

Megatrends in e-learning provision

The University of Leicester

Introduction

The University of Leicester is one of the older universities in the United Kingdom. Founded in 1921 with nine students, the fledgling college gained full degree-awarding powers in 1957 when it was granted its Royal Charter.

The site for the University was given by a local textile manufacturer, Thomas Fielding Johnson, in order to create a living memorial for those who gave their lives in the First World War. This is reflected in the University motto 'Ut Vitam Habeant' - so that they may have life.

The university presents itself thus:

Leicester has been ranked joint 1st for teaching quality and overall satisfaction amongst mainstream English universities for two successive years by the National Student Survey. Over two thirds of our subjects are in the top 10.

The University has been shortlisted for the award of Higher Education Institution of the Year by the Times Higher Education Supplement. The 2006 shortlist of 5 universities reads "Leicester is not the biggest, richest or most famous university in the UK. But by any measure it is one of the best". Leicester was shortlisted for the same award in 2005 and is the only university shortlisted for two consecutive years.

Leicester is a member of the 1994 Group of internationally renowned universities engaged in leading-edge research and high quality teaching. Our research strengths stretch across our five faculties. Over 90% of academic staff are research active. 13 departments gained the 5 or 5* ratings that indicate internationally significant work in the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise.

Leicester is ranked 18th by the Times Good University Guide. The guide identifies Leicester as having the sixth highest completion rate amongst universities (95.6%) - narrowly behind Oxbridge. Leicester is one of just 21

UK universities to feature in the world's top 200 universities (joint 16th in the UK and 151st in the world in the Shanghai Jiao Tong Table)

Over 19,000 students drawn from 150 countries study with us. We are the UK's largest provider of distance learning education after the Open University.

E-learning at the University of Leicester is led by Professor Gilly Salmon, Professor of E-learning and Learning Technologies and Distance Education is led by Dr David Christmas.

Nearly 100% of the university's courses are online and the university has two Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs): Blackboard and Tribal. The university has 18,000 e-learning students, 95% of the student body. There are 6000 distance learning students.

University policy is to embed e-learning throughout all relevant university departments.

Historical context

Distance learning at the University of Leicester began in the faculties of management and law (MBA, MA law) as an additional revenue earner. It has flourished in post-graduate courses and professional development courses for 14 years.

Most e-learning has been in on campus courses. It was a question of encouraging academics to participate. University departments don't learn well from each other. Cross fertilization is difficult and expertise usually does not spread well.

In an ideal world if you could design an e-learning system from scratch and buy in expertise it would be good. In fact the university adopted Blackboard five years ago. A few people were keen advocates of e-learning and got 2000 staff involved and provided practical help. All this was campus based. Then two and a half years ago the university took a new approach and a scaling up took place with the appointments of Prof Gilly Salmon and Dr David Christmas, both formerly at the Open University of the United Kingdom, to head up the e-learning and distance education operations.

Professor Salmon in an article with the imaginative title 'Flying not flapping: a strategic framework for e-learning and pedagogical innovation in higher education institutions' writes of these developments:

Leicester is typical of the traditional campus-based university keen to capitalize on the benefits of e-learning, while also having to move from twentieth-century distance learning to twenty-first-century online learning for its large-scale distance programmes.

Late in 2004, I was charged with preparing a strategic framework for the development of e-learning at the University of Leicester (www.le.ac.uk). Fortunately the university had recognized, prior to my appointment, that e-

learning needed to be developed with appropriate pedagogical and customer-driven underpinnings. A Director of Distance Learning Administration was appointed at the same time as I was, with an agenda of administrative and systems developments. His strategy and actions were developed separately from the e-learning strategy, although each clearly underpins the other (Salmon 2005:210).

Evaluation and research publication has followed these developments through the university's Beyond Distance Research Alliance and in liaison with the United Kingdom Higher Education Academy. Extensive bench marking has taken pace with the focus being on outcomes for student learning and implications for institutional change.

Technical issues

The university uses the Blackboard VLE and has a second VLE called Tribal. Competence in information and communication technologies has benchmarked well in recent official surveys, though knowledge management would be poor when compared to the Open University of the United Kingdom.

The university uses widely used technologies for e-learning that enable the students to take the courses without having to buy additional hardware or software. There is a requirement that every University of Leicester student must have regular access to the Internet, though this requirement can be met by students using machines in the university library.

Leicester does not have integration between the different Information Technology systems, for instance there are no student records on Blackboard. This integration is regarded as desirable but not essential. The emphasis in e-learning is on pedagogy not on systems.

Professor Salmon (2005:203) comments:

Learning technologies are not transparent, their properties are not obvious and do not broadcast their utility. No VLE will ever be enough in itself to create great e-learning. However, teachers and designers frequently attribute the capacity for doing or achieving the learning to the technology. It just cannot be successful without appropriate, well-supported and focused human intervention, good learning design or pedagogical input and the sensitive handling of the process over time by trained online tutors.

Courses

E-learning courses at Leicester cover everything from hard engineering to languages or biomedics or genetics. Laboratory-based sciences are more difficult by e-learning, but e-learning is good for the problem-based approach with the provision of databases of problems working well in e-learning.

The university does not have a policy of converting everything to e-learning; it is rather a policy of adding e-learning to the teaching mix. For instance there are 12 research training materials for Ph.D. student support and support for Geologists on a field trip using varied learning locations.

The university does not follow a policy of having flexible start-up times and flexible progression for e-learning courses. The distance learning courses have four start

bases at various times during the year and reasonable flexibility in progression. Flexible start-up dates for e-learning would imply no group work, would result in high drop-out and would reduce flexibility.

Every course at the University of Leicester has some e-learning in it. The first MA course to be 100% on line is due to be launched soon.

Asynchronous communication is more important than synchronous technologies and the e-learning courses are designed for asynchronous work. The university does have some synchronous technologies like videoconferencing tutorials and podcasting. It is important to remember that the telephone is still a very valuable synchronous tool.

Management, strategy and attitudes

The Vice Chancellor is forward looking and gives outstanding support to e-learning. The university management showed its commitment to e-learning by creating the position of Professor of E-learning and Learning Technologies and appointing to it an internationally known expert in e-learning who had written two best-selling books in the field, *E-tivities: the key to active online learning* (Salmon, G. 2002) and *E-moderating: the key to teaching and learning online* (Salmon, G. 2004) and who in the year 2006 gave no fewer than 56 invited keynote addresses at international conferences on the subject. There is a Pro Vice Chancellor for Learning and Teaching to whom the Professor of E-learning reports but the responsibility clearly rests with the professor.

The attitude of the various groups of staff to e-learning has been forged by collaborative development. Everyone is on Blackboard and podcasting is widespread. There were skeptics but the majority have now bought into e-learning convinced by the business model and the value of e-learning for student learning. Very few do not participate today. An acceptance by technology competent staff has moved to mass acceptance today.

The University of Leicester has an e-learning strategy document. It states:

This paper details the e-learning strategy for UoL for 2005-8. The strategy will promote the building of pedagogical innovation, increase the deployment of learning technologies and enable research into e-learning in a way that directly addresses business opportunities and imperatives. It provides for equivalent and enhanced learning and support experiences for all Leicester students. It offers a framework that not only develops and extends the range of services and approaches already in place but also looks to deepen understanding and deployment of learning technologies in the University. Strategic aims and targets are outlined. The key players, components and issues to ensure successful and achievable implementation are laid out. An agreed start up budget is specified.

Benefits of E-learning for U of Leicester

We can view e-learning and its associated innovative pedagogies as a continuum with entirely remote and distance at one end, through purposeful use for enhancing learning in blended or mixed modes, to the integration of e-learning into all teaching and learning experiences at the other.

The key potential benefits of increasing the use of e-learning in the University are to:

- meet the compelling requirement to continue to develop distance learning in a way that includes sound pedagogical and business models to an increasingly receptive and demanding educational market, and provides high quality learning and support to distance learners equivalent to that provided to campus attendees
- increase the flexibility, accessibility and personalization of provision for campus and distance students and enhance the capacity for integration of study with home, leisure, social and working lives
- integrate e-learning and teaching with the growing provision of e-business, e-resources and e-support in the university so that each contributes to, and enhances, the others
- treat e-learning skills as normal, necessary and desirable in the 21st Century
- move towards a 'balanced mixed mode' learning provision with roughly equal numbers of campus and distance students - probably in a unique position in the UK.

A strategy based on our strengths will be more durable, and harder to imitate than 'off-the-shelf' strategies or those based on traditional marketing approaches. For these purposes, we can identify our core capabilities as:

1. U of Leicester's status as a major provider of post graduate distance learning
2. strengths in sectors which may lend themselves to e-learning approaches including archaeology, genetics, science and education
3. teaching fully informed by research
4. networked within region and FE
5. diverse and non-elitist
6. international
7. teaching excellence including acknowledgement of distance learning and e-learning plans (QAA)

Quality in e-learning at Leicester is subject to the same procedures as any other teaching format. The same approval mechanisms, the same Quality Assurance Agency regulate it as other teaching strategies. E-learning is no different, it is just another way of teaching. Students exiting Leicester in the last two years have tapped all means for learning, including e-learning.

Salmon (2004:208) comments:

Despite the fact that e-learning (and its role as a change agent) figures highly, and sometimes even wistfully, in the aspirations of many policy-makers and senior managers, there is considerable evidence that most Higher Education Institutions are still struggling to engage a significant percentage of students and staff in e-learning, and real development beyond projects by innovators has so far been modest. Research is currently not providing answers to this problem and more models are needed to demonstrate the transferability and scalability of e-learning.

The technology is now just about robust enough for attention to turn to business development and pedagogical innovation and away from technical 'solutions' and 'fixes'. There are two main ways in which e-learning can be introduced into traditional teaching, whether on campus or at a distance. One is through large-scale centralization and provision of professional services. The second is more incremental, perhaps a little slower and more challenging, but gradually involving all members of

staff to make their contribution. This involves the choice of easy-to-use technologies and investment in personal and departmental learning and development. The latter has the advantages of developing capacities for the longer term and keeping 'ownership' with the academics and their departments.

E-learning does have an impact on staff workloads. It can take more time upfront than on-campus teaching. One cannot prepare for the class half an hour before delivering it. One has to give lecturing staff an understanding of the workload in e-learning.

The question of how the University of Leicester collaborates with other educational institutions in e-learning requires careful analysis. Competition is in vogue today. Collaboration can be seen as a criterion of failure, it adds complexity. The university does collaborate with other institutions in research, especially in the United Kingdom Healthcare Partnership for Online Nurse Education.

The credibility of the University of Leicester with government and the public administration is very high. The university ranks in the top 20 of universities in the United Kingdom. The university is research focused and internationally recognised. The university's credibility in e-learning was greatly enhanced by the appointment of two British Open University recognised experts in e-learning and distance education and who were internationally recognisable names in the field. This gave added status to the e-learning programme.

The question of how is the University of Leicester able to handle its large number of e-learning courses and students is the wrong question. E-learning has made no difference to student records. It is a trivial task to scale up the servers. University policy is that e-learning is just another form of teaching which is fully embedded into the university.

Economy

The cost effectiveness of e-learning is usually studied from business models but the outcomes the University of Leicester seeks to achieve from e-learning are not financially measurable. The drive at the University of Leicester is not for cost-effectiveness in e-learning. The university has its business model and it looks for student outcomes from e-learning.

The question about whether income from e-learning is stable and predictable has no meaning for the University of Leicester. Again, it is the wrong question. The university has not added e-learning to its product lines. E-learning is just another form of provision. E-learning has, however, had a major impact on the university and Leicester is recognised today as the United Kingdom's leading e-learning university.

The University of Leicester went into the distance learning market because it is highly cost effective and that is the reason the university focuses on it. Leicester is one of the major British universities, especially for distance learning and especially for South East Asia. As a result of this the university is getting a lot more applicants, especially from post-graduate students. It is important to realise that one does not sell courses by e-learning but one does retain students by doing it.

The impact of e-learning on university staffing has been that staff roles have changed. There are more Information Technology people and there are 18 new staff in the area of the Professor of E-learning and Learning Technologies.

The goal at the University of Leicester has been to integrate e-learning into what the university is already doing. The role of the Professor of E-learning and Learning Technologies has been to drive the development of e-learning. Having a high profile person with an international reputation in the position has helped the process.

Professor Salmon (2004:215) concludes:

The e-learning and pedagogical innovation framework at Leicester provided an appropriate platform for the hundreds of formal and informal discussions needed to develop an e-learning strategy for the university. The strategy was adopted by the University Senate, with a detailed costed implementation plan in July 2005. Implementation has commenced and evaluation processes are in place. I hope that it will provide an example of an attempt to capture the complexity of developing and implementing an e-learning strategy and that it will contribute to the understanding of change processes in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) associated with the introduction of Information and Communication Technologies in learning and teaching. It is also intended as a pointer away from the technology-driven focus on e-learning to date, which has clearly resulted in flapping not flying. New approaches are so much needed if e-learning is to succeed in becoming successfully embedded in HEIs to the benefit of learners and teachers alike, and within a climate of promoting e-learning and teaching research.

References

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