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College Development Network



DIGITAL CAPABILITY

A SCOTTISH
LANDSCAPE REVIEW

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HYPOTHESIS

That frameworks used to describe lecturer digital capabilities in Scotland's colleges prior to the 2020 pandemic did not sufficiently anticipate the demands for digital competencies that resulted from the pivot to virtual learning and teaching required in the pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

At the close of 2019, Scotland's colleges were pursuing a range of strategies and approaches to increase their digital learning and teaching offer and develop staff digital capabilities. This study examines the extent to which colleges had adopted frameworks that elaborated digital capabilities required for digital learning and teaching, and whether these sufficiently described the demands that would be made of lecturers during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the only possible engagement with students was through remote delivery.



'It was like teaching people to swim after the flood had arrived.'

Research participant

CONTEXT

Scotland's colleges have embraced the importance of digital transformation for the economic and social development of the country. This is evident in their digital strategies, with many referencing the importance of government policy documents (*Realising Scotland's full potential in a digital world: a digital strategy for Scotland* (2017)¹; *A Changing Nation: How Scotland will Thrive in a Digital World* (2021)²; *Scotland's Digital Learning and Teaching Strategy* (2016)³). These policy and college strategy documents set out the important contribution that colleges make in supporting economic prosperity and social development by developing 'twenty-first century skills' (Reimers and Chung 2016). The digital capability of staff lies at the heart of colleges' digital strategies.

Digital capability and competence have been termed 'loose' concepts (Ilomäki et al 2016). That is, they are not well-defined and still emerging, with the meanings changing depending on who is using the terms and in which context. This ambiguity is evident in the different approaches, actions, and priorities which colleges have identified are needed to address digital capability and competence.

In an effort to address the lack of a specificity around digital capabilities and competencies, a number of Digital Capabilities Frameworks (DCFs) have emerged. Examples include: the European Union's Framework of Digital Competence for Educators⁴ (DigCompEdu) (Ferrari 2013, Redecker 2017); the Education and Training Foundation's Digital Teaching Professional Framework⁵ (DTPF) and The Jisc Building Digital Capability Framework⁶ (2015). Each has developed its own definition of digital capability and organising themes. For example, Jisc defines digital capability as 'the term we use to describe the skills and attitudes that individuals and organisations need if they are to thrive in today's world.' This definition is further developed at an individual and organisational level. At the individual level, the following make up digital capability:

- ICT Proficiency (functional skills)
- Information, data and media literacies (critical use)
- Digital creation, problem solving and innovation (creative production)
- Digital communication, collaboration and partnership (participation)
- Digital learning and development (development)
- Digital identity and wellbeing (self-actualising)

Similarly, DigCompEdu specifies 22 competencies under six domains, while the DTPF identified seven elements which cover different teaching contexts and activities. The latter framework has widespread adoption in colleges outwith Scotland.

One important contribution of these DCFs is the support they provide for policymakers, college managers and lecturers in understanding the implications of changes brought about by the digital revolution. In some cases, there is uncertainty in colleges as to how digital technologies can and should be integrated into all aspects of education (Caena & Redecker 2019). These influential frameworks (Cabero-Almenara et al 2020) were produced before the Covid-19 pandemic, and

many colleges made reference to their use of a DCF, pre-pandemic, as part of their digital strategy development.

While the frameworks may vary in their focus and definition, they identify the importance of digital creation, innovation, communication, collaboration, participation or engagement, digital identity, and wellbeing as important elements for lecturing staff digital skills development.



'Our 2020 Digital Strategy has been informed by the Jisc Digital Capability Framework.'

Research participant

METHODOLOGY

The study acquired college strategy documents and analysed them to draw out key themes in relation to staff digital capability and identify any references to frameworks that were being used to inform the development of staff.

Interviews were then conducted with senior managers who had responsibility for digital learning and teaching, using a semi-structured interview approach. The interview questions were designed to establish the pre-pandemic position of digital capability in the college, the approaches used in the pivot to remote delivery in 2020 and the set of digital competences and dispositions that were now regarded as a requirement for the future. The interview topics are to be found in Appendix A.

The analysis of the interview responses was performed by the principal researcher utilising a grounded theory approach to draw out key themes. A further workshop involving the client and the researchers refined these themes.

Three focus groups were formed, consisting of senior college managers, student representatives, and other stakeholders. For each group, a presentation of the key themes was presented followed by a discussion.

The findings from this study were also presented to senior managers from four colleges across the UK with a view to comparing them with their own experiences. The colleges (two from England, one each from Wales and Northern Ireland) were selected for their known progress in digital transformation.

RESULTS

Themes from the digital strategy documents

College digital strategy documents demonstrated a consistent set of themes, varying only in the scope and scale of their digital ambitions. Shared challenges across the sector included: identifying staff digital skill needs, who needs what at which level, and the development of those skills; implementing a data-driven approach to learning and teaching as well as ensuring an effective and resilient digital infrastructure.



‘Adopts creative approaches to the embedding of appropriate digital technologies for effective planning, delivery and assessment of learning.’

Professional Standards for Lecturers in Scotland’s Colleges 3.3.5

All strategies included general statements about lecturer skills, using descriptors such as ‘essential digital skills’, ‘appropriate digital skills’ and ‘necessary digital skills’. Digital competence was often expressed in terms of both skills and attitude. For example, one college identified the need to develop not only a specific set of skills, but also the ‘*fluency and confidence of staff*’. The documents revealed a lack of consistency in the meaning attributed to terms such as blended learning and hybrid delivery, pointing to a need for clarification of these and other terms.

Digital capabilities in practice: pre-pandemic

Prior to the cessation of face-to-face teaching in March 2020, the main (but not sole) focus of digital learning and teaching was on the use of the college Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to deliver learning or store content. The digital capabilities required of lecturers included: creating digital resources such as documents and slides and making these available on the VLE; sharing links to external resources; setting, receiving, and marking assignments via the VLE. Competence in the use of email was also required when communicating with students and other staff.

Colleges had adopted a range of strategies to support lecturers who were developing their skills or less confident in the digital space. This included providing mentors, digital champions, and templates to lower the barriers to developing courses. In almost all examples of digital activities beyond what was needed for basic delivery, lecturers relied on self-directed training and development, with support from the college when available.



‘Digital Mentors have been an effective way of supporting the least confident.’

Research participant

Around two-thirds of the colleges reported use of the Jisc DCF to set out their expectations in relation to lecturing staff. All colleges were aware of the Jisc DCF and other frameworks, but not all had chosen to fully adopt one in defining digital capabilities for their own lecturers.

Where use had been made of the Jisc DCF, colleges had also looked to the Jisc Discovery Tool to assess the level of capability. In most cases, this was presented as a tool lecturers could use as they wished. The engagement rate varied from college to college, and from faculty to faculty. Only a small number of colleges had achieved high levels of lecturer engagement with self-assessment tools to gauge digital capability.

These were the characteristics of the college sector at the close of 2019: areas of emerging innovation in digital approaches to learning and teaching, consolidation of the VLE as the central vehicle for digitised content, and a cohort of staff who were challenged with aspects of digital delivery.

Pivot to remote delivery: March 2020 to June 2020

Within days of closing due to the lockdown in mid-March 2020, lecturers were faced with the prospect of only communicating with students through digital channels. Along with this came the realisation that many students and some lecturers had inadequate access to devices, the Internet and/or suitable places to study. Although additional capital funds were released from the Scottish Funding Council to address student digital needs, addressing these deficiencies became a significant logistical challenge for all colleges, exacerbated by a universal shortage of laptops, web cameras and other computer peripherals.

The pressing issue for colleges was how to maintain contact with their students and maintain

engagement while unable to attend. Some colleges reported issues with email; not only the general reluctance to engage with college email accounts (which had been a problem outside of lockdown), but an increase in communication flooding inboxes. Lecturers started to switch to other platforms, which facilitated direct contact with students. Most of all, there was a need for real-time interaction with the whole class. This led to the adoption of platforms designed for group communication and collaboration – principally Zoom, Webex, and Microsoft Teams.

This pivot to new forms of connecting to and engaging with students highlighted the urgent need for lecturers to develop capabilities that had not been previously anticipated. Few, if any, lecturers had experience of fully online delivery – except for those delivering HE courses in UHI colleges. The demands on lecturers were more than just technical, they required a shift in mindset and pedagogy.



‘How can I help my students to overcome their anxieties about learning online?’

Research participant

The college response varied according to local context. While all colleges identified suitable online training resources (such as instructional videos), most were able to supplement these with the appointment of staff to provide individual support, either in a mentoring role or as trainers. Aspects of digital pedagogy were incorporated into this training and support.

Communication platforms (such as Teams and Zoom) were themselves used to help staff gain competence and confidence in their use. This included the use of webinars, giving the least confident opportunity to experience these platforms as learners while providing a safe space in which to practise their newly acquired skills. For those who viewed online learning as merely a

different channel to deliver a lecture, there were more focused interventions to support them in extending their digital practice. In a few colleges, there was an offer of face-to-face digital skills training sessions to assist those most lacking in confidence to make a positive start on their digital journey.

At this critical stage of the pivot to remote delivery, most colleges allowed lecturers some latitude in their choice of digital tools, to facilitate the rapid transition that was required. Others mandated the platforms to be used, only providing support, training, and advice centrally for these. However, all colleges soon realised that permitting a variety of platforms, digital tools, and communication channels was confusing for the students and placed unrealistic demands on college support arrangements. Most, if not all, colleges now mandate the platforms to be used, while encouraging lecturers to recommend others that may be considered for suitability.

As lecturers and students settled into the 'new normal', a pattern began to emerge with some of the lecturers using Teams. The platform offered access to the suite of Office 365 tools, mirroring some of the functionality of the VLE. As Microsoft rapidly developed the platform, some lecturers began to move to Teams as the sole platform for communication, content sharing and to an extent assessment. As observed earlier, many were capable of learning how to use Teams via the free training available online and through the self-help networks of educators that had appeared during the pandemic. While most college digital support efforts concentrated on getting all lecturers to a threshold of competence, there was some support for this shift to Teams which appeared to be working well. Other colleges focused on improving the integration of Teams with the VLE to encourage use of both platforms.

Consolidation: August 2020 to May 2021

At the start of the 2020-21 academic year lockdown had been lifted, while social distancing and the wearing of facemasks remained in place. Colleges were able to open their doors, but there were still restrictions on numbers attending the campus. For some subjects this involved yet another switch to learning and teaching. Lecturers who had transitioned from fully classroom-based to fully online in the lockdown phase, now had to consider further changes to their planning and delivery to suit a blended learning approach.

In anticipation of the continuation of Covid-19 restrictions and dependence on digital, colleges had introduced extended induction in basic digital skills for new students and lecturers. In most colleges, further investments had been made in infrastructure, along with the migration of services to cloud providers. Dedicated teams were in place for the continued training and support that was required to help lecturers provide their students with a blended learning college experience.



'We have a team of Digital First Aiders available to help lecturers resolve issues.'

Research participant

At this juncture most colleges had recognised that their digital strategies were a crucial component of their institutional strategies. Those colleges who had not yet fully formulated a digital strategy at the outset of 2020 made firm and positive steps to do so; those who had, recognised that the digital landscape had changed so much and so rapidly that a refresh was in order.

Along with a digital strategy for learning and teaching, colleges were also re-visiting the

question of how to measure the digital capability of their lecturers. This coincided with the imminent implementation of the registration of college lecturers with the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS). The GTCS *Professional Standards for College Lecturers*⁷ provided criteria on which to judge progress in relation to digital learning and teaching (see extract from the Professional Standards in Appendix B). In addition, Colleges Scotland in collaboration with College Development Network (CDN) and Jisc, had recently published *Our Digital Ambition for Scotland's Colleges*⁸.

These documents set out a clear expectation for lecturers to progress their digital capability and develop a digital mindset. During this period, one college developed its own digital capability framework, mapping its elements to the Professional Standards. Other colleges expressed an interest in considering this framework for their own use.

The second period of lockdown in the first four months of 2021 found colleges better prepared for a return to remote delivery. Well established routines were in place for online courses, and colleges had a wide range of resources (primarily video) that staff could access as required to further enhance their digital skills. Extensive use was made of Microsoft's own training resources, with some colleges encouraging staff to move towards Microsoft Innovative Educator (MIE) certification.



'Digital is here to stay.'

Research participant

Digital capability frameworks revisited

The Jisc DCF, last updated in 2017, includes elements that have assumed considerable importance since the pandemic. Digital communication and collaboration are explicitly covered, and online and blended learning are mentioned as examples of digital teaching. Similarly, the ETF Digital Teaching Professional Framework anticipated the transition to blended and fully online learning. These aspects are covered in its detailed elements (A1, B3, B4 and C3).

One result of the pivot to remote delivery has been the acceptance of the need to provide lecturers with a means to identify their level of digital competence. This could then be taken forward into the Professional Review and Development (PRD) process. None of the colleges interviewed required lecturers to provide this information for their PRD, though there was a commitment to making a self-assessment tool available. The recently updated Jisc Discovery Tool was considered by most to be suited to this purpose, given the flexibility that it offered for tailoring to local contexts.

It was not surprising that in this period of change Jisc should play a leading role. The Jisc DCF was based on extensive research and through its building digital capability service, Jisc has provided colleges and universities with a self-assessment tool based on this framework – the Jisc Discovery Tool. While Jisc has not refreshed its framework, in September 2020, it introduced a new set of questions to the Discovery Tool to reflect the demands that the pivot to remote delivery had placed on lecturers. This included supporting students to develop their digital capabilities to become effective online learners.



'The Jisc Discovery Tool gives us scope to adapt for our own context.'

Research participant

DCFs have proved sufficiently far-sighted to include the digital capabilities that lecturers would require to deliver learning and teaching in the current context. What was not apparent, however, was that these elements of digital capability would move from only being referenced as examples of digital approaches to become critical to the learning experience of every college student in 2020.

One aspect of remote delivery has proved to be more challenging – that of ensuring that digital content is accessible as required by the UK digital accessibility regulations that came into force for public sector bodies in September 2018⁹. These regulations required that content published after 23 September 2019 meet a minimum WCAG 2.1 AA accessible standard. While some lecturers had experience of assessing their digital content through an accessibility lens, most have required training. Again, accessibility and inclusion are covered in the frameworks, but the extent to which all lecturers would be required to consider accessibility of their digital content and make judgements about suitability was not fully anticipated.



‘Meeting the accessibility standard has been a challenge – particularly video captioning.’

Research participant

In the pre-pandemic period, cyber resilience was a consideration addressed at an institutional level; the pivot to remote delivery provided a new set of challenges requiring lecturers to develop additional competences in relation to cyber security in a home setting. This was accompanied with a sharp rise in cyber attacks on educational institutions over the last 18 months.

There was not much anticipation pre-pandemic that students’ digital skills would fall short of what was required for effective engagement on their part with online learning. In this period, lecturers have had to acquire a new competence of supporting their student groups to participate in online activities and engage with digital learning resources.

Focus groups and external reference colleges

Once the interviews with senior college managers had been completed, a short interim report summarising the key findings was produced and circulated to groups for review.

Focus groups

Three focus groups were formed, including representatives from staff from colleges, Jisc, SQA, Education Scotland, sparqs, and college student associations. They were presented with the interim report and asked to provide comment.

There was broad agreement with the findings, recognising that colleges needed to develop specific skills during the lockdown period. However, some asserted that individual colleges were well prepared in terms of the level of staff digital competency.

The need for a digital competence standard for the sector was highlighted, with reference to the Digital Ambition report. It was recognised that colleges had identified similar skillsets that had been prioritised over the pandemic period. These included the ability to deliver remotely, but also a wider range of general digital skills. All agreed that the importance of digital pedagogy should be stressed, but there was an admission that lecturers needed to be equipped with the necessary expertise to take advantage of the technology.

There was some evidence of confusion when it came to the language used to describe aspects of digital learning and teaching. New terms have entered the vocabulary and are sometimes used in an inconsistent manner, which suggested the need for some guidance in this area.

Student associations were keen to have an active role in the development of digital capability, both from the perspective of student skills and those required of lecturers. This was reinforced by the idea of partnership between staff and students,

which could be facilitated via resources such as the sparqs toolkit, 'Exploring student engagement with academic staff'.

 **'Our Student Association has instituted a 'Lockdown Legend' award for lecturers who have excelled in their adoption of digital.'**

Research participant

External reference colleges

The discussions with the four external colleges provided a strong validation of the findings. Their own experiences pointed to the importance of a consistency of approach from all lecturers to deliver a better student experience. They also reported that in their transition to digital competence, they had been required to make provision for both staff and students in the most basic aspects of digital learning and teaching.

 **'Consistency of approach across the college leads to consistency of outcomes for the students.'**

Research participant

As a result of feedback from students, one college focused on the need to limit the number of digital options available to staff, which helped to consolidate the training and support on offer. Students also benefited from direct support from their lecturers to make the most of the online environment.

There was an emphasis on ensuring that new staff were equipped with the necessary skills through training and mentoring options. Mentors were able to demonstrate best practice and provide a risk-free context for staff to develop their capabilities. One note of caution expressed that it was often the case that we expected too much from the technology.

Another college had employed a progressive structure for the development of digital skills, beginning with a clearly defined set of baseline capabilities linked to the VLE platform. From this, lecturers would advance to master a wider set of skills before tackling the pedagogical aspects. The point was made that staff needed to achieve a level of confidence with the technology before they could engage fully with the potential for learning and teaching.



DISCUSSION

It has been challenging for colleges to manage the changing landscape and meet student expectations during the pandemic. Lecturers and learning technology teams have worked intensively to design and deliver a comparable online curriculum, with the introduction of new and innovative ways of communicating, learning, and teaching.

The interpersonal aspect of learning has proved more difficult to support through online means and the wellbeing of many students has become a matter of concern. On the other hand, some students report that they have experienced easier access to lecturers and support staff and find it less daunting to participate in an online discussion than in the face-to-face classroom.

Specific aspects of lecturer digital capability that were not anticipated in the pre-Covid frameworks included: the competence to help their students engage with online learning; the management of student behaviours online and identifying and responding to indications of mental health issues in students; engaging with college digital communities and online resources for their own development and to access support. The regulatory requirements for accessibility and the critical nature of secure cyber operations added to the digital capabilities demanded of staff. As mentioned elsewhere in this report, confidence in the use of digital approaches and a digital mindset have emerged as equally important alongside technical skills.



‘We want our staff to have a Digital-First Mindset.’

Research participant

The update to the Jisc Discovery Tool confirms this, and seeks to provide lecturers with a means of reflecting on how well their digital practice is realising the potential benefits for their students. In colleges where digital capability is now recognised as an important dimension in the PRD process, the

refreshed Discovery Tool provides an opportunity for lecturers to obtain the information they need to discuss their digital development with managers.

This study has confirmed that frameworks have not been found wanting in their inclusion of online and blended learning. However, pre-pandemic training and support in colleges did not anticipate that lecturers would require the set of skills and dispositions that emerged in March 2020. At the time of writing, none of the colleges have a mandatory base level of digital capability for their staff. The use of self-assessment tools, while encouraged, is on a voluntary basis. It is anticipated that through normal PRD processes, the question of digital competences will be kept in focus for some time to come.

A further conclusion from this study is that online and blended learning requires each lecturer to develop a particular set of skills and dispositions. Much of the challenge referenced in this report arises from the cadre of lecturers who were unfamiliar with such approaches, and lacked both the confidence and competence to adopt technology in a way that was pedagogically sound and inclusive.

This raised a further question as to what such a ‘baseline’ might encompass. Interviews with staff revealed a common range of skills that had been prioritised during the pandemic. Such a baseline is one of the objectives stated in *Our Digital Ambition*.

As the pandemic eases and colleges anticipate some return to normal delivery patterns, there is a question as to what extent remote delivery will be a permanent feature. It is highly likely that the shift to online and hybrid meetings will remain in some form, especially where time for travel was required. One certainty is that flexibility will be required to accommodate the evolving expectations of students, employers, and wider society. To deliver on this, lecturers will need a sound base of digital skills.

RECOMMENDATIONS

During the course of the study, the following recommendations have been identified as being able to further develop the effectiveness of future delivery models:

- ✓ The varied and inconsistent use of terms to describe digital learning and teaching experiences suggests that a list of key terms and definitions would be a significant contribution to add consistency in messages to students and other stakeholders.
- ✓ A baseline set of digital competences for lecturers that mirrors what has been prioritised in the sector would provide a consistent overview of what will be required going forward.
- ✓ Given the commitment of colleges to adopt digital approaches in all aspects of their work, a baseline of digital competences for all staff would be helpful to improve the operational efficiency and effectiveness that colleges have said they wish to achieve.
- ✓ To support effective blended delivery models in the 2021-22 Academic Session and beyond, further work should be undertaken with a clear focus on pedagogical approaches suited to digital learning and teaching to complement the outputs identified above.



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APPENDIX A

Topic Guide for college interviews

- 1.** Describe your college's Digital Strategy document
 - a.** A stand-alone strategy
 - b.** Part of the Learning and Teaching strategy
 - c.** Part of the ICT strategy
- 2.** What date was the most recent version published?
- 3.** Is there an associated implementation plan for the Digital Strategy?
 - a.** If so, when was this last updated?
 - b.** Describe any specific targets that are in your implementation plan for digital capability
- 4.** Have you established any KPIs that relate to digital capability?
- 5.** Which, if any, framework was used to inform your Digital Strategy?
- 6.** Were other frameworks considered? If so which ones? (eg ETF, Wales)
- 7.** Do you require formal certification of digital competence for staff?
 - a.** If so, is this certification in basic skills only? To what SCQF level?
 - b.** Are there any plans for certification in the future?
- 8.** Pre March 2020, what digital capabilities for teaching staff were you focussing on developing?
- 9.** During the period March 2020 – Now
 - a.** Describe any new demands of digital capability that were not already present in your provision for teaching staff
 - b.** Describe any areas of digital capability that were particularly challenging for teaching staff
 - c.** Describe the arrangements that you put in place to enable students to transition to online learning
 - d.** Describe the arrangements that you put in place to enable staff to transition to online learning
 - e.** Have you produced a revised Digital Strategy and/or Implementation Plan in this period? If so, what were the main changes/additions from the pre-Covid version(s)?
- 10.** Describe how digital capability is treated in the college performance review processes
- 11.** Describe the college approaches to providing opportunities for staff to develop their digital capabilities.
 - a.** What is the balance between internal training and support and external (eg LinkedIn Learning)
- 12.** Describe any tools that you use to help staff identify their level of competence and confidence in the several dimensions of digital capability (however defined by your college)?
- 13.** Does your staff on-boarding process include a digital capability component? Does it include basic digital training?
- 14.** Which aspects of virtual learning do you judge valuable enough to continue post-Covid?

END OF TOPIC LIST

APPENDIX B

Extract from: Professional Standards for Lecturers in Scotland's Colleges (GTCS 2020)

2.3 Technologies and resources for learning, teaching and work	
2.3.1	Understands and evaluates critically the use of technologies in optimising students' ability to learn and their relevance to the world of work.
2.3.2	Understands how to keep up to date with emerging industry / subject technological advances.
2.3.3	Understands how to embed appropriate digital technology.
2.3.4	Understands the safe use of technology and the necessity for cyber resilience and security.
2.3.5	Understands the nature and agenda for sustainability, and works in partnership to ensure the most effective, efficient and inclusive development and use of learning resources

3.1 Ongoing professional learning	
3.1.5	Engages with technology and digital literacies to enhance opportunities for collaborative practice and professional learning

3.3 Creates innovative curriculum design and learning and teaching	
3.3.5	Adopts creative approaches to the embedding of appropriate digital technologies for effective planning, delivery and assessment of learning

3.4 Effective application of digital technologies to learning, life and work	
3.4.1	Promotes and supports the safe and respectful use of digital technologies and the impact on others.
3.4.2	Engages with, and evaluates critically, the use of technologies and their impact on meeting student needs, and supporting learning, teaching and assessment.
3.4.3	Promotes and facilitates wider access to learning and teaching and assessment through the effective application of digital technologies

3.5 Critical reflective and collaborative practice in learning and teaching	
3.5.4	Facilitates and engages in the use of local and global digital learning communities to enhance opportunities for collaborative practice.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The Scottish Government (2017) REALISING SCOTLAND'S FULL POTENTIAL IN A DIGITAL WORLD: A DIGITAL STRATEGY FOR SCOTLAND. Edinburgh. The Scottish Government.
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- 4 European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators (DigCompEdu)
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- 5 Education and Training Foundation TAKING LEARNING TO THE NEXT LEVEL: DIGITAL TEACHING PROFESSIONAL FRAMEWORK, Guide for teachers and trainers
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- 6 JISC digital capabilities framework: The six elements defined
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