Digital Learning[1] Strategy

Introduction

One of the primary goals of any university is to enable students to learn. Similarly, one of the primary functions of St Mary's University digital estate is to support that learning to make it even more effective and impactful. This strategy sets out how St Mary's will utilise the digital domain to enhance our teaching delivery, and the learning of our students, over the next 5 years. The strategy will also set out opportunities for leveraging the proposed digital learning enhancements for commercial benefit.

This Digital Learning Strategy has been informed by good practice in the educational sector, the experience and expertise of St Mary's Technology Enhanced Learning team, the views of St Mary's senior academics including Dean of Learning & Teaching, Institute Directors, Associate Deans of Student Experience, the Associate Director of Academic Strategy and the Director of HR.

Implementation of the strategy will be overseen by the Academic Development Committee, chaired by Prof Symeon Dagkas, Deputy Provost.

Current context

The use of technology in teaching and learning has been steadily increasing over many years. From the visualiser to the electronic whiteboard; from the touch screen to virtual learning environments; from the email group to the virtual reality world, technology has played an important role in how teaching is delivered from nursery through to higher education. However, in recent times the use of digital has progressed at an exponential rate, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic where the entire HE Sector, including St Mary's University, had to move all teaching and learning to digital delivery within a few weeks.

At time of writing, October 2020, the pandemic shows no signs of receding and the necessity of using digital for teaching and learning will likely remain for several years. Simply put, the university now has no choice but to embrace technology in the delivery of all programmes. However, whilst for St Mary's this is a period of unprecedented challenge, students continue to expect, and deserve, a high-quality education, whether learning on and off campus, in person or online.

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[1] See Appendix 1 for full definition of terms

Separately to the pandemic, digital continues to offer new, innovative and exciting opportunities to aid the teaching and learning experience in higher education. The digital domain offers tools that enable real time understanding of students' grasp of material, tools for enhancing revision, insight into which materials students are struggling with, methods of exploring ideas at low cost and mechanisms for allowing even quieter students to contribute to class discussion. Digital also offers opportunities for delivering learning to new markets, domestically and internationally.

Additionally, students have never been more informed, more mobile, or had so much choice around where, when or even how they learn. However, even though students use technology all the time, there remains a need to their overall digital literacy.

The impact of the current context is that:

1. Many universities will likely be re-evaluating their strategic approach to learning in order to turn the crisis into an opportunity.
2. The use of technology is opening up opportunities to learning for students of highly diverse backgrounds, cultures, socioeconomic groups and even countries which have previously been out of reach of UK Universities.
3. St Mary's students who commute daily onto campus can learn on the move, or in multiple locations without compromising their other commitments. Digital provides opportunities to enhance this flexibility.

Digital Learning – 2020

Digital learning has come a long way. Previously an online or blended experience was considered by some to be inferior due to being deemed, among other things, too impersonal and lacking sufficient interactivity. However digital learning solutions have evolved to the point where they can, in the right context, and delivered effectively, provide as rich or maybe even a richer overall learning experience than purely face to face. Digital tools and approaches are continuously improving, which allows lecturers to reach a wider range of students and empower them take charge of their learning. In addition, these modern digital learning solutions are now extending equal learning opportunities by providing access to students who may not be able to engage through traditional classroom-based settings.

St Mary's has made good progress in engaging with digital learning to date. A range of tools and approaches are currently in place, as follows:-

- **Moodle** - a one-stop virtual learning environment for teaching staff to share all learning material and resources with students, communicate key activities in the module, collate assessment submission, monitor students' engagement, and generally manage the course programme.

- **Turnitin** - a text matching solution used within Moodle to detect plagiarism and streamline marking and feedback. Turnitin works by providing reports showing

whether there is evidence of academic misconduct. It also acts as a learning tool to offer students the opportunity to identify and correct possible occurrences in their work and improve their own academic writing.

- **Panopto (aka TLC) is** a teaching and learning capture and video management solution that makes it possible for all staff to capture, store and stream all types of learning content. This is used effectively at St Mary's to deliver live and pre-recorded sessions, flip classroom content, how-to guides, lab demonstration, practical, assessment, training and reflection.

- **Zoom** is a video conferencing tool for real-time online meetings. Zoom is used extensively in teaching, for example to facilitate breakout rooms where student groups can be divided into smaller groups during a live session, thereby removing the social pressure inherent in larger groups. Zoom also enable online engagement with students on screen sharing and virtual whiteboard. With Zoom integrated with Panopto, meetings are recorded, stored and shared on Moodle with students easily.

- **Vevox** is a polling software that energises face-to-face and online meetings and classes. Through Vevox, audience can vote, share feedback and interact with the presenter through their own mobile devices, giving everyone an equal chance to be heard. Optional anonymity settings on Vevox encourage honest uninhibited feedback to create a safe space for participation, especially for students who are reluctant to be seen as asking 'silly' questions.

- **Mahara** is a platform where students can construct a media rich e-portfolio of their development and showcase their knowledge and passion with their peers, tutors and potential employers.

- **Flipgrid** is a digital tool that engages students in conversation and help them find their own voices to build and strengthen social learning communities as they discuss their ideas and experiences with their peers.

- **Padlet** is like a living, breathing webpage that supports gathering of ideas, brainstorming and collaborative learning. Students can work flexibly with their peers and tutor at their own pace.

- **Microsoft Teams** is a platform that facilitates collaborative classroom learning. If used together with teaching and learning, it can help students develop soft skills like team working, knowledge sharing, openness, accountability skills which are applicable in the real world.

However, as the world moves towards a technology-driven society, it is important to note that the principles of good teaching have not changed. What has changed is the spectrum of tools now available to lecturers to teach, engage and inspire students. St Mary's must therefore embrace technology as essential tools to support learning and as a means of providing students with more agency over their studies. With the understanding that digital

learning can empower students to receive quality education anytime anywhere, greater and more effective use of digital can only help students harness their own motivation to learn and give them a voice in their educational experiences.

Emerging trends in digital learning now include:

- **Simulation based learning** is emerging across the HE sectors to provide immersive experience using Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) technologies. For example, University of New South Wales teaches crime scene investigation using a VR application they have created, and University of Birmingham train social workers using VR, immersing students in example of client visits to help them become more comfortable and confident in the work setting.

- **Video based learning with green screen technology** has opened a new dimension to storytelling and digital presentation. It brings learning to life and embeds opportunities for students to create and develop skills that translate into real-world experience. Havant and South Downs College embedded the use of digital video with green screen to enhance pedagogical practice and empower students to create their own learning resources.

- **Personalised learning** allows the students learning journey to be customised based on their current knowledge, interest and future needs. It gives the students complete control of what they want to learn and how they want to learn and at a pace that works for them. Examples include Manchester University, who have provided opportunities for their students to choose their own learning approach, and Teesside University who are expanding their portfolio of online courses to deliver a personalised learning experiences for online students.

- **Microlearning** helps students to easily access bite sized learning on the go. It is action oriented and each bite size content helps students to meet specific outcomes. One such example of the use of microlearning is Deakin University, Australia, who have developed short e-learning modules for businesses that fits in with the working pattern of the company's employees.

- **Gamification** aims to make learning fun by creating bespoke computer based 'games', using existing software, as a way to enable learning. One such example is University Central Lancashire who use Microsoft One Note to create puzzles and "escape room" type questions to test students understanding of lecture content and enrich their learning.

Goals, Targets and Strategies

The principle aims of this Digital Learning Strategy will be achieved through pursuing five goals

1. **Enabling student engagement**, through transforming the use of digital from, in the majority of cases, a course administration and repository tool to a core enabler of engaging and pedagogically sound online and blended learning.
2. **Enabling student success**, satisfaction, retention and graduate outcomes through strategic use of digital technologies
3. **Enabling commercial opportunities**, through utilising digital approaches to exploit our academic teaching for commercial purposes
4. **Enabling student empowerment**, through engaging and empowering students to thrive and succeed in their digital learning environment
5. **Enabling staff to innovate**, through investing in staff, and supporting them in the provision of digital learning

Goal 1: Enabling student engagement, through transforming the use of digital from, in the majority of cases, a course administration and repository tool to a core enabler of engaging and pedagogically sound online and blended learning.

Much of what we currently call digital learning is actually digital course administration. The greatest use of digital at St Mary's is through Moodle, the virtual learning environment where every programme has a presence. Though Moodle offers great learning capabilities, it is largely used a course admin tool eg for communicating with student groups, publishing reading lists, submitting work and disseminating marks. This is a useful use of digital, but St Mary's must go further in order to maximise the learning of our students, keep pace with our competitors and maximise the commercial return on our learning 'products'. Strategies to enable this goal are as follows:-

	Strategies	Targets	Responsibility
1.1	Develop a framework, aligned with the St Mary's Curriculum Framework, to support course design for online and blended delivery of new programmes thus ensuring quality of blended and online learning is maintained	July 2021	**Lead:** CTESS **Support:** TEL Faculty and Institutes Learning & Teaching Strategy
1.2	Redefine the programme approvals and process to incorporate the digital domain in all areas of curriculum and assessment delivery	July 2022	**Lead:** CTESS **Support:** Application Services Faculty and Institutes Other stakeholders involved in the curriculum approvals process
1.4	Enhance usability for students when accessing and interacting with digital tools and platform for their learning	July 2022	**Lead:** TEL **Support:**

				Application Services Technology Services Faculty and Institutes Student Union Student Reps
1.5	Redefine student and academic support for blended and online learners in line with Digital Learning Strategy	July 2021		**Lead:** CTESS **Support:** Student Services Registry Careers Faculty and Institutes Library PTs LDLs Student Union Student Reps TEL
1.6	Expand and improve software programs and tools available to support blended and online learning	July 2022		**Lead:** TEL **Support:** Faculty and Institutes Technicians Application Services Technology Services
1.7	Establish equipment infrastructure required to enable academics to record and deliver high quality presentations at institutional scale	July 2021		**Lead:** AV **Support:** TEL Institutes and Faculty Technicians Technology Services
1.8	Ensure availability of appropriate and adequate online learning materials, including books, journals, and other learning materials	Sep 2021		**Lead:** Library Services **Support:** Faculties and Institutes

Goal 2: I Enabling student success, satisfaction, retention and graduate outcomes through strategic use of digital technologies

The success criteria of digital approaches are that they improve student success. The areas where digital must ensure success include students' learning, attainment and preparation for

the world of work. Hence, our increased of digital will be approached in a way that ensures success in these key areas.

	Strategies	Targets	Responsibility
2.1	Make case for additional investment required to provide secure, robust and resilient technical infrastructure suitable for large scale use of digital learning	April 2021	**Lead:** Technology Services **Support:** Application Services TEL AV Helpdesk Network Faculty and Institutes Students
2.2	Incorporate personalised learning in the digital space for students where quality of learning is shaped by learners' experience, characteristics, interests and aspirations	July 2021	**Lead:** TEL **Support:** Student Union Faculty and Institutes Students Library Services
2.3	Ensure digital approaches capture accurate data on key areas of student engagement that enables effective reporting and analysis and better informs and improves key student KPIs such as satisfaction, attainment, retention, graduate outcomes.	July 2021	**Lead:** TEL and CTESS **Support:** Strategic Planning Faculty and Institutes Recruitment Careers TEL Application Services Technology Services
2.4	Capture real-time learning analytics to improve and enhance teaching approaches for future provision	July 2021	**Lead:** TEL **Support:** Application Services CTESS Faculty and Institutes Careers Library Services Technology Services

Goal 3: Enabling commercial opportunities, through utilising digital approaches to exploit our academic teaching for commercial purposes

Digital learning approaches allow a higher return on investment due to the lower cost of repeating the delivery. St Mary's will seek to utilise digital learning to maximise income generation through selecting programmes for online delivery and through reusing learning packages for short courses.

	Strategies	Targets	Responsibility
3.1	Identify and develop programmes well suited for online or blended learning provision	April 2021	**Lead**: Enterprise **Support:** Faculty and Institutes Marketing
3.2	Develop incentive model that encourages academics/departments to produce online learning 'products' for commercial exploitation	April 2021	**Lead**: Faculty/Institutes **Support:** Finance Enterprise Institute Directors Marketing IP Policy
3.3	Agree priority areas, through appropriate market research, for online short courses	April 2021	**Lead**: Enterprise **Support:** Finance Dept Institute Directors Marketing

Goal 4: Enabling student empowerment, through engaging and empowering students to thrive and succeed in their digital learning environment

Despite the current 'millennial' student being digital natives, experience shows that many still require support in order to fully engage in digital for learning. Hence the following strategies must be pursued to achieve this goal:-

	Strategy	Targets	Responsibility
4.1	Identify and develop a clear student engagement model to support digital learning.	April 2021	**Lead**: Student Union **Support:** Students Faculty and Institutes Internal Comms Portal Services TEL Marketing

				Student Services
4.2	Create feedback loop whereby former students, now practising as professionals, input into digital curriculum design, student support approaches, etc in order to enhance development of current students' digital learning experience	July 2021		**Lead:** Faculty and Institutes **Support:** Careers & Employability Student Union CTESS Careers Application Services TEL
4.3	Improve students' digital capability by embedding digital skills into their curriculum and develop standalone skills development opportunities	July 2022		**Lead:** Faculty and Institutes **Support:** CTESS Learning Development Lecturers TEL Library Services
4.4	Improve ease of access to services, eliminating any difference in experience between on or off campus use, mobile or wired.	July 2022		**Lead:** Technology Services **Support:** TEL
4.5	Promote digital safety and wellbeing to students in learning in the digital domain	September 2022		**Lead:** TEL / Technology Services **Support:** Student Services CTESS Technology Services Faculty and Institutes Student Union

Goal 5: Enabling staff to innovate, through investing in staff, and supporting them in the provision of digital learning

Perhaps the single most important goal of the strategy is to empower staff to embrace greater and more effective use of digital. Without this goal being achieved none of the others will be realised. Staff at St Mary's have the appetite, realise the urgency and desire to do more, but

they lack the expertise, and have limited confidence in how to utilise digital more extensively in teaching delivery. Hence the following strategies will be pursued in order to realise this goal:-

	Strategies	Targets	Responsibility
5.1	Provide comprehensive programme of training and support in the use of digital technologies (that goes beyond digital course administration) in teaching	June 2021	**Lead: TEL** **Support:** HR CTESS Technology Services
5.2	Build sufficient of levels digital focus and guidance into academic staff induction	July 2021	**Lead:** Faculty and Institutes **Support:** CTESS TEL HR
5.3	Develop training to broaden digital skills of academic and support staff as a core competency	July 2022	**Lead:** Organisational Development **Support:** TEL Technology Services Faculty and Institutes
5.4	Establish online learning design and media services to support the growing demand of producing media rich content for the development of blended and online programmes	July 2022	**Lead:** TEL **Support:** CTESS Faculty and Institutes Programme Directors
5.5	Promote digital safety and wellbeing to staff in working and teaching in the digital domain	July 2021	**Lead:** TEL **Support:** CTESS Technology Services HR
5.6	Create networks for staff to share best practices, ideas, innovation and collaboration in the use of technology for working and teaching	July 2021	**Lead:** TEL **Support:** CTESS Technology Services Faculty and Institutes

5.7	Create funding streams to encourage innovative use of technology in teaching and learning	July 2022	**Lead:** CTESS and TEL **Support:** Finance Enterprise Faculty and Institutes

Appendix 1 - Definitions

The terminology of "digital learning", "blended learning", "distance learning" and "online learning" have been used frequently in the context of programme delivery and sometimes interchangeably as well. It is important that the distinction between them are clearly defined to avoid any confusion and ambiguity around this.

- **Blended learning** refers to a programme that combines both face-to-face learning and online elements in its delivery. A blended approach usually brings together classroom-based activities with the lecturer present and online learning materials provided by the lecturer.

- **Online learning** takes place when students learn online. Their learning typically takes through a virtual learning environment where, for example, access to resources, books and support are provided online. The delivery may consist of a combination of asynchronous and synchronous activities, but it takes place online.

- **Distance learning** is where learning is designed to be consumed entirely remotely. Hence the student does not have to be present on a physical campus to apply, enrol, engage with the learning or even take their exams. Distance learning can be either online or offline (but is increasingly online). Distance learning programmes are attractive to students who have other careers or responsibilities as it allows them to study at their own pace and schedule.

- **Digital learning** refers to any type of learning that uses technology to deliver the teaching and help students learn. Hence the term 'digital learning' covers an infinitely wide spectrum of technologies.

- **Digital** is a broad term and refers to any use of electronic data or technology.

- **Digital estate** refers collectively to St Mary's IT hardware, software, tools, resources and support staff.

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Authors
- Samuel Massiah, Chief Information Officer
- Bing Choong, Head of Library and Digital Support Services