded in the curriculum.

While there is often excellent support on offer from the library or learning resource centre, ICT services, learning and skills development and careers, students rarely have their digital capability assessed or progressed in a holistic way.

### What are the challenges for institutions?

Students arrive with very different experiences of using technology. Unless their access and confidence are addressed, some will struggle to participate fully in the learning experience. But bridging the digital divide is not the responsibility of individual academic staff, and the curriculum may not be designed to address these concerns.

Technology changes quickly, in response to commercial and social drivers. It is almost impossible for busy academic staff to stay up to date with all the latest developments.

For the 'net generation', technology choices are an aspect of lifestyle and identity. There are challenges for everyone involved in student learning to support the diversity of chosen devices and ways of working.

Institutions are increasingly judged on the quality of the student experience, and ICT facilities are scrutinised closely by prospective students and their parents. However, resources of digital know-how and expertise are less visible and are less obvious targets for investment.

## Prepare students for the technologies they need to use

In addressing these challenges, most of the SLiDA institutions are introducing learners as early as possible to the technologies they will use for study. Abingdon and Witney College achieves this through a **universal e-learning induction** programme which mixes in-class activities with anytime access to multimedia resources. This flexibility allows learners to be inducted even if they enter college outside the usual enrolment periods. Since all learners begin their studies with high expectations of digital technology use, there has been a parallel staff development programme and the appointment of six e-learning champions to keep staff skills updated.

At the University of Edinburgh students' skills and expectations of technology use are also addressed on entry, but here it is through **specialist induction** in their programmes of study. At the University of Surrey, second and third year **student mentors** introduce new arrivals to the technologies they have found critical to their own learning, through workshops and one-to-one support.

## Integrate personal technologies and learning spaces

All the SLiDA case study institutions recognise the value of learners using their own devices and services, and provide secure network access on campus. With resources and space at a premium, Birkenhead Sixth Form College now assumes the use of personal devices such as laptops, smartphones, camcorders and audio players, and maintains a small pool of these for learners who do not own one.

Wherever possible, institutions are reconfiguring campus spaces to ensure ubiquitous access to networks and to provide more opportunities for social learning. The University of Edinburgh has redesigned its main library to support a range of learning and research activities with an emphasis on collaboration. The Science and Engineering campus has a new learning and teaching cluster which offers a variety of technology-supported settings including social study areas adjacent to teaching rooms. A key motive has been to support new pedagogical practices, and there



have been measurable changes in the use of space such as more group learning and informal discussions between staff and students.

## Involve students in meaningful ways

At all the SLiDA sites, students are recognised to have their own experience and expertise with technology. The University of Glamorgan has a strong culture of **student engagement** and through 'student expectations' task groups and the appointment of student voice representatives they have addressed the technology issues most relevant to the student experience. Students have benefited from more consistency in staff use of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), access to Skype and social networks on arrival, upgraded software in labs, an online assessment submission system and a wireless network across campus.

Oxford Brookes University has shown that **student-centred research** can drive changes to the policy agenda. Over five years of researching learners' experiences of learning with technology, much of it at a high profile nationally, the university has adopted digital and information literacy as a graduate attribute that every programme must support. The University of Wolverhampton has also adopted digital literacy as one of its graduate attributes after a **consultation exercise** with current students and recent graduates about their experiences of learning at the university and of entering the workplace.

CoLab was a **student-led enterprise** at the University of Surrey offering technology-based services to the university, the local community and external institutions. Surrey's educational model encourages development of professional capability through work placements, and CoLab provided a rich learning experience to the students that it employed. These students also did valuable work to build the university's digital capability: researching student technology needs, developing staff and student skills through workshops, designing online tools and resources, and showcasing university services to local businesses.

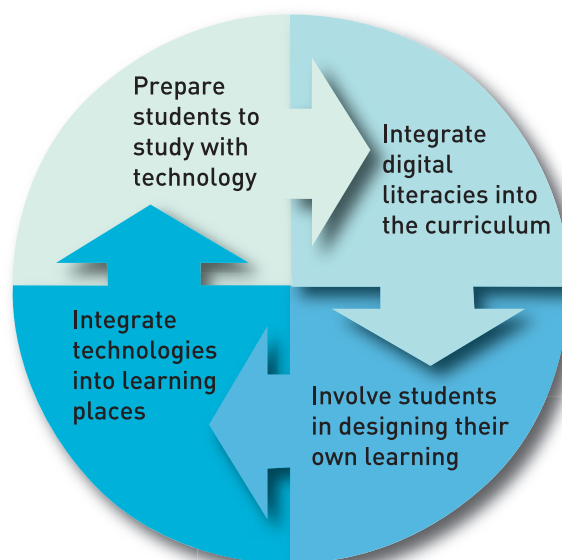
## Integrate technology into the curriculum

Previous studies have found that one-off, skills-based provision is less valued by students than authentic experiences in their chosen programmes of study. We know from graduate employers that flexibility and good judgement in digital environments are more valued than the use of specific systems. This suggests students should experience a wide range of digital applications in the course of their studies. Several of the SLiDA institutions took a strategic approach to curriculum redesign, particularly towards more use of blended (face-to-face and technology-based) learning.

At London Metropolitan University, blended learning coordinators and consultants have been embedded into each faculty. With the shift from a centralised approach to an engagement with different learning and teaching practices there have been many **local innovations** in course design, responsive to student needs.

The University of Salford began by embedding **digital literacies** into its distinctive portfolio of courses in the creative, media and digital arts. Building on these successes, the institution has initiated an institution-wide strategy based around the SCONUL 'Seven Pillars of Information Literacy'. Many courses have extended their support from information skills to encompass personal, organisational and communicative uses of technology.

At Oxford Brookes and the University of Wolverhampton, digital literacies are being embraced as a core **graduate attribute**. Oxford Brookes' new 'Strategy for Enhancing the Student Experience' requires all undergraduate programmes to develop digital and information literacy. A conceptual model, again based on SCONUL's 'Seven Pillars', is helping programme teams audit their current practice and articulate their aspirations. Through redesign and renewal, every programme in the academic portfolio will soon be able to show how students' digital literacies are being developed. Programmes at Wolverhampton focus on the advanced use of information and practice with **cutting edge technologies** appropriate to the profession or discipline. Quality of the student experience is ensured through a set of six **blended learning entitlements**.



### The SLiDA institutions

SLiDA was led by a team at Oxford Brookes University. Following a recommendation of the earlier LLiDA project, SLiDA investigated nine institutions intensively over a six month period. The aim was to find out: 'How are institutions creating and enabling opportunities that promote the development of effective learning in a digital age?' The institutions were selected from more than 35 expressions of interest to represent the widest possible range of strategic, policy and practical interventions. They were:

- » Abingdon and Witney College
- » Birkenhead Sixth Form College
- » University of Edinburgh
- » University of Glamorgan
- » London Metropolitan University
- » Oxford Brookes University
- » University of Salford
- » University of Surrey
- » University of Wolverhampton



## A strategy for digital capability

- » Thriving in the digital age demands the confidence to respond to complex and changing circumstances, rather than mastery of specific systems. Students need to have practised their skills in **challenging contexts** and with high-level tasks to which digital technologies are integral
- » It helps to have a **framework** of core principles underpinning student support, whether that is articulated in programme documentation, student entitlements or terms of reference for support services
- » Shared frameworks are key to a strategic approach, but **examples of good practice** are important to guide curriculum renewal in different subject areas
- » Digital skills should not be bolted on to existing provision. Rather, the institution needs to **renew its core practices** in the light of new digital challenges and opportunities. Digital literacy can be incorporated into the student experience as an aspect of professionalism, employability, citizenship and other **core values and attributes** of becoming a graduate
- » **Teaching staff skills** are critical to students' experience and developing confidence with technology. In addition to general workshops and training opportunities, staff benefit from embedded experts such as e-champions and specialist professionals. They need opportunities to share practice with colleagues in both scholarly and informal settings
- » **Students' technology skills** are shared very readily, including with academic staff if they are willing to learn! Students may lack experience in professional and academic practice, but their technical know-how can be harnessed through peer working, paid support roles, internships and mentoring schemes
- » Students need opportunities to express and develop their **personal preferences** for technology. Use of their own devices and services for study should be encouraged and supported. **Social and personal uses of technology** are important in their own right to help students fit learning into their lives and maintain their commitment to study
- » Institutions find different ways to **involve students** in their experience of learning with technology. This might be directly, by giving choices or asking for and responding to feedback in class, or it might be indirectly, through student-centred research or working with student representatives to improve the learning experience
- » All of the institutions involved in SLIDA are taking a **long-term view** of developing digital literacies. They are working on an iterative process of consultation and review, embedding new practices of student support in ways that could be sustained

*“It’s about being literate for the modern world, it’s about functioning fully as a professional, as an academic but also as a human being.”*

Senior Librarian, Oxford Brookes University

## Further information and resources

Supporting Learners in a Digital Age: full report, case studies and online resources

<https://wiki.brookes.ac.uk/display/slida>

Developing Digital Literacies: JISC-funded programme of institutional development 2011–2013

[www.jisc.ac.uk/developingdigitalliteracies](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/developingdigitalliteracies)

Learning Literacies in a Digital Age (LLiDA) study

[www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/briefingpapers/2009/learningliteraciesbp](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/briefingpapers/2009/learningliteraciesbp)

Learners' Experiences of e-Learning materials

<https://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/JISCle2/About>

SCONUL 'Seven Pillars of Information Literacy' framework

[www.sconul.ac.uk/groups/information\\_literacy/sp/model.html](http://www.sconul.ac.uk/groups/information_literacy/sp/model.html)

Developing Digital Literacies JISCMail list

[www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=jiscdiglit-public](http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=jiscdiglit-public)

JISC Digital Literacy Workshop materials

<http://bit.ly/jiscdiglitmaterials>

This briefing paper has been produced for JISC.

Author: Helen Beetham

Theme: Digital Literacies

Programme: e-Learning

Alternative formats of the briefing paper can be found at:

[www.jisc.ac.uk/publications](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/publications)