

Interview guide for case studies in the Megatrends project

Institutional factors

Name of institution: Manchester Metropolitan University 00441612472000

Manager of e-learning: n/a

URL of e-learning: n/a

Number of online courses: 1000

Number of e-learning students: 15.000

% of e-learning students who could be said to be distance education students:
(defined as students who do at least 50.1% of a course online): n/a

Historical context

1. How would you describe the history of distance education in your institution?

I do not agree that a history of distance education is a prerequisite for success in e-learning. We are not a distance education institution. It is blended learning that has come to the fore today and e-learning is an important part of the blended learning package. We do offer distance education courses but they are not a driver of e-learning.

2. How has competence in e-learning developed in your institution and how has it contributed to your success?

Competence in e-learning has developed organically and over a very long period. Since 1995 there has been a whole institution interest in e-learning. Very quickly a single platform was established; this was a proprietary VLE, WebCT Version 1.1. The skills were learned on WebCT. The beginnings of elearning at MMU could be described as 'from the middle out'. It was not 'top down' or 'management led'.

3. Has this development been abrupt or would you describe it more as a gradual step-by-step process)?

The development of e-learning was not 'from the bottom up'. It was a grouping of professors in the middle who recommended it to both staff and management. In the period 2003-2004 e-learning finally became established. Huge demand overwhelmed the middle and e-learning was adopted in a new phase led by management.

4. How has online education been followed up by evaluation and research and how has this contributed to your success?

E-learning has been followed up by evaluation and research. One of the change levers since 1997 has been the Learning and Teaching Fellowship Scheme. Since then more robust research work has been undertaken. There were 45 people with Learning Development projects. Then a scholarship approach was introduced. This has all led to the creation of an on-campus e-learning journal called *Learning and Teaching in Action*. There has also been some publication in refereed journals.

Technical issues

5. How would you describe competence in information and communication technology in your institution?

It has taken time to forge a relationship between e-learning and the university information systems. We now have competence in information systems, though this was not available during the 'middle out' period. We now have the technology capability, a robust system and an established platform. We are now moving from WebCT Campus Edition to WebCT Vista, both of which are run by the information systems people.

6. To which extent are e-learning courses in your institution based on widely used technologies that can be taken into use by students without requiring them to buy additional hardware or software?

No additional expense is required by students to take the e-learning courses. Just the normal WebCT requirements.

7. How would you describe the integration between different IT-systems that are involved in e-learning in your institution? How has this contributed to your success?

N/a

8. What are the strengths and weaknesses of your e-learning administrative systems (from enrolment through delivery to certification)?

In essence we needed to respond to the e-learning administrative requirements. We needed a scalable system. We were doing all we could but the systems were not integrated.

Now WebCT Vista will sweep all these problems aside. It will give us a fresh start, a good scalable system with an all new student record system integrated into it. The system will be driven by new webforms which are being designed from scratch.

Courses

9. Which types of subjects are covered by online education in your institution and what is the relative importance of different subjects?

e-learning courses are available from 7 faculties and 40 departments. There is e-learning activity in all areas, some more evolved than others: Art and Design, Health, Law, Humanities, Food Hospitality. E-learning is most important in Law, Education, Health, Sciences and Business.

10. How would you describe the "onlineability" of the subjects your institution has chosen for e-learning?

N/a

11. Do the online courses provided by your institution have flexible start-up and progression?

Largely no.

12. What is the role or importance of synchronous and asynchronous communication between students and teachers and among students themselves?

We try to be tolerant of course development in our design philosophy. We aim to design for the students' needs; therefore all technologies are possible. There is widespread use of asynchronous communication including message boards and discussion areas. This does not rule our synchronous communication technologies like chat and online clinics.

Management, strategy and attitudes

13. How would you describe involvement from the institution leadership in terms of being supportive, and how has this been important for success?

We have a new Vice-Chancellor in the last two years. There is a new vision for learning of which the managed learning environment is a cornerstone. The argument for e-learning had to be won: the new view is based on flexibility, high quality experiences using ICT and knowledge structures.

14. How would you describe the attitudes of the different groups of staff towards online teaching? How has this affected your success?

We have had a long run at e-learning lasting 10 years. There is now maturity in a large number of staff who see it as normal. There are a large number of seasoned practitioners and a cascading leadership mode brings others on board leading to whole department adoption. There are many uncharted areas. We have almost reached a ceiling for adoption but there are still hundreds who think e-learning is not important.

15. Does your institution have a strategy for online education? If yes, what is (briefly) the content of the strategy and how is it followed up by employees in your organisation?

Not a separate strategy but contained within the Teaching and Learning strategy.

16. How does your institution deal with quality issues related to online education and has quality contributed to success?

N/a

17. How would you describe the effectiveness of your administrative routines in online education?

N/a

18. To which extent do teachers involved in online education have predictable and manageable workloads?

N/a

19. To which extent does your institution collaborate with other educational institutions and how has this affected success?

We have a loose link with other WebCT users. We are part of the North West Forum for WebCT users but have no formal collaboration arrangements.

20. How would you describe the credibility of your institution (both formal and informal) with the government and public administration and how has this been an important criterion for success?

We always emerge as a capable university, a safe pair of hands. We have done very well at audits. A recent audit of governance gave a very good result. We are financially sound. This means that we are well regarded – but this has no bearing on success in e-learning.

21. How are you able to handle the large number of online courses and students?

We cope with difficulty with our large number of courses and students. Hence the need to scale up the WebCT e-learning systems.

Economy

22. How would you describe the cost-effectiveness of online education in your institution? How has cost-effectiveness affected success?

We find e-learning to be not particularly cost effective. The prospect of one day being cost effective is a powerful driver. Efficiencies are important to the new Vice-Chancellor. The university cost model will change and e-learning will be part of this change.

23. To which extent is income from operation of online education stable and predictable?

We don't do revenue-based e-learning. Our system is blended learning for face-to-face students.

24. To which extent does your institution experience pressure to be flexible to be able to adapt to a changing market?

Flexibility is the key. MMU is not an 18-21 institution. So many students at MMU have to work to pay for their studies. We will see an acceleration in student requirements and in student tastes. The new Vice-Chancellor talks about the model of the learner, about design for learners who exist, about the needs of the fee-paying learner.

25. To which extent does your institution apply a strategy of flexible employment and use staff to adapt to changes in markets?

e-learning brings no employment issues as all the work is done by full time staff.

Additional factors

26. What other factors have contributed to sustainability, robustness and the achievement of critical mass in your institution?

None.

Thank you