

# Megatrends in e-learning provision

## Manchester Metropolitan University

### Overview

Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) is a major university in the city of Manchester in the North West of England. The university began its life in 1824 as the Manchester Mechanics Institution for Technology Art and Design and as the Manchester School of Design which started in 1838.

Manchester Metropolitan became a Polytechnic in 1970 and was constituted as a university in 1992. The main university campus is in the Manchester City Centre and there are six other campuses.

Today the university has over 35.000 students and over 4000 staff. Its leadership in e-learning is located in a Managed Learning Environment Management Group. Implementation and staff development are supported by its Learning and Teaching Unit which today is led by Robert Ready who has a full-time staff of 8. The university has made a major commitment to the WebCT VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) or LMS (Learning Management System) and describes it thus

*As part of its plans to transform learning at MMU, the University is making a major investment in its Managed Learning Environment (MLE). The first phase of this project involves the implementation of WebCT Vista in several departments across the University. The new WebCT Vista package is an updated version of the existing WebCT Campus software which has been used by a growing number of staff across the University for the last eight years. You will find links to specific resources for both WebCT Vista and WebCT Campus Edition on the university website.*

Staff use of WebCT is presented thus:

#### *Pedagogic design*

- *Ensure that the objectives of the on-line elements are clearly defined and that students understand how the on-line elements are aligned to the unit learning outcomes.*

- *Think about whether and how your on-line materials offer opportunities for interaction and communication: student to student, student to tutor and student to content.*
- *In WebCT consider using page tracking to see how individual students are progressing.*
- *Consider providing alternative types of activities to enhance student learning other than text-based materials. (But remember to take account of those students who have accessibility/disability problems)*
- *Aim to provide activities to help students develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills.*

MMU today has 1000 online courses and 15.000 students who use e-learning as part of their study.

### **Historical context**

MMU has not got a history of major distance education provision and would not consider distance education to be a major driver of its e-learning provision.

It does not consider that success in distance education is a prerequisite for success in e-learning as MMU is not an institution with a long history of distance education. What has come to the fore in recent years is the importance of blended learning and e-learning is an important part of the blended learning package.

Competence in e-learning at MMU has grown organically and over a very long period. The first initiatives occurred in 1995 and quickly a single platform on a proprietary VLE was chosen. This was WebCT version 1.1 and the university still uses WebCT.

The development of e-learning at MMU was neither Top-down or Bottom-up but From the middle out. This means that it was neither imposed by senior management (Top-down) nor demanded by staff (Bottom-up). It was From the middle out, this means that it was developed by a group of professionals at the middle who recommended it to both management and staff.

Finally, in the period 2003-2004 a new phase was achieved in which e-learning was adopted and led by management due to huge demand from staff and students.

This evolution of e-learning has been followed up by evaluation and research. One of the levers of change since 1997 has been the Learning and Teaching Fellowship Scheme, whereby a number of Fellowships for work in e-learning were awarded. Since then more robust research has been undertaken in the field with 45 people doing Learning Development projects leading to the production of a journal *Learning and Teaching in Action*.

This work is presented thus:

*This database has been set up for MMU staff to share information about their learning and teaching projects. The aim is to encourage people to share what they're doing and to exchange ideas and good practice. All projects are of interest: they can be externally funded or done in what passes for your free time; they can be cross-departmental, concerned with curriculum development, changes in assessment practice, use of technology, key skills, support for part-time students... the list is endless.*

*The aims of this database are:*

- *to register all kinds of research and development in learning and teaching - this will be useful for the Unit in planning staff development and support at both faculty and institutional level*
- *to enable staff to share ideas and experiences, and to identify similar projects across the institution*
- *to help the Unit to encourage dissemination of good practice - for instance, by suggesting seminars, papers for Learning and Teaching in Action, conferences or appropriate other publication routes.*

*The Learning and Teaching Unit will monitor the database and endeavour to make links, identify themes and provide project-specific support.*

## **Technical Issues**

It has taken time to forge a relationship between e-learning and the university's information systems. The university now has competence in its information systems, but this was not available during the From the middle out stage.

The university now has full capacity of information systems for e-learning based on robust systems and an established platform. This established platform is the WebCT Campus Edition which is, at present, being upgraded to the WebCT Vista Suite.

The e-learning courses are based on widely used technologies which are available to students at no extra cost. The main requirements are for compatibility with the WebCT browser and any student with a reasonably current PC or laptop will have this at no extra cost.

The e-learning administrative systems needed to respond to the vast take-up of e-learning in the university. The systems needed to be scalable and were not integrated. Now, the installation of WebCT Vista will sweep all aside. It will give the university a fresh start, a whole new scalable system. Allied to this is a new student records system which will be fully integrated with the VLE. The system will be driven by new web forms which have been designed from scratch.

## **Courses**

MMU has a wide range of 7 faculties and 40 departments in fields like Art and Design, Health, Law, Humanities, Food Science and Hospitality.

There is e-learning activity in every one of these areas, some are more evolved than others but all are participating.

E-learning is very important in Law, Education, Health, the Sciences and Business.

In general the courses run to a fixed pattern and are not available for flexible start-up or progression.

In the development of e-learning courseware the university tends to be tolerant in its design philosophy. Courses are designed to the faculties' needs and therefore all kinds of design features are possible, including both synchronous and asynchronous communication. Many courses use message boards, discussion areas and other forms of asynchronous communication but this does not rule out synchronous communication. Some courses, for instance, use chats or online clinics.

## **Management, strategy and attitudes**

The role of institutional leadership in the promotion of e-learning has changed in the last two years with the appointment of a new Vice-Chancellor. The Vice-Chancellor has brought a new vision for learning and a focus on the managed learning environment is a cornerstone. Previously this argument had to be won. Now there is a new direction and a new focus on flexibility and on the provision of a high quality learning experience using information and communications technology in the context of the development of knowledge structures.

The attitude of staff to e-learning is based on a 10 year experience of and exposure to online learning. There is a maturity in a large number of staff who see it as a normal activity. There are a large number of seasoned practitioners whose cascading leadership has brought a large number of others on board, so that e-learning has embraced whole departments.

Nevertheless, there are still some uncharted areas for e-learning as MMU is a very large institution. The university has almost reached a ceiling in the take-up of e-learning, but with some hundreds of staff still inactive in terms of the institutional Virtual Learning Environment.

The university does not have a specific e-learning strategy document, but the strategy is contained within the university's Learning and Teaching Strategy.

From the point of view of collaboration in e-learning with other universities, MMU has loose links with other WebCT users and forms part of the North-West Forum for WebCT users.

From the point of view of the government and public administration, MMU is always seen as a capable university, a safe pair of hands. It does well in audits by the Quality Assurance Authority for Higher Education and did very well in a recent audit of university governance. Financially the university is sound and this contrasts with a number of universities which are in debt. Thus the university is well regarded by the authorities – but this had no bearing on its success in e-learning.

The rapid growth in demand for e-learning has led the university to commit to a significant capital development programme. This programme secures the required scaling of the enterprise in technical, administrative and staff development terms. Hence, the importance of the present initiatives to rescale the e-learning administrative systems.

### **Economy**

Up to this point cost-effectiveness of e-learning has not been a central priority for the university. The university has concentrated on adding value and developing new approaches to learning. It is envisaged that with scaling and maturity, cost benefits will accrue. The university Vice-Chancellor is interested in flexibility, in meeting the needs of the modern student, in re-inventing the learning infrastructure and in making the best, informed decisions about learning design in a context in which the costs of all kinds of provision are an important factor.

On the question of income from e-learning one must remember that the university has not a focus on revenue based e-learning. It uses e-learning in a blended learning approach for full-time face-to-face students.

There is a large and sharpening pressure from the market place towards flexibility. There is going to be acceleration in student requirements and tastes. The new Vice-Chancellor talks about the model of the learner, about designing for learners who exist today, about the learning of the fee-paying student. MMU is not a typical 18-21 year old student institution. Many of the students are older than the norm. Very many have to work to be able to pay the fees for their studies.

The impact of e-learning does not create employment issues at MMU because all the e-learning work is done by staff as part of their duties. There is some indication that as e-learning provision matures, administrative and e-learning support staff of various kinds are contributing to the overall effort.