



Digital Culture Change

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Abstract

Digital culture change is not a one-size-fits-all approach but rather a dynamic way to engage people and technology within a transformative framework that enhances stakeholder learning within higher education (HE) and organisational effectiveness. The Covid-19 pandemic underscored the need for flexible digital strategies, highlighting challenges related to digital inequity and the limitations of uniform transformation models. To drive a meaningful approach to change, senior leadership at the University for the Creative Arts (UCA) created a Digital Enabling Strategy to support decision-making, efficiency and stronger connections for delivery and academic success. Creating the strategy included commissioning institutional research guided by Jisc, a digital technology agency, and a strategic leadership review to replace previous Information Technology (IT) planning. This staged approach involved engaging the broader community of academics, students, professional and technical staff as stakeholders in change. Key principles that surfaced from the research included creating a more collaborative digital culture, strengthening existing technology structures, fostering leadership for change, and resisting regression to outdated models. The leadership review supported implementing an enabling three-level framework (centralised, distributed, and distinctive) that could tap into the institution's unique value propositions for both campus and online experiences. It is encouraging that the institution has, through this process, been able to reassess core creative and business aspirations through a digital lens, identifying opportunities for innovation and mixed modes of participation, planning and engagement. By embracing an enabling strategy that set out to appraise and reset digital readiness in a small specialist higher education institution, distributed leadership can now build a digital culture that is inclusive yet adaptive and robust enough for competitive change.

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1 Introduction Strategic Considerations for Digital Change

1.1 Context for a Strategy Reset

The University for the Creative Arts (UCA) is a specialist Arts University that is based on three campuses in the Southeast of the United Kingdom (UK) and one campus in Xiamen, China. In early 2024 work began to better understand the digital landscape and to produce a Digital Enabling Strategy. In late 2024, this Digital Enabling Strategy was approved. The following paper uses elements of the internal research carried out by Jisc, a digital technology agency, with UCA senior leadership analysis to explore strategic considerations for digital transformation (Educause, 2025) and more specifically for digital cultural change. As a small specialist institution, UCA has relied on external factors being predictable, but recent changes from the Covid-19 pandemic and the current crisis in the funding of higher education in the UK (QAA, 2024) has led to the need to re-assess how central services can be made more sustainable and the greater use of diversified hybrid and digital technologies.

1.2 Themes from the Digital Enabling Strategy

In 2023 UCA commissioned Jisc to support UCA in the creation of a new Digital Enabling Strategy (Jisc, 2025). The research consisted of group interviews, workshops, and professional conversations. A Jisc consultant conducted research interviews with 24 key stakeholders across UCA's academic schools, professional services, technical team and senior leadership team. Emerging findings from these interviews were further explored in four workshops to build consensus, encourage ownership and map digital maturity for digital transformation. The strategic planning also drew upon desk-based research and Jisc's published reports on Higher Education (HE) digital strategies and digital transformation, including the *Framework for digital transformation in higher education* (McGill, 2023a), other scholarly work and prior staff experience of senior leaders designing digital change. The Information and Digital Services (IDS) Director then reviewed the research to coordinate the next steps.

There were two main conceptual themes from the enabling strategy research undertaken. The first was about *engaging the broader community*. A successful digital enabling strategy must address complex and interactive networks of activity to ensure broad engagement and inclusivity in tackling pedagogical challenges. This involves the establishment of open forums and digital platforms where students, educators, and administrators can collaborate and share insights. Gathering stakeholder feedback from the broader community encourages diverse voices in digital strategy development to ensure equitable access and representation, and including utilising data-driven approaches to understand community needs and drive continuous improvement in digital engagement.

The second theme from the research confirmed the need to design a digital change program that was *distinctive, centralised and distributed*. Institutions pride themselves on their distinctive identity and offerings that set them apart within the higher education landscape. Digital planning should strive to cultivate a distinct academic experience that attracts top talent and fosters intellectual curiosity and creativity. Whether through unique learning and teaching provision, interdisciplinary approaches, or commitment to creative innovation, this distinctiveness is reflected in the institution's culture, values, and contributions to the broader community. As a small arts institution, UCA works across a wide range of creative industries (UCA, 2025) and has a well-known sector reputation and presence. To further a greater connection to the university mission, stakeholders need to understand what makes the institution distinctive and how digital enhances that distinctiveness, so that individual academic and student-based initiatives contribute to this unique identity. Cultivating digital credibility is especially important in the specialist art school context that liaises with creative industries in a fast-paced and competitive technology environment.

UCA maintains a centralised focus on academic excellence, innovation, and student support. Centralised resources and services, such as academic advising, technical and administrative support,

ensure that students receive comprehensive assistance throughout their academic journey. Communications to students should be centrally coordinated. This approach fosters a sense of cohesion and unity within the community, enabling students, academics, and professional staff to work collaboratively towards shared goals.

Finally, while maintaining its coordinated and centralised focus, designing new digital provision within the institution should recognise the importance of distributed networks and decentralised decision-making processes. By empowering departments, programs, and individuals to take ownership of their initiatives and priorities, the institution fosters innovation, creativity, and adaptability across the organisation. This distributed model for program planning allows flexibility and responsiveness to diverse needs and opportunities, while promoting a culture of autonomy and accountability.

2 Scholarship for Digital Change

Throughout the planning stage key critical and contextual literature sources have been used to inform institutional discussions and practical actions. These sources have been influential in the conceptual formation of the UCA Enabling Digital Strategy and subsequent thinking about the focus on how digital cultural change could be defined and pursued. Andersen (2018) had previously set the scene at a European University Information Systems (EUNIS) event by presenting digital change strategies through his explanation of the three D's (digitisation, digitalisation and digital transformation) to frame the steps needed for enabling disruptive innovation. Providing a common framework for communicating the concepts for practical enablement, Educause (2025) defines digital transformation as "a series of deep and coordinated culture, workforce, and technology shifts that enable new educational and operating models and transform an institution's operations, strategic directions, and value proposition". The theories that consider boundary spanning (Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2011) within an institutional context can be used as a method in which stakeholders can think about how to achieve common goals and recognise how institutional silos can be overcome by negotiation and consensus. Similarly, the societal context of 'what a university is for' needs to be recognised within institutional digital planning as digital technologies are not only used to enhance learning and teaching but as way a fulfil HE's extended mission for public good (Johnson, MacNeill, & Smyth, 2018).

3 Cultural Change

3.1 Expediting the Digital Enabling Strategy

As a part of the continuing actions from the Digital Enabling Strategy, UCA seeks to further explore what types of cultural standards and cultural change could be successfully deployed across the university to drive forward a UCA digital change program. A strong culture reduces friction in making decisions, so the organisation can move quickly and respond to changing conditions. Overcoming the inertia of institutional culture is perhaps the hardest of the deep and coordinated shifts needed for digital transformation (Johnson et al., 2018). Skelton (2023, p. 9) reports that there is a spectrum of maturity levels for digital transformation within higher education but ultimately "Successful digital change doesn't focus on technology, it is about people and changes to cultures and working practices." Cultural standards need to be more fully explored, but threading through this work are the values and behaviours that would be expected for HE institutions in UK, like equity, social justice, clarity and constancy of purpose.

Culture change is more likely to succeed if leaders use resources and tactics to equalise power in order to avoid imposing solutions and to manage conflict effectively. For example, the Jisc research found that the recent problems with the timetabling project demonstrate that the organisation did not understand how to enact digital change. The resulting information technology (IT) project focused on implementing a new technology system, which adopted a one-size-fits-all model, that was implemented across the organisation. The project did not properly consider the necessary changes to business processes, and did not take into account best practice approaches to bring people more thoroughly into the change process. Jisc's *Maturity model for digital transformation in higher education* (McGill, 2023b) is a simple and effective model for describing digital change (Figure 1).

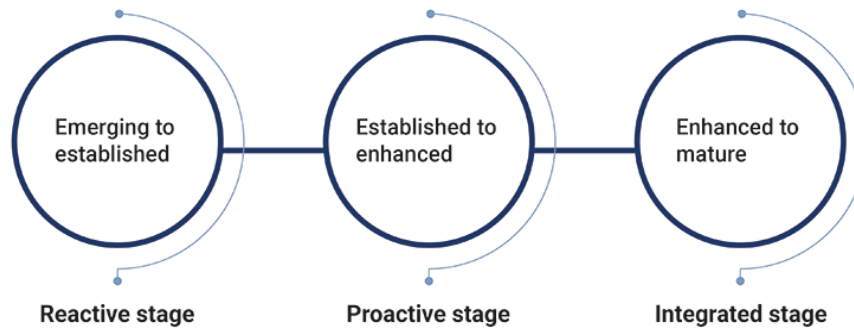


Figure 1: Jisc's Maturity model for digital transformation in higher education

3.2 Surfacing Change

As a part of the Digital Enabling Strategy, surfacing what is unspoken from earlier research findings can be used to inform ongoing university project work for enabling cultural change and program planning. Culture can be made tangible through practical tools that enable conversations about as-is and desired cultures.

Key findings from the research can be paraphrased as the following:

- **Digital places inclusion at its centre.** Prioritising digital inclusion is not just about providing access to technology; it is about creating an environment where everyone, regardless of background or ability, can fully participate and benefit from digital resources. This means addressing barriers such as limited internet access, digital literacy gaps, and designing inclusive digital spaces and resources.
- **Digital and the physical spaces for teaching and learning are entwined.** The intersection of the digital and physical realms forms a dynamic network that brings together staff, students, and industry partners. This network transcends geographical boundaries, disciplinary silos, and cultural differences, fostering collaboration and innovation.
- **Digital user interfaces will be consistent, attractive, and well-designed.** The user interface matters. The student digital experience should be via an interface that is consistent, visually attractive, and designed for ease of use. Consistent, good design will reduce the cognitive load on the user and inspire confidence and trust in the institution.

- **Digital is an integrated element of creative practice.** By embracing the digital as an intrinsic part of their practice, students gain valuable skills and insights that are essential for success in today's rapidly evolving creative industries. They learn to harness the power of digital tools to express their ideas, engage with audiences, and push the boundaries of creative expression.
- **Digital is a tool for research and inquiry by staff and students.** Embracing digital technology as a tool for research and inquiry empowers students and academics to push the boundaries of knowledge creation and dissemination, fostering a culture of curiosity, collaboration, and innovation.
- **Digital is concerned with identity and becoming.** Through connected physical spaces on campus and digital spaces, students have access to a network of resources and support services that enhance their academic and personal experiences. Whether it's collaborating on group projects in shared workspaces, attending workshops and events, or seeking guidance from faculty and staff, the environments are designed to foster community, creativity, and growth.

4 Cultural Shift Planning

To address digital culture change, three main areas provide a focus to collectively lead cultural shift. These areas look at supporting stakeholders using their UCA distinctiveness, recognising the need for a more collective experience in future development, and planning for growth using the digital to create opportunities with online learning.

4.1 Digital support for learning and teaching.

Student digital skills and expectations can vary widely in terms of technology for learning in the creative industries. Many academic staff have deep technical skills in specific disciplines but could lack broader digital skills or may not have the confidence to use digital approaches in their teaching. At UCA there is no institution-specific digital pedagogy or coordinated approach to raise baseline digital capabilities, but academic members of staff do work with specific platforms for creative tuition as they lead on arts-related digital learning and teaching (Orr & Shreeve, 2018). To improve digital learning and teaching, the IDS can help students and staff reflect on what skills and capabilities are needed to manoeuvre around pan-university technologies that the institution can support, and then point them towards appropriate resources and training. There is deep expertise in some areas of digital learning and teaching, but this can exist in disconnected pockets: in the library and virtual learning environment (VLE), in technical skills, and in various educational networks.

4.2 Digital student and staff experience.

In the Jisc interviews, students reported that they sometimes suffer from a confused and overwhelming student experience. There is no joined up process for supporting students with an immediate technology issue and no support for 'bring your own device' (BYOD). Systems are disjointed and there is an assault of information. This is too much for many students, especially when viewed through a neurodiversity lens. Information can conflict which leads to loss of faith and trust that can be relied upon. Many students may not read the emails sent to them. To resolve this, IDS could introduce an internal communication function with a plan for student communications throughout the year. All communications from professional services functions to students should be coordinated with the internal communications team. Academic messages from schools should continue to students via

the VLE. UCA should implement a student mobile app or portal. The VLE should be leveraged further as the focus for digital teaching and learning; the new app will bring together all other aspects of the student experience. An app will only be successful if it has ongoing ownership and development; the internal communications function should be responsible for maintaining it and embedding it in UCA processes.

4.3 New business opportunities.

Digital can reduce barriers of time and space. Digital technology can make education accessible for students who would consider studying, but who have careers, caring responsibilities, or other constraints that make commuting to campus impractical. While some creative disciplines involve hands-on, kinesthetic skills that do not naturally lend themselves to online learning, there may be enhanced business opportunities for UCA online learning programs such as in the Creative Business School. There may be opportunities for alumni in many disciplines to continue learning after graduation through short non-accredited units or micro-credentials. The greatest challenge is likely to be the requirement to create online learning resources of sufficiently high quality to service knowledge exchange and industry level partnerships.

5 Recommendations: Leadership, Culture, and Governance

Moving towards a digital change program through the Digital Enabling Strategy has meant the directorship has taken an active role in championing change. UCA is now able to realise how best to leverage technology in order to deliver on key University strategic priorities.

5.1 Focus on People to Enabling Cultural Change

Digital leadership is needed at all levels, from the Executive level down, all need an understanding of digital approaches and a genuine enthusiasm for change. Ambitious goals should be set to inspire staff and create conditions in which they are able to innovate (and sometimes to fail) in a safe and supportive environment.

Successful digital transformation requires a focus on people, not technology. Digital leaders need to be human leaders. Key points to the role and purpose of Digital cultural change leaders, adapted from Gartner (2024), can be embodied by the following.

- To be **authentic**: to act with purpose and enable creative self-expression.
- To be **empathetic**: to show genuine care, respect, and concern for staff and students well-being.
- To be **adaptive**: to provide flexible support for the academic mission that meets the unique needs of university stakeholders.
(Nottingham, adapted from Gartner)

5.2 Agility and Speed

Successful digital change requires agility, speed, and a close connection to the users of the digital products and services. It needs people from many areas of the organisation (McGill, 2023a) to come

together and forgo institutional silos. The IDS program team needs to be closely aligned to the user requirements, and empowered to implement the changes requested, and present this back to the users.

5.3 Trusted Advisor and Trusted Broker

The ideas of the trusted advisor and trusted broker emerged from conversations that took place as a part of the Jisc strategy building workshops. More broadly, the digital technology function needs to achieve the status of a Trusted Advisor. The Trusted Advisor is an expert whose advice is asked for, listened to, and respected. They do not attempt to impose control while examining the difficulties of leading change (Skelton, 2023). Instead, they educate and give guidance. They have a seat at the table when important business decisions are made.

The digital technology function can also operate as a Trusted Broker. A broker procures goods and services for others, arranges, and negotiates, acting as an intermediary. The trusted broker might pre-select a set of goods or services to guide appropriate choices. The client trusts the broker to make that selection, and the broker trusts the client to pick the correct solution for their needs. There are many challenges now, like the exponential growth in Artificial Intelligence (AI), and its impact on HE. This has an even greater impact on UCA students who are being educated to work in the creative industries.

How can the digital technology department achieve the status of a Trusted Advisor? Firstly, stakeholders need to respect the department's domain expertise in technology. People will ask themselves 'Does the department get the basics right?' and evaluate it through their own experience: 'Are systems stable?' 'Do they perform well?' When stakeholders were interviewed, the Information Services Department was seen as getting these core fundamentals right, so it should be in a strong position to build on this.

Secondly, stakeholders need to see that the department truly understands the institution. If a technology department does not understand the institution, it will not be trusted to give advice that reflects the institution's interests. The digital team needs to understand and support learning, teaching, and the student experience; appreciate each academic school and their subject disciplines; care about the experiences of students and staff day to day; and understand the shared mission and strategy for the whole institution (Phipps & Lanclos, 2022).

5.4 Governance

Digital governance should sit beyond and above the technology function. The university should seek to establish a Digital Board that is focused on the coordination of digital decision-making, allowing a broader, institution-wide view.

Major new projects should be evaluated by the Digital Board against clear institutional priorities such as:

- more effective learning and teaching;
- improved student experience, measured in higher student satisfaction;
- improved research, measured in research impact and funding;
- improved staff ways of working (e.g., automation and time-saving efficiencies);
- the application of AI policies across the institution.

The membership of the Digital Board should be reviewed regularly to ensure it has a broad base of stakeholders and sufficient focus on the student experience. Digital projects beyond a certain level of investment should have a rigorous business case (Greenway et al., 2021) and be considered by the university executive team, just as you would expect for a large building project. However, this is overkill for many small, simple digital initiatives, where the business case may be outdated by the time it is completed and some form of weekly 'standing' Digital Board should be implemented.

6 Summary

Designing an institutional Digital Enabling Strategy has allowed UCA to approach digital culture change using strategic and operational oversight for all institutional digital resources. This has allowed UCA to develop clear lines of communication and escalation, a common understanding of compliance, security, governance, common taxonomy, involvement in and understanding of daily business practice, and a more visible support presence. Celebrating UCA's positioning as a small specialist arts institution will be critical as a way to include a diverse range of stakeholders in digital leadership, as stakeholders being able to work together to solve core and cross-boundary issues will be fundamental to external success in order to:

- realign digital resources to provide consistent services to students in each course and realise economies of scale;
- assess the total budget requirement for the digital and business change enterprise;
- leverage current university-wide commercial offerings and industrial partnerships;
- challenge contractual agreements to ensure value for money;
- create a structure that encourages staff progression;
- explore new business opportunities directly enabled by digital culture change.

Given these precepts, a sense of institutional purpose must be fully embedded to ensure the community engages with digital systems not only for efficiency and return on investment but to drive a significant cultural shift that benefits the entire university.

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7 Author biographies



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