

The Open Polytechnic: Planning and development of e-learning courses

The Open Polytechnic is New Zealand's largest ITP. It is the sector's only specialist provider of distance education programmes and has a long and successful history of employing an 'industrial' approach to the preparation, production and delivery of its programmes.

THE OPEN POLYTECHNIC has adopted this same industrial approach in its use of e-learning. The essential features of industrialisation in this context are job differentiation, increased specialisation of task, careful management of work flow, consistency of brand and quality, and the pursuit of economies of scale. The Open Polytechnic applies each of these principles in its use of e-learning.

Planning for e-learning at The Open Polytechnic tends to be initiated at a faculty and programme level. Consultation takes place with the Design and Development Centre (DDC) and the Marketing Group, leading to a course development proposal. The proposal comprises a business case, based on the estimated fixed and variable costs and the anticipated student market. It also includes an educational case, outlining the match between the proposed course package and identified learner needs.

This proposal is then considered by the Executive Group of the institution – comprising the deans and senior managers of finance, marketing and other key operational services. The Executive Group is charged with ensuring that all proposals conform to approved institutional strategy and that priorities are established among competing claims for resources. Bringing all major development proposals to this group also ensures an integrated approach to new programme developments.

Once a development proposal is approved, the DDC appoints one of its staff as project coordinator. That person then manages a production team comprising subject experts from the sponsoring academic programme team, technical specialists in instructional design, editing graphic design and e-learning from the DDC and e-Learning Office, and other specialist assistance as required. Specialist staff may come from operational centres within the institution or commissioned from outside sources when necessary. The project will have an approved project account which is managed by an accountant within the DDC, working alongside the institution's Finance section. Essentially, an internal charging system is used to draw on the resources of the sponsoring faculty to meet the development and production costs associated with the project.

Each project coordinator is responsible for managing the development of their respective course, for coordinating the contribution of team members, for ensuring that all standards, legal and other commitments are met and for keeping the project on schedule. While the faculty and programme team remains effectively the client of the project, the DDC – through the appointed project coordinator – remains formally accountable for the project through to the commissioning of the new programme.

Once the course is fully developed and commissioned, it is handed over to the faculty for delivery. The core content and structure of the course is then 'locked down' to ensure version control and course integrity, although the faculty-based course controller retains the ability to append supplementary material during the life of that version.

TAKING THE LEAD

Strategic Management for e-Learning

Case Study



Reflections

This kind of centrally managed planning and development brings some very positive features with it. The Open Polytechnic can:

- apply a consistent set of standards and guidelines across its offerings. This consistency is particularly evident across the various elements of any given qualification or programme;
 - allocate resources to programme development cost-effectively, ensuring that programmes are resourced on the basis of educational need and scale of demand rather than on the basis of individual advocacy by enthusiastic teachers;
 - coordinate its various operational and support services to meet the requirements of each new programme;
 - take a proactive approach to the uptake of new technology and new pedagogy rather than reacting to the demands and readiness of individual teachers. (Lessons learned across projects are more easily disseminated and further training identified from a centralised perspective).
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Educational leaders of conventional, campus-based institutions may want to apply some of these centrally managed processes to their own institutions. However, they are also likely to confront some issues with the implementation of such a model in their own institutional contexts. A production team approach to course development:

- tends to challenge the prevailing institutional culture of the teacher or academic in charge of the course development process and may not be well-received in some institutions;
 - tends to be more expensive than a teacher-centric one. It can usually only be justified with relatively high student enrolments offering economies of scale. Not many regional institutions have courses with enrolments large enough to justify such an approach;
 - works most effectively when it forms part of a strong strategic leadership of the teaching programme – of what gets taught, how and to whom. If these decisions are made on a devolved basis within an institution, it may be difficult to achieve the necessary consensus on institutional priorities that is evident from the Open Polytechnic case study.
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