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| Salford City College |
| Thought leadership interview with Saf Arfan, vice-principal development and innovation (May 2016) |

“I’ve started with an open brief to transform the college through digital”

Saf has a background in construction and regeneration and he moved into the FE sector eight years ago. He joined Salford City College in September 2015 as vice principal in charge of development and innovation to guide transformation of the college via an effective digital technology strategy. He says that the college had been lagging behind with investment in technology but, with a new executive team in place, the college is pushing ahead fast with adoption of new technologies to improve teaching and learning.

Tell us about your colleges

Salford City College has 15,000 learners working across five campuses. We offer a broad mix of vocational courses as well as A-levels, for which our results are the best in Greater Manchester, for FE providers. Particular strengths include performing arts, sport, science, media and animal care, to name a few.

We also offer a number of higher education courses including art and design, business and management, construction, education and care, and sport. This is an area of growth in the college and enables students to progress within college as well as to stay local.

Why is digital important to your college? What is your vision for digital?

Digital technology is all-pervasive now and we should be harnessing the opportunities that it offers to improve learners’ experience and maximise their achievements. Encouraging independent thinking and learning is an important part of this journey, so learners get accustomed to self-learning through digital technology to prepare them for work or higher education.

To help us do that, we are putting the finishing touches to our new five-year digital learning strategy, which will be ready by summer 2016. We have involved stakeholders from across the college and discussed our thinking with a specialist in strategy and business processes at Jisc to get an external perspective. We have invested a considerable amount of time getting the detail right and it consists of seven key themes:

* Digital pedagogy
* Learning spaces
* Investment in IT infrastructure
* Resources (people and structures)
* Digital literacies (staff and learners)
* Collaboration and partnership
* Innovation and quality

I will be delighted to share our strategy with other colleges and learning providers as soon as it is finalised.

What benefits are you realising through the use of technology – to learners, staff and to your core business?

Students will really start to see the benefits of this development work from September 2016 when more of the infrastructure is in place. A new VLE [(Canvas)](https://www.canvasvle.co.uk), together with a substantial investment in converting our learning resource centres (LRCs) into digital learning zones, is generating lots of excitement amongst students and staff. We have placed lots of effort on continuing professional development (CPD) to help all staff embed blended and flipped learning from September. The feedback to date has been very positive. The students we have consulted have also responded positively to our strategy, in particular with the concept of using your own device, which is convenient and offers more flexibility.

We have been pleasantly surprised by how enthusiastically most college staff have got behind our strategy and aims. The professional development work we are doing to update digital skills plays a large part in that but, equally, the staff see the value in this and they just want the technology to work.

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| Like most colleges we have some really dedicated and innovative staff who have introduced some great e-learning concepts through their own endeavours. It won’t be long before they start to use Canvas in new and more engaging ways. |

How is your digital strategy being implemented?

I spent a lot of time thinking this through, learning about the college, the general practice, our weaknesses and strengths, as well as scoping best practice across the sector, before I started to put pen to paper – all about getting the measure. As the document started to take shape I felt it was important to develop an implementation plan alongside this; to provide that long-list of all the actions that need to be distributed amongst key actors, all of which need to be progressed concurrently. Key to this was restructuring and creating some key posts. One of these was to appoint a head of digital learning and we were fortunate enough to attract strong interest. We successfully recruited Deb Millar – a seasoned expert within the field. This is a key role that will help us to drive the strategy and - given her track record and innovative approach - I am confident we will make rapid progress.

It’s early days but I feel we are making fast progress; this is due to an effective strategy group and contributions from colleagues, such as Clare Smith, learning technologist and Ashley Newell, quality manager, who have led on the selection and implementation of Canvas, the roll-out of the digital CPD programme and on developing a quality standard for blended learning. We also joined the Blended Learning Consortium and received great support and advice from Peter Kilcoyne (Heart of Worcestershire College) and Catherine Evans (Coleg Gwent). To my pleasant surprise there is lots of support across the FE sector from some exceptional leaders in the field of e-learning.

From September 2016 the college will mandate independent learning as part of the study programme, commencing with one hour per week for all levels, increasing to three hours over the next two years for level three learners. This is facilitated by the teaching staff for level one learners and digital learning facilitators for level two and above.

We are investing around £8.5m across our estates and IT infrastructure and will continue to invest until all teaching and learning resources are outstanding – because that’s what we all aspire to be at Salford.

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| It is fair to say the college has some catching-up to do with the widespread adoption of digital technologies, but the corporation and executive team are hugely committed to transforming the learning experience. They are taking a keen interest in developments and our new vision and strategy will enable us to make-up lost ground as soon as 2018. |

The selection of our VLE is a good example of this and after a thorough evaluation process we selected Canvas, which both the staff and learners felt was the most suitable platform. The executive team held a clear view of the importance of making the right choice for us and view this as a long-term investment. This was a key milestone that demonstrated a senior commitment to change for the better and illustrated that we’ve listened.

Have there been any barriers to take up of technology by staff?

Most staff are enthusiastic and agree with the principles of what we’re trying to achieve, but some will inevitably have concerns about the process and speed of adoption. That’s why it has been important that college managers and directors have played a prominent role in shaping delivery and securing buy-in.

They nominated Canvas leads from each department to undergo the ‘train the trainer’ sessions. Now we have started to roll out the training to all staff involved in teaching and learning and we are in the process of planning CPD for autumn 2016 and beyond. This is being continually revised and we have some exciting inset days planned for July.

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| There is still much to do over the next 18 months in embedding digital and developing the digital literacies of staff, but you can never get bored of technology and we’re all on a journey that has no end. |

We aim to have all staff trained on the entry level digital quality standards by December 2016 and up to the highest performing level within 18 months. Developing KPIs and learning analytics to test and measure the effectiveness is an area for development for the strategy group over the coming months.

I am confident we will overcome any residual resistance to digital technologies and we will adopt the usual carrot and stick approach, balancing incentives with compulsion. Key is linking this to both individual and department performance management. Ultimately, there isn’t a choice, we all need to engage with digital technologies because it has so much to offer FE and our learners naturally incline to it.

Getting the structure right is important and as well as appointing digital learning facilitators in the former LRCs, we are in the process of appointing one digital leader per curriculum area (17 in total) to lead on the selection and curation of content. These benefit from three hours’ remission each week and will become the department go-to person, who will support staff with CPD and lead on innovation.

Similarly, we are making a significant investment with IT staff, with first-line technicians being based in the digital learning zones so they are accessible and on hand when staff and learners need their support. The next phase of their training is designed to work on cultural change and helping them to be more customer focused, heading off IT problems before they happen, to reduce incidents and aim for a trouble-free user experience – the challenge as always is putting the theory into practice!

Can you share any evidence of impact such as cost savings, efficiency gains or improvements in attendance?

I am sure we will be able to in due course and we will see a reduction in staff contact time, which generates some efficiencies, but as mentioned earlier, we are playing catch-up so investing lots of time and money. We could have spent this developing a business case, but we’ve already being doing it, just not so well.

What one thing has made the biggest difference to your college as you implement your digital strategy?

Changing our VLE. It is a resilient system hosted off-site and we purchased the 24/7 staff helpline for the first 12 months. Clare Smith, our learning technologist, did an exceptional job on managing this process. Staff have confidence in the system and it is far more functional than our previous one.

What advice would you have for other senior leaders on developing their visions for digital?

It is tricky to distil this down into just a few pointers but I’d say:

* Be clear on what you are trying to achieve and the reasons behind this before you start. Frame your vision on a mind map (take a helicopter view) and keep referring back to this if you feel you are going off course or being overwhelmed by the detail
* Consult widely across your organisation, trust your colleagues, use your instinct to help you navigate and work out the steps you will need to take. Identify the resources and skills you will need along that journey
* Build friendships across the sector and learn from other people working on similar issues – I joined [Jisc](https://www.jisc.ac.uk)’s [digital leaders programme](https://community.jisc.ac.uk/groups/digital-leaders-programme) and attended many learning events such as the [Association of Colleges (AoC)](https://www.aoc.co.uk) conference to network with people with similar agendas and share ideas
* Resist the temptation to throw money at any problems until you have thought them through properly and consulted - across your organisation and with experts in the field - to identify the right solutions
* Be steadfast and be pragmatic in your approach – don’t overcomplicate matters for the sake of it
* Assemble the right mix of skills and expertise and develop the people to take this forward

More information

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