



UNIVERSITY WEBSITE AND DIGITAL FUNCTIONS

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1. Introduction

This document summarises selected findings from a recent comparator study undertaken by SUMS Consulting of website and digital functions. This work was shaped around the needs of a particular assignment. The study group comprised 16 universities, including two US institutions. Two organisations from outside the higher education sector also participated in the study – a local government organisation in the UK and a US-based national not-for-profit research and policy organisation – to bring an external perspective from organisations with similar challenges.

The comparator study points to a wide diversity of practice in the structure, resource and role of website and digital functions across the HE sector. It identified several areas of good practice and a number of critical factors that can contribute to an effective operation.

The following pages explore:

- Sector trends
- Key findings from the study
- Areas of good practice identified in the study
- Critical factors for an effective function

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2. Context: sector trends in website and digital functions

Recent studies into HE website and digital activities reveal a function in flux, as institutions grapple with the challenges of establishing user-centric communications and technologies and promoting institutionally-wide collaborative strategies within highly devolved structures and siloed cultures.

Key findings from these studies include:

Fragmented customer journeys as a result of siloed thinking and highly-devolved structures

While website and digital teams are all too acutely aware of the importance of customer-focused communications and technologies, institutional culture and structure is making it difficult to translate this knowledge into reality. Given the importance of digital in the increasingly competitive market for students, universities must move away from siloed to user-centric approaches if they are to compete effectively.

Focusing of university resources on institutional websites rather than on campaigns

A key current trend among universities is an increase in externally focused websites: investment away from digital campaign marketing. It is expected that re-investment in digital campaigns will be made once external websites have been improved.

Meaningful steps being taken towards customer-focused website and digital activities

A change in the focus of digital marketers from functionality to more personalised engagement through the creation of unique user experiences. Universities are currently focusing on the following web and digital activities: user journey mapping and analysis, content audits and governance redesign, digital skills audit and team restructuring, personalising content using geolocation and personalisation technologies, and customer engagement through social media.

Development of structures to support collaborative and co-creational working

University structures globally are beginning to support more flexible and reflective ways of working. This evolution is enabling institutions to relax hierarchical decision-making processes and to promote collaborative strategies and incorporate student voices.

Universities embarking on digital transformation projects

This is digital transformation in its purest sense – the creation of a unified digital culture of shared values – requiring a holistic approach and cultural change, alongside significant resources and senior management support. Despite the scale of the challenge to become a truly digital university, studies have identified a number of universities that are taking their first significant steps towards digital transformation.

3. Key findings from the comparator study

Shared challenges

Understandably, given the pace of technological advances and the increasing importance of digital in today's world, web and digital functions face a number of complex challenges.

The major challenges shared by organisations in the study are:

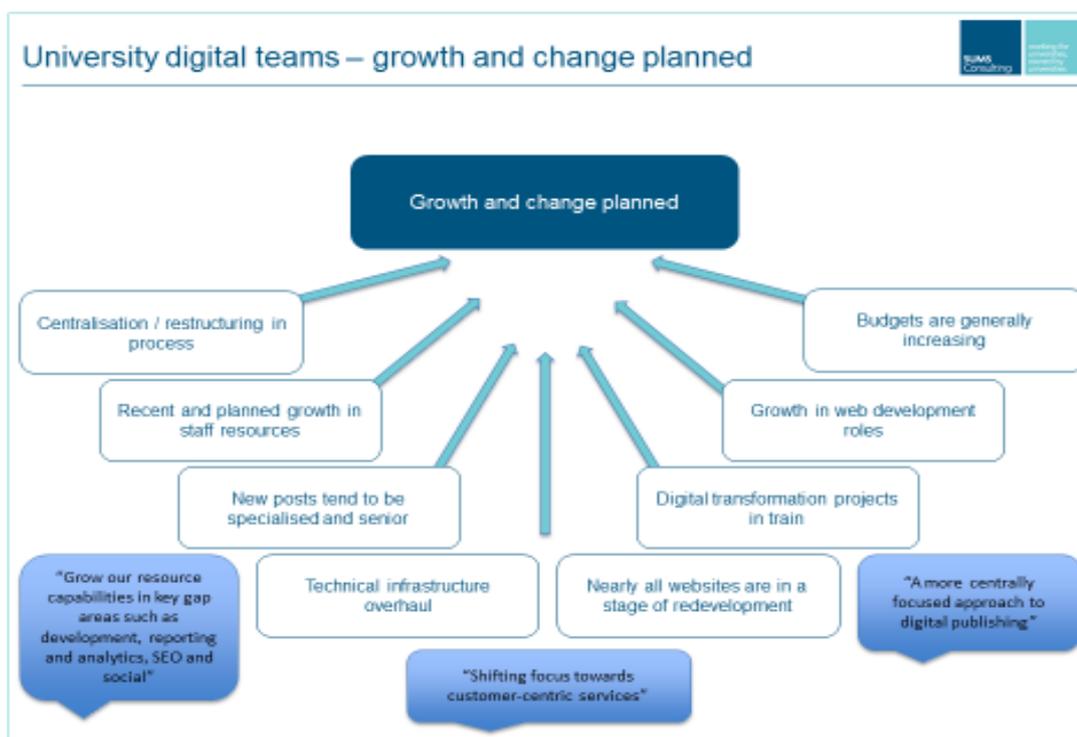
- **A highly-devolved structure**, resulting in thinly spread resources, unmanaged and non-strategic content creation of varying quality, one-off and duplicated efforts that focus on web development rather than strategic marketing activities, and the increased difficulties this structure places on effective internal communications.
- **Insufficient or inadequate resources** (staff and budgets) to manage increasing workloads, respond to technological advances, take on new projects alongside business as usual responsibilities, manage effective cross-organisational communications, and to support measuring and reporting on metrics and marketing automation tools and processes.
- **Balancing strategic planning and agility** due to unplanned growth in the range of service demands and comparatively regular changes in team focus that fall outside strategic priorities and beyond the capability and capacity of existing resources.
- **A product or siloed culture**, which makes securing stakeholder buy-in to support an organisational shift to a more user-centric strategic approach especially challenging.
- **Providing suitable digital platforms** that meet the needs of a diverse range of stakeholders, activities and strategic aims.
- **Managing activities effectively with outdated and inadequate ICT systems, platforms and infrastructure**, including content management systems (CMS) and server insecurity and instability.

Structure and resources

- **Most website and digital teams in the benchmark are based in the central external relations department**, usually within the marketing team. A smaller number are located in ICT departments or split between ICT and marketing.
- **Responsibility for key web and digital activities sits across a number of teams**, with responsibility for key activities such as websites (both primary and smaller sites) and blogs split equally between website, digital and IT teams. Content creation and digital recruitment activities tend to sit in the digital team, the communications team or are devolved across the institution. Hosting, network and security services are provided by the central ICT department.
- **Most respondents (69%) work with third-party providers to secure specialist knowledge and skills** such as user experience, digital advertising, CMS support, web development and design, content strategy, inbound marketing and training.
- **Most respondents have a highly-devolved or mixed structure**
A small number are currently centralising or planning to centralise the web and digital function and, of those with centralised functions, the centralising process took place within the last four years.
- **The scale of devolved roles with web responsibilities varies considerably**: at one extreme, no-one outside of the central team has editing access; at the other, more than 1,600 staff can change content. However, most organisations have fewer than 300 and just over half have 20 or fewer. The study reveals that the scale of devolution for the universities in the group is unrelated to the size of the institution.

- **Resources vary considerably**, with central teams ranging from 4 FTE to 23 FTE and non-pay budgets ranging from up to £25k to £250k and above – with no correlation between the size of the team, the location and size of the institution, and its budget (neither pay nor non-pay).
- **The salary levels of individual posts vary considerably, irrespective of location**
The direct comparison of posts was outside the scope of the study, but the variety indicates a marked difference in the grades and levels of responsibility of key web and digital posts between HEIs. For example, a web developer may expect to earn between £30-40k at one institution and more than £70k at another.

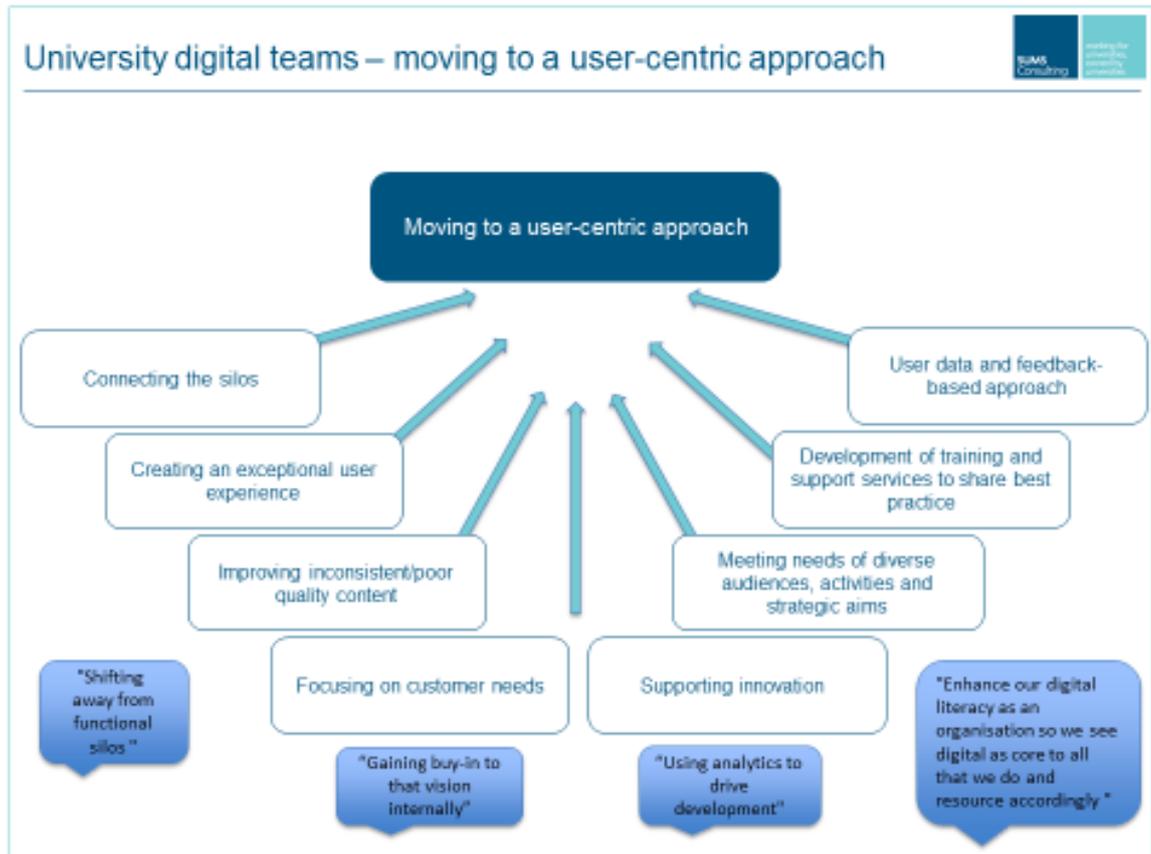
Functions in flux – growth and change planned



Many of the organisations in the study have recently undergone, were in the process of, or were planning, significant changes to their web and digital functions. Amongst these the most significant are:

- **Structural changes and major projects**, ranging from restructuring and shifts towards customer-focused approaches, to overhauls of all web platforms and key systems and major web refreshments or content creation.
- **Expanding their teams and in-house capabilities**. Most universities have recently added new posts, and more than half are planning new additions. These new roles tend to be specialised (areas of expertise include web development, project and innovation management, content creation, reporting and analytics and design) and more than half are at management level or above.
- **Budgets are increasing**, with a quarter of universities having increased their budget since 2015-16 and another third planning an increase in 2017-18. The reasons for these increases include website and platform development, growth in staff resources, and filling specific skill gaps in an increasingly competitive market for developers.

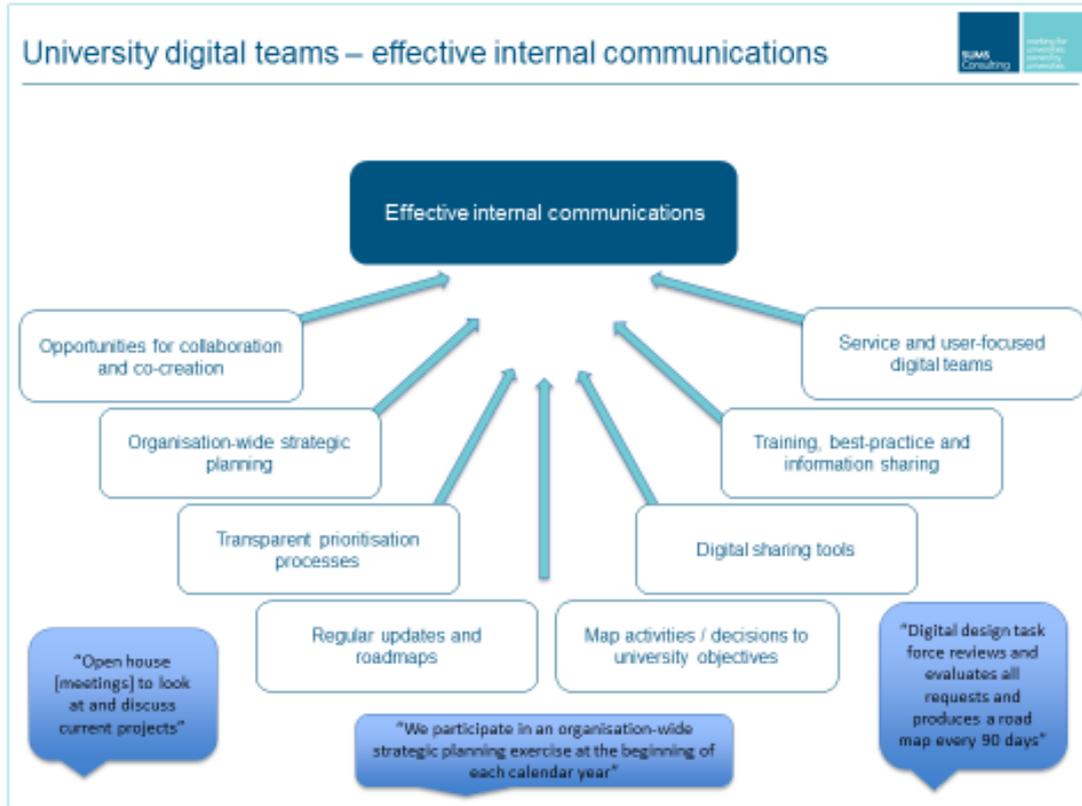
- Shifting to a user-centric approach.** There is broad consensus among study participants that the single biggest improvement to website and digital activity would be to shift to an entirely user-centric approach. A third of organisations in the study are in the process of doing so. While this is a big challenge for many, participants cite evidence, metrics and effective internal communications as vital to such a cultural change.



4. Areas of good practice identified in the comparator study

This section explores how participants are positively addressing some of their major challenges.

Strong commitment to frequent and open communications and strong relationship building



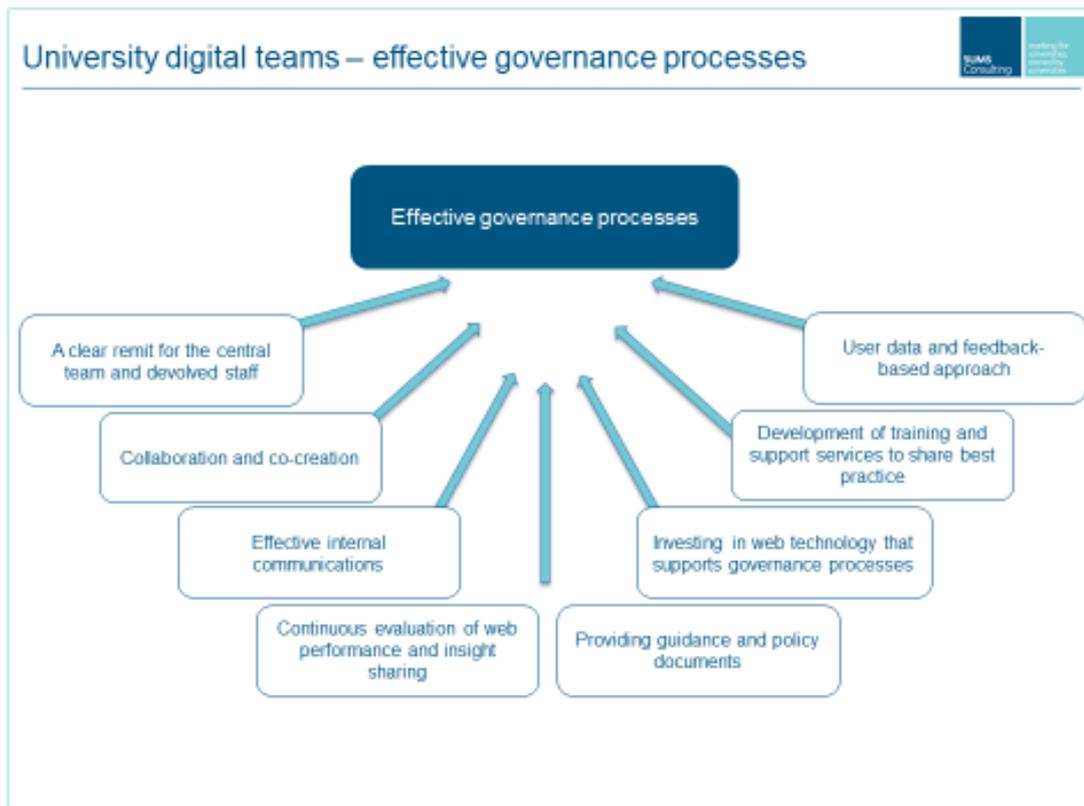
The study reveals that effective and open communications are more closely correlated with higher levels of satisfaction than many other aspects of web and digital functions. All organisations that identified areas that were working well referred to communications as a central aspect of this activity. Higher levels of dissatisfaction were expressed by web and digital teams that felt isolated and did not cite communications activities as a major component of their team’s remit.

Collaboration and co-creation



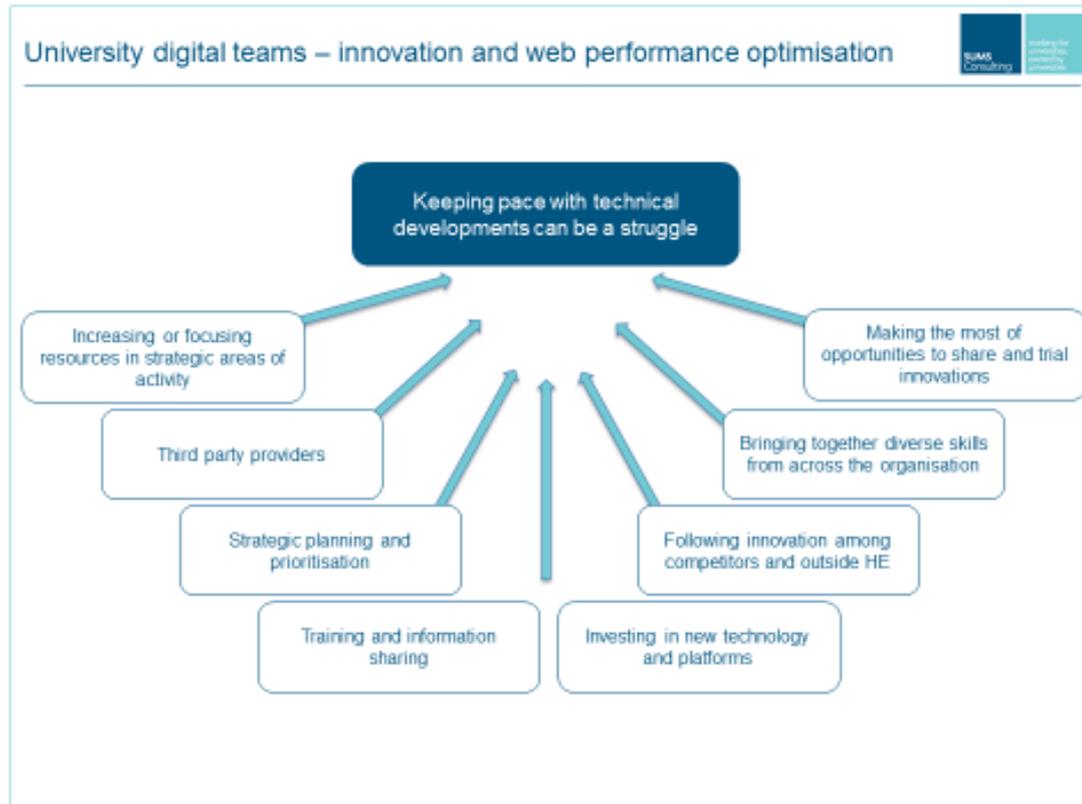
Most HEIs have staff with web and digital responsibilities located across the organisation, whether within devolved or centralised structures. Higher levels of satisfaction were expressed by those teams benefitting from cross-organisational collaboration and co-creation of web and digital activities, enabling them to draw on a wide range of skills and expertise.

Varying approaches to governance



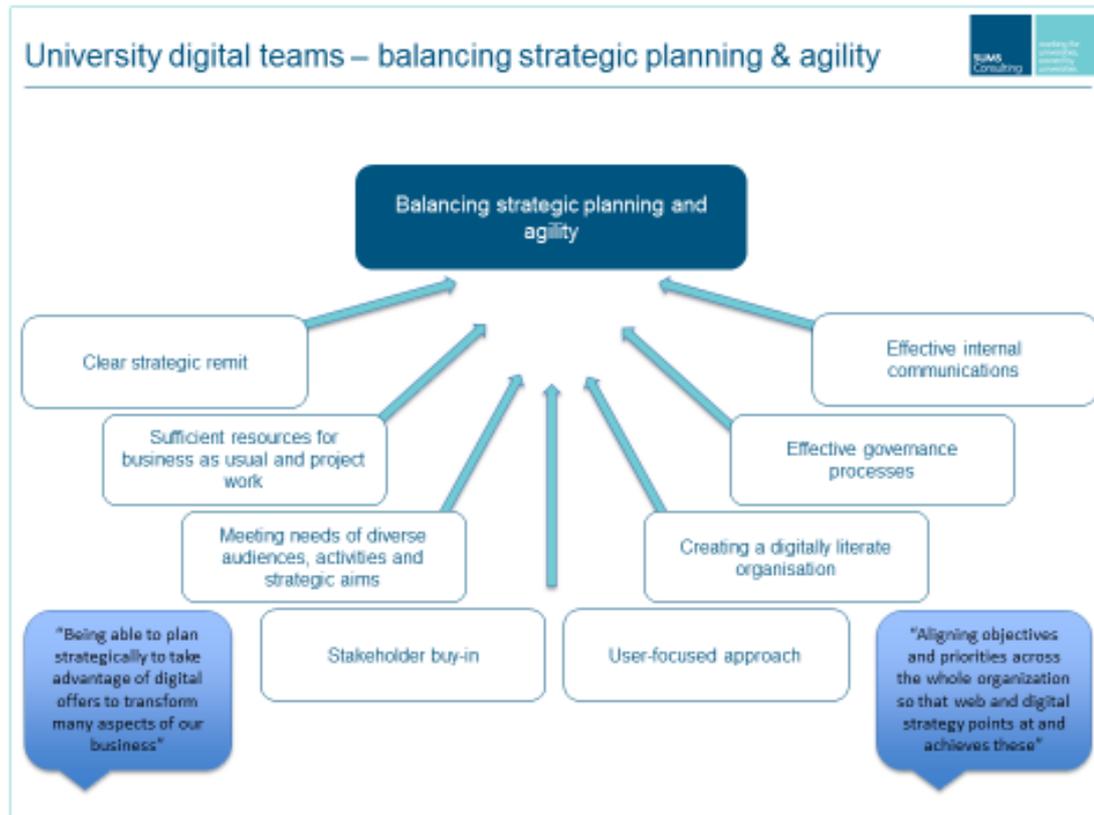
A range of devolved governance tactics are used to manage devolved structures and cross-organisational teams effectively. Several organisations refer to the importance of web and digital projects in offering an opportunity to introduce governance processes, enabling new systems to support governance processes as part of their design. Many of those with effective governance processes in place implemented them as part of a project. Some are aiming to introduce better governance processes as part of their planned website redevelopment, digital team restructuring or digital transformation projects.

Keeping up with technological advances



Events, publications, training, third-party providers and inspiration from outside their sector are the key ways that teams keep up-to-date with technological advances. Other methods include competitor analysis and regular monitoring of user feedback and analytics. Most respondents work with third-party providers to secure specialist knowledge and skills in areas such as user experience, digital advertising, CMS support, web development and design, content strategy, inbound marketing, and for training purposes. Having a passionate and inquisitive team and taking advantage of projects to explore innovations and new technologies were cited as important aspects of staying ahead of the latest trends.

Balancing strategic planning and agility



While balancing strategic planning and agility is a big challenge for many of the organisations in the study, the ability to do so is viewed as a major factor in delivering an effective web and digital function. Several good practice examples emerged from the study:

- Aligning the digital strategy with wider university objectives and strategies.
- Ensuring that digital activities are represented at a senior level and feed regularly into strategic decision-making.
- Placing responsibility on senior team members for staying on top of, sharing and feeding the latest technological advances, trends and best practice into the digital strategy, thereby helping to ensure it remains responsive and fit-for-purpose.
- Implementing strategic planning processes that incorporate organisation-wide representation and support the creation of a digital strategy that reflects, and is owned by, the whole organisation. Examples include having leads from each department contribute to the annual strategic planning, reviewing and prioritising process and inviting all staff to attend and contribute to strategic planning and review meetings.
- Ensuring that organisational strategy is central to the daily work and decision-making of web and digital teams.
- Giving pre-eminence to the needs of customers empowers web and digital teams to justify and openly communicate their strategic priorities and decisions throughout the year.

5. Critical factors for an effective function

The study reveals a number of critical factors for an effective web and digital function.

A mixed structure with a manageable number of devolved staff that includes professional communications staff.

Those teams with a mixed structure comprising a central team working alongside devolved staff reported the highest satisfaction levels with existing structure and resources. Keeping the number of devolved staff as manageable as possible makes training and skills development programmes, internal communications and governance structures more effective while also maximising access to resources, skills and expertise across the university. Those with locally based professional communications staff – responsible for managing local communications activities including web and digital, and with a consistent reporting line into the centre – tended to report higher levels of satisfaction.

A central web and digital team supported by sufficient numbers of skilled and professional devolved staff.

Institutions with a central web and digital team supported by sufficient numbers of skilled and professional devolved staff, tended to report higher levels of satisfaction. Areas of expertise in which key skill gaps are being addressed include: web/CMS support, technical development, architecture, design, user experience, content creation, project/innovation/service delivery management, reporting and analytics.

A clear and strategic remit supported by an effective governance structure.

Those most satisfied with workloads and resources have a clear strategic central remit as experts and champions of web and digital activities, empower and upskill staff across the organisation to manage content creation locally, and are supported by a range of governance approaches.

Regular, open and varied communications targeted at different stakeholder groups.

Higher levels of satisfaction were expressed across the group in those teams that dedicated substantial effort to building cross-organisational relations, sharing updates and insights, collaborative and co-creational working, and upskilling devolved staff through regular, open and varied methods of communications targeted not only at devolved staff but at all staff and users across the organisation.

Being located or co-located in the external relations department.

Location in the external relations department was identified as beneficial given the central role of web and digital in external relations; thereby aiding good relations and collaborative working across the external relations division, simplifying strategic and operational processes, joining up on- and off-line activities and contributing to a user-centric and digital-first approach.