UCOL: The importance of locus as well as focus

As the focus of an institution's strategy for e-learning develops, it may need to review the location of its e-learning support services to keep pace with these changes.

IN 1998, UNIVERSAL COLLEGE OF LEARNING (UCOL) shifted to its new, integrated site in the heart of the Palmerston North central business district. The rebuilding exercise gave UCOL the opportunity to take a fresh look at how it wanted to deliver its educational programmes to its diverse mix of students. There was a strong philosophical and pedagogical commitment by the leadership to increasing the flexibility of study options for students, along with a commitment to use new technology to help in this process. Funding for the new site was insufficient to reproduce the number and size of classrooms UCOL had enjoyed at its previous site, which provided added motivation to take full advantage of new learning technologies.

The new campus reflected this focus on flexible learning opportunities: the ratio of classroom space to EFTS was relatively low in the expectation that students would typically undertake a larger proportion of their study independently and outside of the formal classroom; the number of networked student workstations, on the other hand, was relatively high; and teaching staff relinquished their private offices for open-plan offices to facilitate teamwork.

Over the following decade, UCOL has made a significant commitment to e-learning and blended learning. For most of this time, policy and operational support has been driven by an Education Technology Unit (ETU) comprising a Team Leader, a Web Master and an e-Learning Advisor and Developer. The unit provides guidance and support for teachers as they develop and deliver their flexible and online programmes, manages the Learning Management System (LMS) and supports staff and students in their use of it. Unit staff interact with the UCOL's IT service to ensure the provision of networking, hosting, and hardware services. The unit also offers a slate of fully online qualifications in business, computing, health and fitness, and te reo Māori.

These programmes are offered under the 'eCampus' brand. In addition, a large number of campus-based programmes incorporate online elements. For most of this period, UCOL has had a site licence to Blackboard and has provided the normal array of support and infrastructural services for this platform.

The strategic focus for this decade of development has combined two principal objectives – to allow UCOL to extend its enrolment catchment through distance education, and to take full advantage of educational technology in the provision and support of educational programmes. The recent engagement with the Tertiary Education Commission over the Investment Plan process has now forced UCOL to reconsider its strategic goals in general and its goals for e-learning in particular. This negotiation process has led to the adoption of a new set of strategic goals for UCOL and the abandonment of some former goals. There are now some very explicit goals around "improving student success" and providing "excellent education delivery" that have a direct bearing on the development and focus for e-learning.

Conversely, the new funding regime specifically discourages institutes of technology and polytechnics from offering their programmes outside their regions whether by satellite campuses or by distance education. The previous

goal of promoting the development and use of educational technology has also been dropped as it is now seen as a process that may contribute to a desired set of outputs or outcomes rather than an outcome in its own right.

UCOL is still getting to grips with what its new strategic focus might mean for the development and use of e-learning and flexible delivery. There are some major initiatives underway to improve levels of student retention. These are likely to include enhanced advisory and support services for students along with improved monitoring and feedback for students as they progress through their programmes, all of which lend themselves to online delivery. The goal of "excellent educational delivery" will likely lead to enhanced support for teaching staff for programme and course development and a more explicit investment of resources in this development process.

The new strategy has also encouraged UCOL to review both its planning for e-learning and the location of its support for that medium. Over the past couple of years, a group of teachers at UCOL have been making enthusiastic and innovative use of an emerging Moodle platform. In many respects, their efforts are exceeding the previously held vision and targets for this medium. There is a growing recognition that, as long as this group is encouraged to work within the broad strategic goals of the organisation (improved student retention and excellent educational delivery), it may not be necessary or desirable to specify too tightly how they should utilise e-learning to achieve these objectives. To this extent, UCOL is embracing an emergent approach to e-learning strategy rather than a more formal systematic approach.

In the spirit of this emergent strategy, UCOL is shifting the locus of support for e-learning from the small, stand-alone, central e-learning unit to the Library. This shift is, in part, a recognition that libraries are increasingly interpreting their core business as knowledge management for the digital age. It is also a response to the enthusiastic participation of the Library in a number of related developments. These include the championing of Web 2.0 technologies, the Library's role in the implementation of the Moodle LMS, its central role in providing networked digital services across and among UCOL's various campuses and its commitment to support both teachers and students in e-learning.

The Library – or 'Learning Commons' as it is known under its new expanded role – has come to be recognised and valued by both teachers and students for its support of e-learning. The relocation of this responsibility is an acknowledgment of the influence of this unit. To build on these efforts, UCOL plans to appoint an e-Learning Leader to coordinate e-learning activities, share knowledge and best practice, and work with groups ready to progress their use of the medium.

In summary, UCOL is choosing to focus on achieving its strategic student outcome goals rather than focus on e-learning process goals. It is shifting responsibility for leadership of e-learning to the Library in recognition of the interest, influence and mana of that unit. Finally, it is proposing to support and encourage networks of enthusiastic teachers to make best use of e-learning to achieve the desired student outcomes.

Reflections

e-Learning seems to need strong and influential champions. The identification of the Library as the appropriate locus for that role recognises both the strategic role of libraries in general but also the particular expertise and interest of current Library staff and leadership.

The new strategy seems to place considerable expectations on the ability of the Library and the e-Learning Leader to lead and coordinate developments across UCOL's programmes. Substantial progress will be very difficult to achieve without the full support and involvement of programme leaders.

The success of the new strategy will depend on the designated senior champions of each new strategic goal. If they see a significant role for e-learning in support of these goals, they may be prepared to assign sufficient priority and direction to its development. It will be difficult for the e-Learning Leader to achieve significant progress without this kind of leadership and support.