

Whitireia Community Polytechnic: Planning e-learning at a programme level

One of the best ways to ensure effective e-learning is to insist on a common approach across all the elements and courses making up a programme.

WHITIREIA COMMUNITY POLYTECHNIC is a medium-sized New Zealand polytechnic. With its home campus in Porirua and other sites at Kapiti and Central Wellington, Whitireia serves the greater Wellington region with a large suite of vocational and professional qualifications. Whitireia also operates a further campus in Auckland City catering for international students.

e-Learning at Whitireia has grown from the efforts of a few enthusiasts to support their courses with online services in the late 1990s to well over 300 courses making use of the institution's Learning Management System in 2008. The Online Learning Centre (OLC) was established in 2003 to support teaching staff in their efforts to enhance the educational experience of learners. In 2006 the Polytechnic commissioned a review of its e-learning strategy and the OLC.

The review found that the 'online courses' fell into three broad categories: fully online programmes; blended-delivery programmes; and web-supported programmes. Just three programmes were delivered fully online. These were the Diploma in Creative Writing (Online), the Diploma in Publishing (Online) and the Postgraduate Certificate in Forensic Psychiatric Care. These programmes were developed through a partnership between the respective teaching teams and the staff of the OLC. Each programme was well designed for the medium, making good use of a range of content management, communications and support functionality for both students and teachers. Students and staff reported moderate to high levels of satisfaction with the online learning mode. If there was a concern, it related to the fairly high demand on the time of OLC staff both in the design and ongoing delivery and maintenance of these few programmes.

A larger number of programmes were delivered in what staff tended to call 'blended learning' mode. In these cases, face-to-face teaching continued to be used as the primary mode for teaching but varying levels of online service were provided to allow a more attenuated, or flexible approach to this face-to-face component. Two examples of this blended learning mode were the New Zealand Diploma in Business stream offered from the Polytechnic's Central Wellington Campus and the Postgraduate Certificate in Nursing (Mental Health). The former stream was targeted at part-time students drawn from the Wellington business community. They attended the inner city campus for a series of fortnightly three-hour classes but instructors used the online medium

TAKING THE LEAD

Strategic Management for e-Learning

Case Study



to provide supplementary study material, support discussion on study themes and provide access to library and other online resources. The Postgraduate Certificate in Nursing (Mental Health) was a qualification delivered to qualified nurses in the early stages of their work in mental health. The programme was delivered through a series of week-long block courses conducted at three-month intervals at the Porirua campus but supplemented with a range of online services similar to those offered in the business programme.

The defining feature of both these first two categories was that the mode of delivery was planned on a programme-wide basis rather than on an individual course basis. Students progressing through these programmes could expect to find a familiar learning framework in each successive course. OLC staff could offer advice and support on a programme-wide basis rather than depending on the responsiveness of individual tutors.

In contrast, the great bulk of online courses fell into the third 'web-supported' category where individual tutors determined how they would use Blackboard to support their teaching. Students progressing through these qualifications could anticipate a range of online learning experiences. OLC staff endeavoured to help these teachers by offering a series of training courses in online teaching but were hard-pressed to provide one-to-one support for course development or maintenance.

A key piece of advice arising out of the review was to commit to a policy of planning the use of e-learning at a programme level rather than at course level. This advice has been taken up by the institution in several ways. At a policy level, Whitireia is strongly encouraging faculties and departments to take a programme-level approach to all their e-learning, ensuring that both tutors and students are able to work in a learning environment that is relatively standard across a whole programme and well-matched to the learning needs of students. Secondly, deans are encouraging programme managers to exercise a critical leadership role in helping to define and implement this approach. And thirdly, the OLC has been charged with focusing on programmes rather than individual courses and on providing increased training opportunities for staff

Reflections

A focus on programmes rather than courses will make more cost-effective use of scarce development resources and personnel.

Students will almost certainly prefer a reliable, if sometimes unremarkable, level of e-learning support across a programme to an unpredictable sequence of the good, the bad and the ugly as they progress through their studies.

It will be almost impossible for programme leaders to ensure quality course delivery and support for e-learning if decisions about how, when and whether to use this mode are left entirely to individual teachers.

A commitment to programme-wide delivery will mean that teaching staff will need to be supported, trained and occasionally even persuaded to comply with the agreed delivery mode. This provides an excellent opportunity for team-based training and development.