
UNIVERSITY E-LEARNING STRATEGIES – DO THEY ACTUALLY IMPROVE ACCESS?

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Abstract

In a study carried out on behalf of the New Zealand Ministry of Education in 2007, Brown and his colleagues surveyed national e-learning policies in a number of countries and states/provinces. They found that there was often a disconnect between e-learning and the “rich and long tradition of distance education”. The strategies tend to present e-learning and ODL as a “completely new phenomenon ... The key point is that e-learning does not automatically serve the same purpose as distance education” (Brown et al 2007: 79). The purpose of this paper is to review the e-learning strategies adopted by traditional universities to judge the extent to which they are improving the access to university for the non-campus based student.

In 2005, HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council of England) adopted a strategy to embed e-learning in all higher education institutions in a sustainable way, by 2010.

According to HEFCE:

‘In the light of our rationale and definition for our e-learning strategy, we therefore aim to support the HE sector as it moves towards embedding e-learning appropriately, using technology to transform higher education into a more student-focused and flexible system, as part of lifelong learning for all who can benefit.’ (HEFCE 2005: 5)

Thus, HEFCE was explicit that one of the objectives of their strategy was that e-learning would result in a more flexible system which would provide greater access to all who could benefit. One result of the HEFCE strategy has been the adoption of e-learning strategies in the majority of UK universities. Ten of these e-learning strategies were selected for analysis. A key purpose of this analysis was to see if the strategies explicitly aim to increase access. Additionally, the study analysed the strategies along a number of parameters including:

- Enhancement of Teaching and Learning
- Staff Training & Support
- Implementation Policy & Strategic Alignment
- Library and Learning Resources
- Estates

The purpose of this more extensive analysis was to review the current position of e-learning in the selected universities with a view to formulating likely trends.

The results of this study are that most of the selected universities do not currently see e-learning as a way to widen access. Rather the focus of the e-learning strategies is on the enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning. There is also a focus on building capacity i.e. on upgrading the e-learning skills of academics and how to support them in their use of e-learning.

However, the e-learning strategies adopted by universities can be viewed in a developmental context. The development can be viewed on a trajectory from introductory/ancillary use of e-learning to intermediate/blended use to advanced/transformational adoption of e-learning. Currently, most of the universities selected for this study are in the introductory phase with a few in, or moving into, the intermediate phase. While a broader analysis, incorporating more universities (both in the UK and elsewhere), would be required to be definitive, the indications from this study are that the potential of e-learning to transform traditional universities is unlikely to be realised in the short to medium term.

Introduction

In 2007, a study was carried out on behalf of the New Zealand Ministry of Education surveyed national e-learning policies in Australia, Canada, Finland, Iceland, Korea, Japan, Sweden, UK and the USA. In addition, the e-learning strategies of the following states and provinces were reviewed: California, Pennsylvania, Ontario, British Columbia, New Brunswick and Saskatchewan. The researchers identified three stages in national e-learning policy development:

- governments act to make e-learning possible with strategies to develop physical infrastructure
- governments work to integrate e-learning into the education system (mainstreaming and embedding e-learning)
- e-learning takes a transformative role – changing the view of learning and operation of universities/tertiary system (Brown et al 2007: 76).

Brown and his colleagues' study summarised a number of issues arising from their analysis of strategies as follows:

- There is no standard definition of e-learning; online learning and distance learning are often treated as synonymous.
- There is often a disconnect between e-learning and the 'rich and long tradition of distance education'. The strategies tend to present e-learning and ODL as a 'completely new phenomenon', whereas 'The key point is that e-learning does not automatically serve the same purpose as distance education and this distinction has not been well articulated in most policy texts' (Brown et al 2007: 77).
- Main focus is on formal tertiary education rather than on the full range of lifelong learning
- Lack of strategies for disadvantaged and under represented groups
- Lack of policy alignment – e-learning policy often not supported & reinforced in other tertiary policy initiatives
- Economic imperatives underpin much e-learning policy – a common goal is to create competitive and dynamic knowledge based economies, but this can act to limit the wider adoption of e-learning for other purposes.
- Drivers linked to forces of neo-liberalism and globalisation & global education market.
- Lack of debate and critical dialogue on risks of investment in e-learning – value rarely questioned and the discourse is removed from any deeper consideration of educational policy; most policy texts do not explain how or why e-learning will meet goals such as equity, fairness, social justice.

In 2005, HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council of England) adopted a strategy to embed e-learning in all higher education institutions in a sustainable way, by 2010. A fund of £33m was distributed as seed funding for the initiative. This would seem to be a major change in policy direction. As Morris has noted:

“Within the UK, there has been a marked switch in national strategies for e-learning away from funding centralised initiatives (such as the UKeU and the National Health Service University) to decentralised activities with funding allocated to individual institutions” (Morris 2008: 336).

According to HEFCE

‘In the light of our rationale and definition for our e-learning strategy, we therefore aim to support the HE sector as it moves towards embedding e-learning appropriately, using technology to transform higher education into a more student-focused and flexible system, as part of lifelong learning for all who can benefit.’ (HEFCE 2005: 5)

Thus, HEFCE was explicit that one of the key objectives of their strategy was that e-learning would result in a more flexible system which would provide greater access to all who could benefit. One of the results of the HEFCE initiative has been the development or updating of e-learning strategies by most English universities. (Quite a number UK universities had e-learning strategies before the HEFCE initiative.)

A key question is whether this move to embed e-learning in individual institutions will lead to greater access. The purpose of this paper is to review the extent to which the embedding of e-learning in traditional (i.e. not distance teaching) universities in the UK is likely to lead to improved access to university for the non-campus based student. The method chosen was to analyse the e-learning strategies adopted by a number of traditional (campus-based) universities in the UK. This analysis also aims to discover key areas of commonality among the strategies with a view to distinguishing likely trends in the development of e-learning within UK universities.

Methodology

A systematic search was carried out of UK university websites and a number of universities were identified whose e-learning strategies were available publicly on their websites.

Ten of these e-learning strategies were selected for further analysis. The ten selected universities were:

- Birkbeck University of London¹
- Bournemouth University²
- Cardiff University³
- Queen’s University Belfast⁴
- University of Bristol⁵
- University of Dundee⁶
- University of Lancaster⁷

¹ http://www.bbk.ac.uk/elearning/elag/elearnstrategy/index_html/elearn_stra_pdf

² http://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/eds/documents/bu_e-learning_strategy_01_2006v2.pdf

³ <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/learning/resources/e-learning%20strategy.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.qub.ac.uk/home/Education/e-learningatQueens/FileUpload/Filetoupload,10118,en.doc>

⁵ http://www.ltss.bris.ac.uk/news/source_documents/elearning-strategy.doc

⁶ http://www.somis.dundee.ac.uk/academic/e_learning_strat.htm

- University of Leicester⁸
- University of Paisley⁹
- University of Warwick¹⁰

The key point of the analysis was to gauge the extent to which the e-learning strategies had the objective of developing online courses aimed at the off-campus student or, at least, aimed to introduce greater flexibility into the delivery of courses.

Additionally, the study analysed the strategies along a number of parameters including:

- Enhancement of Teaching and Learning
- Staff Training & Support
- Implementation Policy & Strategic Alignment
- Library and Learning Resources
- Estates

The purpose of this more extensive analysis was to review the current position of e-learning in the selected universities with a view to formulating likely trends.

Before proceeding, it is worth noting the variable nature of the e-learning strategies. Some are highly detailed (such as the e-learning strategy from the University of Leicester), explicitly linked to various strategic goals of the originating university and containing very specific implementation plans and targets. Others are much less specific and written at a high level of abstraction (such as the University of Dundee)¹¹. Most are in-between these two extremes and focus on particular issues which (presumably) are critical to the university (such as the University of Lancaster and Birkbeck University of London).

When viewing the results of this analysis, a useful classification of e-learning courses is the one used in the Sloan surveys survey given in Table 1.

Table 1: Course Classifications

% Online	Type	Descriptions
0%	Traditional	Course with no online technology used — content is delivered in writing or orally.
1 to 29%	Web Facilitated	Course that uses web-based technology to facilitate what is essentially a face-to-face course. Uses a course management system (CMS) or web pages to post the syllabus and assignments, for example.
30 to 79%	Blended	Course that blends online and face-to-face delivery. Substantial proportion of the content is delivered online, typically uses online discussions, and typically has some face-to-face meetings.
80+%	Online	A course where most or all of the content is delivered online. Typically have no face-to-face

⁷ <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/celt/celtweb/files/eL%20Strategy%20Final%202006.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.le.ac.uk/strategies/elearning/>

⁹ <http://www.paisley.ac.uk/schoolsdepts/ICT/documents/elearning-extract.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/elearning/trends/university/>

¹¹ In general, more recently published strategies have become more detailed and specific.

Source: Allen and Seaman 2007.

Results

Flexible Delivery

Of the ten universities studied, only the University of Leicester foregrounds distance learning in their e-learning strategy. This is perhaps not surprising as Leicester would be the only one of the selected universities to already have a substantial distance education offering. Leicester says that its e-learning strategy is designed to “meet the compelling requirement to continue to develop distance learning in a way that includes sound pedagogical and business models to an increasingly receptive and demanding educational market”.

More frequent is the mention of blended learning. Blended e-learning delivery is implicit as a major delivery mode in most of the strategies and explicit as the major mode in some.

Birkbeck states

“Because much of Birkbeck’s distinctiveness lies in its provision of face-to-face learning experiences, it is envisaged that developments in e-learning will primarily be directed toward augmenting our face-to-face provision in a blended fashion. As such, e-learning will be important in increasing flexibility for our students”.

Queens University Belfast states that “The University proposes that e-learning will largely occur in the context of blended learning (i.e. the integration of e-learning with traditional media and methods according to course content, level and students). The current version of the e-learning Strategy will focus on this aspect only.”

However, the selected universities do not restrict themselves. For example, Queens goes on to state that “it is proposed that a select number of programmes be approved to use e-learning to offer courses throughout the world i.e. distance learning. These courses will offer something unique or have a marketing advantage that sets them apart from courses offered by other providers.” And Birkbeck states “E-learning approaches also are key elements in provision of distance learning in which students normally would not attend classes on the Birkbeck campus. Further development of e-learning at Birkbeck is likely to benefit existing distance learning programmes and to encourage and enable appropriate new ventures into distance learning.”

The potential of fully online programmes is viewed in a number of the strategies as a means of reacting to opportunities. Dundee’s strategy states ‘Where opportunities occur to develop programmes for off-campus students, the University needs to act rapidly but responsibly, only encouraging projects where the market has been tested and assessed in detail, and where a return on investment can be predicted with some confidence.’

However, it is clear from the strategies that (with the exception of Leicester) the selected universities are in preliminary stages with regard to the provision of off-campus courses via e-learning. There would seem to be substantial awareness of the potential but with this awareness there is the realisation of the many differences between current modes of operation and what

would be required to successfully deliver e-learning courses aimed at off-campus students. For many, their move into even blended learning is tentative.

As would be expected given its substantial experience in distance learning, Leicester has a number of interesting things to say about fully online e-learning programmes aimed at off-campus students:

‘Research into the technology is now robust enough for attention to turn to business development, pedagogical innovation and away from technical ‘solutions’ and ‘fixes’. Research into distance learning over more than 30 years has identified what works, what does not, what constitutes excellence and what adds real value to student experiences. Most is relevant to distributed [fully online] e-learning. Such knowledge is of no value if it cannot be used in a flexible and contextualized manner’.

Finally, Leicester goes on to state:

‘Distance and e-learning require more up-front investment (compared to campus based teaching) but offer a low cost and sustainable model over several years if large numbers of students continue to register. ... Attempting scaling up of distance learning through ‘hand crafting’ (in a way that is possible in campus based learning) is uneconomic and unsustainable for distance. Therefore predictions need to be made about which courses are worth funding in this way, serious choices made and resources diverted in those directions.’

Other Aspects of the e-Learning Strategies

As distance education/flexible delivery was not prominent in the e-learning strategies, it was decided to analyse to strategies of the selected universities in more depth with a view to (a) establishing which elements were common; (b) obtaining information on the importance given to different elements and (c) projecting likely trends. The following elements emerged as significant:

- Enhancement of Teaching and Learning
- Staff Training & Support
- Implementation Policy & Strategic Alignment
- Library and Learning Resources
- Estates
- Research and Evaluation

Enhancement of Teaching and Learning

The e-learning strategies of all the selected universities foreground the potential of e-learning to enhance teaching and learning. Cardiff sees e-learning as a means to “encourage our students to use ‘deep’ approaches to learning - to enhance collaboration in learning”. Birkbeck believes “E-learning approaches will improve the effectiveness of our teaching - facilitate collaborative learning activities - enable students to more effectively prepare for classroom activities and, subsequently, to reflect on and learn from these activities”.

Warwick states “E-learning technologies, appropriately used and supported, can enhance current educational practices in several ways. Among other things, they can:

- facilitate collaborative learning

- help focus and intensify students' preparation for classroom activities
- help enable more efficient and effective use to be made of large-group activities such as lectures
- provide access to resources and expertise without reference to geography”

Leicester makes the following insightful point about online pedagogy “the focus should be to further develop communication and group teaching in the online environment ... Content is rarely viewed as a major differentiator; value lies in brand, support, group teaching, communication with staff, accreditation and licenses to practice.”

Allied to enhancing teaching and learning are a range of related issues which the strategies state can be encompassed by e-learning. These include:

- Foster various learning outcomes. For example, Cardiff sees e-learning as a way to ‘equip students with the skills required to foster a spirit of enquiry and to challenge orthodoxy
- Foster information literacy skills. For example, Queens sees e-learning as a way ‘to ensure that students gain the relevant skills, which are needed to engage with e-environments, both as independent learners who can take responsibility for what and how they learn, and as members of tomorrow’s work force.’
- Use e-assessment to cut down on staff workload. For example, Warwick states “Steps to employ CAA [Computer Aided Assessment] systems have been taken in certain parts of some departments over the past few years. ... Marking loads are among academic staff’s heaviest burdens, and many will be keen to adopt CAA systems where these are pedagogically appropriate.”
- Use e-portfolios as a more authentic method of assessment. For example, Bournemouth seeks to ‘Continue [its] strategy for embedding e-PDP [Personal Development Portfolio] in programmes and investigate the potential of ePortfolios for describing and recording learning achievement and personal development’

Staff Training and Support

Along with the enhancement of teaching and learning, the other major consideration in all the e-learning strategies was staff training and support.

All strategies analysed make provision for extensive staff training. Mostly, it is envisaged that the training is to be provided by a central e-learning support unit often in the context of a professional accredited programme. Queens’ approach would be typical: “Within Queen’s, the Information Services Educational Technology Unit already provides a programme of e-learning related workshops and seminars which has been well received by staff... The training needs to focus both on the development of technical skills ... and the pedagogical aspects of utilising e-learning “

However, it is generally recognised that centrally provided training on its own will not embed e-learning. For example, Warwick states “Experience has shown that mounting centrally-targeted training courses has had limited effects on the take-up of e-learning techniques by academic and other staff. Work will be needed directly with departments to respond to their individual needs.” Therefore considerable space in the strategy documents is given to discussing a variety of flexible means of providing support to staff who are implementing e-

learning. The many options considered and the amount of space given to this issue identifies this issue as a key one in implementing e-learning within traditional universities.

In addition, it is recognised in some strategies that incentives had to be put in place to encourage staff to engage in e-learning. For example, Bristol's strategy includes a clause : "To recognise the need for academic staff to have time to develop e-learning. Specifically, effective and innovative e-learning practice should count as evidence for promotion on the grounds of excellence in teaching."¹²

Implementation Policy and Strategic Alignment

Most of the strategies gave considerable space to how the e-learning strategy is to be implemented. All the selected universities, except Bournemouth, have adopted a 'bottom-up' rather than 'top-down' implementation policy. For example, Dundee's strategy states "The University supports initiatives and creativity emerging from the ground up, rather than through top-down diktat" and Warwick's strategy states "E-learning resources should be an amenity for staff and students, but not imposed on staff".

This implementation policy would suggest that the drafters of the e-learning strategies do not see e-learning as core business. This impression is re-inforced when one looks at the extent to which the e-learning strategy is integrated into the other strategies of the university. While practically all the e-learning strategies sought to align with other strategies of the originating university, this was incomplete. Sometimes there was considerable detail in aligning the e-learning strategies with other university strategies (particularly the Teaching and Learning Strategy). However, relatively few mentioned the university's strategic plan and overall there was little coherence. It seemed relatively random as to which other strategies got articulated with the e-learning strategy.

Library and Learning Resources

A number of the e-learning strategies refer to the changing role of the Library in an e-learning context. Bournemouth notes that its Library is in process of evolution from a storehouse for books to a multi-purpose learning resource centre, with adaptable spaces to facilitate group work, and a central role for learning technology. Bournemouth also has a series of policies (a) to promote the development and sharing of learning resources for skills; (b) to promote development and adoption of subject online resources and (c) to identify and link to international and national repository and resource-sharing initiatives.

Teaching Space

Pressure on teaching space is obviously a problem in a number of the selected universities and e-learning is seen as a potential way to ameliorate this problem. For example, Lancaster seeks to "to manage the continued pressures on ... on teaching space through appropriate deployment of e-learning".

¹² It is interesting that in contrast to the amount of space given to staff support, very little space is giving to the need for student support. Only one of the ten selected strategies address this issue.

Conclusions

The following points can be drawn for the foregoing discussion:

- The lack of emphasis on fully online courses, and the tentative nature of the discussion of even blended courses, would indicate that most of the universities studied are still some distance from being in a position to deliver fully-online courses aimed at off-campus students.
- The emphasis on enhancing teaching and learning would seem to indicate that this is the area which is most in need of attention and/or is the area in which the drafters of the strategies see e-learning as having most to offer.
- The emphasis on staff training and support would indicate that the traditional mode in which staff operate in on-campus universities will require significant 're-engineering' if they are to reach the full potential that e-learning has to offer.

It is possible that a small number of traditional universities will take the lead in the e-learning space – perhaps establishing dominant positions within individual countries.

More generally, as noted above, Brown and his colleagues identified three stages of national e-learning policy development. Perhaps there are similar stages of e-learning strategy development for individual institutions. Lancaster in its e-learning strategy gave a three stage e-learning development path which could be summarised as follows:

- **Minimum/Introductory** - the minimum standard readily achievable now for all programmes of study. This includes online information for all modules, assessment, schedule, etc. Also online notice board and course submission. This defines what all students should expect as part of their e-learning experience at Lancaster University.
- **Intermediate/Contextual** - development & embedding of activities into local LTA [Learning, Teaching, Assessing] practices (blended learning) and customisation to specific disciplines and contexts.
- **Advanced/Transformational** - significant shift in pedagogical practice and greater requirement for technical infrastructure and development. "Assuming, as read, that access is 24/7 anywhere on/off campus".

Lancaster places itself on the cusp from introductory to intermediate. With the exceptions of Leicester and Bournemouth, the other universities studied would seem to be at, or below, this point.

While a broader analysis, incorporating more universities (both in the UK and elsewhere), would be required to be definitive, the indications from this study are that the potential of e-learning to transform traditional universities is unlikely to be realised in the short to medium term.

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