Case Study: University of Warwick, UK

Managing academic freedom, creativity and consistency of experience across many strong departments

Key learnings

- Many strong departments with a strong sense of individual identity.
- Academic freedom and freedom of departments to innovate is important.
- Greater need for a more consistent online experience and data integrity across faculties.
- Aim to integrate processes and systems across the University to achieve greater consistency while still enabling departments the freedom to innovate.
- Centralised IT services for teaching, learning and administration can lead to increased opportunities for innovation in niche areas
- Very strong institutional and campus identity with a strong campus-based culture.
- Major departments have their own individual identities, which can be a strength or can sometimes dilute/fragment the University identity and strategic cross-campus initiatives, leading to creative tensions.
- Strong university and campus identity not carried as effectively into the IT platforms.
- Campus 'masterplan' helping to define approach to active and flexible spaces which can have multiple purposes over time.
- Many innovations across the different departments in new learning technologies, spaces and approaches.
- There is a need to experiment with new technology enabled learning spaces and to observe and share others' practice in these spaces
- A learning hub has been set up in a nearby town where a high number of students live who are not in campus residences
- The Business School runs a well-established world class online MBA and has a distinct digital infrastructure and support model from the rest of the University
- The growth in demand for work-based study, placements and internships as well as a trend towards Degree Apprenticeships means an increased need for different models of delivery
- There is a growing trend for interdisciplinary degrees for example, the Global Sustainable Development interdisciplinary undergraduate degree course from the school for cross-faculty studies.

About the university

This is a leading multi-disciplinary university in the Russell group of UK universities. With around 15,500 undergraduate and 9,500 postgraduate students[i]. That includes about 7,000 overseas students of which 2,500 are undergraduates and about 4,500 are postgraduates. The university has a world-renowned business school and engineering school plus a strong medical school which all lead in technology application. Departments take very different approaches to technology in teaching, extending to their use of assessment methods, use of the VLE, and their attitude to recording lectures. This differentiation among departments in the adoption and application of IT is common to many other institutions interviewed. Well-funded, competitive and higher budget departments tend to lead and seek to show their students a more advanced IT environment. Overall the university has a reputation for an above average and well-supported digital environment across most departments, and where online work is becoming the norm for students.

Academic freedom and a high degree of independence of each department is supported. Central services do not mandate many things. This freedom may have been good for innovation in practices but has created some challenges of consistency across disciplines. A major student personalised information initiative is in place to increase the level of consistency and create the 'University Platform' upon which the departments can innovate and optimise their practice in a more sustainable environment. A trend towards more interdisciplinary degrees in addition to rapid growth of degree apprentice programs with significant block assignments with employers creates a need for greater consistency and data integrity.

Many innovative approaches taken across campus, with freedom to innovate with different new technologies within the different faculties, including the well-respected Centre for Education Studies and Centre for Teacher Education. The central academic technology group is also supporting a strong toolset with the aim of making teaching practice more effective.

Consistency of identity is important with an aim to create a consistent 'degree experience'. This does not yet fully translate into the supported digital environment. This is an important area to address as the digital experience becomes a bigger part of student life and the interdisciplinary and block release experiences can create a more splintered experience for students. Currently there is a very strong campus identity. Students describe a 'campus bubble' and strong sense of community.

Identity and consistency of experience

How to deliver a *'Warwick degree'* and experience to all students, including those who don't spend a lot of time on the campus

Students describe a 'campus bubble' and strong sense of community where academic and social life occurs., especially as the campus is away from any nearby large town or city and the university provides several spaces where students like to meet and congregate. Since the start of refurbishment works in the Students' Union building, students have migrated to the library and have continued to use this a meeting point and for both individual and collaborative working (Figure 1).

Reading Lounge - Relaxed reading area, where you can meet with friends,near the main entrance to the Library. Four We-Watt bikes are located here where you can recharge your phone.

Figure 1: University of Warwick Library Source:
https://warwick.ac.uk/services/library/using/libspaces/main/360-views/

Additionally**,** a learning hub has been set up where a high number of students live who are not in campus residences.

Student Personalised Information initiative (SPI)

The university is moving from a position in which each department was self-managed to a more centralised and consistent approach to provision so that, for example, students can follow interdisciplinary and cross faculty programmes – a focus area in the university's current strategic plan The challenges in delivering consistent experiences include developing a sense of place, course experience, workflow management, the lack of a common accreditation framework across faculties and other administrative challenges.

SPI seeks to improve coherence and consistency for administration, student identity, data security and management of interdisciplinary work to create an integrated and consistent approach.

Moodle has been the central LMS for six years, providing a consistent learning and teaching platform and base for curriculum development and support. Approaches taken by teachers to add content, resources, and initiate forums and discussions have been variable. The policy of academic freedom and not mandating many things results in both positive experimentation and some variable approaches and results.

In some departments there is a strong desire to respond to a changing external landscape to contribute to regional and national employment needs. This move creates a clear requirement for a consistent set of module credits and the ability to track them across faculties which is currently hampered by incompatibilities and inconsistencies in data tracking solutions and accreditation systems. The latter is also providing a challenge for international exchange programmes.

The Business School were early to develop quality online courses. Their need for a sophisticated digital infrastructure drove bespoke in-house development. It therefore has some strong data-enabled administrative systems for its local requirements. This was developed ahead of a strong central virtual learning environment and specialist administrative systems.

Extended classroom initiative

A central Academic Technology team in the IT Services department supports each of the faculties with a centrally supported toolkit to make teaching more effective[ii]. They have a concept of 'university as a platform' on which individual teachers and faculties can innovate.

A range of ITS supported technologies for you to use…

1. Lecture Capture Service
A no-cost, no-hassle lecture recording service that puts the lecturer in charge

2. Personal Capture Service
A simple & convenient tool for recording short audiographic presentations

3. ResponseWare Lecture Engagement System
Pose questions in lectures, students answer using laptops, phones or tablets

4. Moodle Quiz Teaching Tool
Create a set of questions for your students to answer online

5. Moodle Module Space
A single online location for information, resources and activities

6. MyPortfolio for Students and Staff
A personal electronic portfolio for students and staff

7. Tabula Student Profiles
A single online secure location for information about your students

8. Box of Broadcasts – the Academic iPlayer
UK terrestrial TV and radio channels recorded for reuse in education

9. Reading Lists with Talis Aspire
Warwick's reading list system, integrated with Moodle

10. Video in Moodle with eStream
Provides high quality online video playback in Moodle, for staff and student created videos

11. Discussion Forums in Moodle
Add a discursive element to your Moodle Module Space

12. Online Classrooms with Collaborate
Easy to use, real-time video, text and audio conferencing

Figure 2: The 12 currently supported IT tools at the University of Warwick

Campus masterplan

It is a central aspiration of the University to provide a mix of activities in all parts of the campus to create a vibrant sustainable community, where active interaction between students and staff allows ideas to be easily exchanged. Buildings of the future will include interdisciplinary research centres and doctoral training centres, flexible-use accommodation to respond quickly to commercial opportunities, interactive and collaborative space making research available to the public including through the learning grid, more living accommodation on campus for staff, students and visitors.

One building has recently been refurbished with flexible and experimental spaces, including some spaces for videoconferencing. As staff are unclear about what they want to help provide an active learning environment, it is important to be able to test ideas and find out what works and what does not. Many of the new buildings have built in state-of-the-art lecture theatres and collaborate co-working spaces for students as in Figure 3. For example, in one 30 seat teaching room there is the following supported equipment:

- Data Projector
- Whiteboards x 3
- Document Camera
- IR Induction Loop
- Lapel Radio Microphones x 2
- Fixed PC

- Laptop Connectivity (VGA, HDMI)
- Lectern Touch Screen Display
- Solstice Wireless Casting
- Lecture Capture
- Lecture Capture Camera

Figure 3: The Oculus building, designed after extensive consultation with student and academic focus groups.

Challenges

Current challenges concern space management and increasing the flexibility of spaces. Flexible and innovative supported learning spaces are seen as key enablers of innovation in pedagogy, and sometimes provision can push the sense of what's possible. The Oculus building was designed after extensive consultation with student and academic focus groups. From a technology perspective managing complexity is challenging for IT Services (ITS). It is clear that an online digital trajectory becomes the norm. Currently 50% of services are standard while 50% are more complex. Currently this leads to a creativity conflict where a challenge is turned into a shared opportunity and adds value. ITS would like to move towards an 80/20 spilt which will give more opportunity for innovation.

Who we interviewed

IT Director, Library Director and Chair of SPI initiative, SPI programme manager, Head of Academic Technology Team, Coordinator of Technologies for Learning, an interdisciplinary research network.

[i] Further details of student numbers are available at
https://warwick.ac.uk/services/spg/spa/academicstatistics/section1/table_1.1a_-_2017.pdf
[ii] Warwick IT Service Technology in Teaching details are available online at
https://warwick.ac.uk/services/its/servicessupport/academictechnology/teaching/