

# Massey University: Devolution of control

Many authorities on e-learning recommend a firm central control on the development and management of this activity. For a number of reasons, Massey University has spent a decade pursuing a relatively decentralised, devolved approach to this activity. This case study considers why Massey has adopted this approach, how it has gone about it, and what has been the result.

MASSEY UNIVERSITY WAS AN EARLY and enthusiastic adopter of e-learning within New Zealand. As the country's major provider of distance education in the university sector, the advantages of e-learning technology were immediately obvious. As early as the late 1980s, a handful of extramural teachers were requiring students to submit assignment work on floppy disks. As soon as email became available, they began using this medium to communicate with their off-campus class groups. With the emergence of the web in the early 1990s, these early adopters used this new medium to widen the learning experience of their extramural students.

These early developments were driven largely by individual teachers. The leadership and central services of the University encouraged rather than directed their efforts. This pattern was consistent with the approach taken for both extramural and campus-based teaching. Massey is a classic 'dual-mode' distance education institution. Teachers typically teach their courses in both 'internal' and extramural mode. They exercise the same high level of autonomy in the planning, preparation and delivery of their extramural teaching as they do for their internal teaching. Central services are available to assist with tasks such as the publication and dispatching of study material, the handling of student assignment work flowing to and from the markers, the management of an extensive examination service and the like, but key decisions about what is taught and how it is taught have remained firmly in the hands of the teaching staff. As facilities for e-learning came available in the mid- and late-1990s, teachers at Massey were determined to retain this same level of control over their use of this new medium in their teaching and learning.

The University leadership was acutely conscious of this strong culture of teacher ownership and commitment to their extramural teaching and of the expectation that this culture would prevail with the new medium as well. The leadership was also fully aware of the contrary advice of international experts: that e-learning required a much higher capital investment in materials preparation than conventional teaching; that it called for a production team approach involving media specialists as well as subject experts; and that planning, resourcing and management needed to become corporate rather than individual activities.

## TAKING THE LEAD

Strategic Management for e-Learning

## Case Study



This strong culture of teacher autonomy was one factor influencing institutional strategy. An equally powerful factor was the issue of resourcing. In the mid-1990s, Massey University, like universities throughout the western world, adopted a more transparent approach to allocating and managing its resources. Government funding was firmly based on enrolment numbers, and the whole sector was being forced to become more efficient. The University responded by devolving most of its income directly to teaching units on the basis of their student numbers and those units were then expected to manage within their allocation.

This was a bracing challenge for Heads of Department and Pro Vice-Chancellors (deans). If their student numbers grew, they could appoint additional staff; if they fell, they would have to shed them. In this new funding environment, these managers gave close scrutiny to any proposals to increase resources for central services or to fund any endeavour by 'top-slicing'. Any such increase would mean less resource available for them. The demand for a significant institutional investment in e-learning coincided with the introduction of this new funding regime. It was not a good time to be proposing the establishment of new and expensive central service and production units.

There was a third factor influencing the decision about how e-learning should be resourced and managed – that of scale. The high investment, production team model of e-learning works most effectively when the effort and investment can be focused on a few strategic programmes at a time. It would be very difficult to resource a wholesale shift of an institution's entire programme portfolio using this model. However, this was the possibility that Massey contemplated. In 2000, Massey delivered more than one thousand courses extramurally as well as another two thousand on campus. At that time, there was an expectation that the great majority of these extramural courses would incorporate some measure of e-learning within 3–5 years.

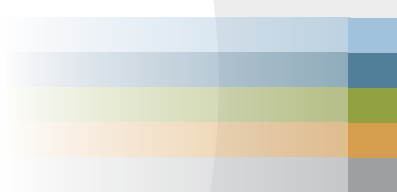
This dilemma was given careful and high-level consideration in a couple of reviews in 1998 and 2001 respectively. On each occasion, the recommendation was that Massey should seek an e-learning solution that was consistent with the prevailing culture of high autonomy for teacher-developers, that any central investment in this new medium would need to be modest at the outset, and that departments and colleges should be challenged to resource this new mode of teaching from their existing, EFTS-based funding allocation.

Balancing these recommendations, the reports also assigned a key role to the central Information Technology Services for hardware, software, networks and connectivity. They also recommended that the central Training and Development unit boost its training and support services for teachers in this area. Colleges were encouraged to develop their own e-learning plans and to employ e-learning managers to facilitate and coordinate this work.

With a few exceptions, these structural and resourcing arrangements continue to this day. Like most strategies, there have been positive and not-so-positive outcomes. On the positive side, most extramural courses and many hundreds of internal courses now make use of the institutional Learning Management System (LMS). Teaching staff have adopted e-learning as an option in their repertoire and they retain responsibility for the development and delivery of their programmes using this medium. The University has established and maintains an efficient network and server environment, a National Call Service for e-learning problems, an online study skills service for students and a well-subscribed programme of staff development in e-learning. Students generally report positively on their e-learning experiences.

Less positively, most courses use only a small selection of the functions available via the LMS, principally the content management and email discussion functions, rather than exploiting the full range of functions available (student web pages, conferencing, quizzes etc). Most courses remain firmly text-based with very few making use of more sophisticated multimedia material. Colleges have also found it hard to maintain a strong strategic direction in e-learning with progress periodically disrupted by turnover in their e-learning management positions or by other pressing college priorities. Students are also likely to notice differences in approaches to e-learning as they move through their degree programmes, with some courses making heavy use of the medium and others much less.

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## Reflections

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A highly devolved model of resourcing and accountability is bound to lead to more variable outcomes than a more centralised, targeted one. Those occupying senior leadership roles in such a system will find it difficult to steer the key issues of what gets taught and how it gets taught if they are not formally accountable for these functions and where they have little influence over resourcing decisions.

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This case study illustrates the importance of an institution's prevailing culture and values, for good or ill. Leaders who choose to work within the existing culture can expect to draw on the strengths of that culture but should expect its disadvantages as well. On the other hand, if they deliberately set out to change the prevailing culture, or they take an initiative that is in breach of that culture, they can anticipate opposition. Some of the early pundits in this area believed that conventional tertiary institutions did not have the necessary values or structures to survive in the digital world of tomorrow. This case study lends only partial support to their claim.

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Some institutions struggle to incorporate e-learning into their day-to-day activities. e-Learning remains an activity that lurches from one centrally funded short-term project to the next with nobody accepting permanent ownership of it. By contrast, this case study is an example of a new and potentially very challenging activity being absorbed relatively smoothly within an institution's routines and systems.

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In retrospect, the decision to challenge colleges (faculties) to develop and drive their own e-learning plans was a little unrealistic, given the large number of competing demands for college time and resources. A recent recommendation to support such plans with targeted central resourcing goes some way to address the problem.

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