

University of Canterbury: Developing e-learning without an explicit e-learning strategy

Many institutions are reluctant to develop a set of strategies specifically for e-learning. They believe that changes in technology and teaching preferences will rapidly render such strategies outmoded and that e-learning objectives need to be driven by and integrated with learning and teaching objectives. These institutions tend instead to rely on broader strategic statements about learning and teaching.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY has a Teaching and Learning Plan and has deliberately avoided developing an explicit strategy for e-learning. In part, this arises from a recognition that the technologies available to support teaching are changing so rapidly that any media-focused strategy in this area is likely to become rapidly out of date. However, it also reflects the view that use of educational technology should be driven by learning and teaching needs, and that it will increasingly be integrated with, and become indivisible from, other forms of teaching and learning. It also recognises the high importance accorded to academic autonomy at Canterbury and that decisions about how and what to teach will continue to be made by groups of academics located within departments and colleges. The oversight and guidance of the University's teaching efforts is provided by the Teaching and Learning Committee.

The University of Canterbury is a research-oriented institution that follows a coordinated approach where support for e-learning is a cooperative venture between Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Services and the University Centre for Teaching and Learning (UCTL, previously known as ERAU). The aim is to provide a single access point to provide support for staff using computers and other ICT systems in education. It also works with the University's Library in providing easy access to information.

The University's main Learning Management System (LMS) is WebCT (now Blackboard) which is now under review. The College of Education (now part of the University) uses a locally-written system, Interact. The underlying hardware, operating systems and databases of the e-LMS are supported via ICT Services, while administration of the e-LMS, advice on educational aims and content come from UCTL.

e-Learning activities are often coordinated with other members of the Canterbury Tertiary Alliance and the College of Education. This subsumption of the formerly independent College of Education provided the University with a significant pool of both academic and support staff familiar with e-learning. Over 85% of the University's students are enrolled in at least one course currently using the e-learning management systems.

TAKING THE LEAD

Strategic Management for e-Learning

Case Study



The University has a substantial distance-learning offering through the College of Education and a small number of distance enrolment courses in the rest of the University. It is still thinking through its view of expanding the number, or otherwise, but considers it more likely that the dominant use of e-learning will be in a blended learning approach where ICT allows greater freedom for students to access various elements of learning. Its current emphasis is on flexible learning rather than distance or e-learning.

The University's Strategic Plan and Progress Report 2006-07 do include a couple of key performance indicators with a bearing on e-learning. The first of these is "to encourage non-conventional modes of delivery". The forecast for 2007-08 is to identify barriers to the further development of web-enabled learning and alternative modes of delivery; increase the number of own-time, own-place courses; and develop and implement a plan to address these. In 2008 the University intends to implement the 2007 plan, evaluate the effectiveness of learning offered in alternative modes and support the further development of such courses.

Another key performance indicator is to develop, support and evaluate various e-learning technologies. In 2007 the University commenced an evaluation of LMS and related technologies, including those from the former Christchurch College of Education. In 2008 the University will make a decision on its learning management platform with a view to supporting a single platform by the start of teaching in 2010. It is also evaluating other technology with potential educational benefits, including clickers, lecture recording, podcasting and wikis – all of which are in increasing use.

Different units within the University develop their own teaching and learning plans. Colleges have their own teaching and learning committees. Institutional progress in e-learning varies as a result of localised control or steerage mechanisms. In a similar way, some colleges hire their own staff to assist with e-learning. The UCTL employs about 25 staff to assist with teaching and learning developments throughout the University. These staff maintain close links with the ICT Services staff about the technical requirements to enable e-learning functionality. The University's Teaching and Learning Committee, through UCTL, allocates around \$100,000 per year to encourage innovations in teaching and learning. As at other tertiary institutions, many applications for support involve the use of technology in teaching.

As new papers or courses are proposed or current ones seek revalidation, the Director of the UCTL advocates that submissions destined for the Committee on University Academic Programmes (CUAP, a subcommittee of the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee) incorporate flexible learning strategies. This approach is bringing about some course redesign as more staff see benefit in using a flexible learning approach.

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The devolved nature of the University means that the Staff Development Unit approaches e-learning on an individualised basis according to the needs or requests of various staff members or departments, or through programme revalidation or start-up processes. It might be claimed that the links between the e-learning operations and the strategic issues at the University have something of a disconnect.

However, in terms of change management, the Vice-Chancellor's Senior Management Team has incorporated thinking about changes in learning and teaching into its long-term planning. This includes consideration of reduced dependence on lecture-style teaching, more problem-based learning, use of electronic resources, flexible-learning options and new technologies, and changes in teaching and learning styles and infrastructural requirements. Considerations include appropriateness and effectiveness, and the support required for these changes. Increased requirements for accountability in these matters are expected.

More broadly, the University has an interest in the Bologna Process and how it might affect its overseas market, how e-learning might impact on retention of both undergraduate and postgraduate students, and whether e-learning serves the mix of students attracted to the University.

In summary, the University has a broad strategic direction for its teaching and learning which informs a number of e-learning developments. However, the somewhat devolved nature of the institution suggests that uptake will be variable across departments and schools, with assistance being derived from the UCTL, initially on an individual basis but increasingly on a more strategic level. The determination of an appropriate institution-wide LMS, or an environment sufficiently sophisticated to accommodate several approaches, may result in a more corporate approach to e-learning management.

Reflections

A very broad-based strategy for teaching and learning may give teaching support staff enormous latitude in how they support and develop teaching across an institution. However, it also makes it more difficult for either them or anyone else to assess the effectiveness of their efforts.

Since the development of a strategic mandate for a particular kind of teaching would seem inappropriate in any university setting, the teaching support staff must work hard to ensure they can provide help at a programme team or departmental level, rather than gravitating towards the keen and early adopters. The support needs to be directed so that the systemic changes can be made.