Interview guide for case studies in the Megatrends project

Institutional factors

Name of institution: The Open University (UK)

Manager of e-learning: Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching)

URL of e-learning: N/A

Number of online courses: See note 1 below 335 (65%)

Number of e-learning students: See note 2 below 114,000

% of e-learning students who could be said to be distance education students: (defined as students who do at least 50.1% of their programme online): 100

Note 1 – this is a difficult question to answer for a number of reasons. First you don't give a definition of online and you don't give a definition of course. At the UKOU with open access we have gone for a very modular approach where our courses are between 10 and 60 points (60 points is equivalent to 50% full time study). Most other universities equate course with award – so if I'm studying towards a degree another university would call that 1 course – at the UKOU the student would study between 6 and 12 courses (modules) to get a degree. Re online – what percentage of the course needs to be studied online to meet your criteria, or is it just that there is any required online element? Also if you are looking at eLearning you shouldn't just limit this to online – we have a number of courses where we use CDROM and DVDROM to deliver elearning experiences – eg virtual field trips which would be too bandwidth intensive to study online. For the purposes of this survey I am taking the UKOU meaning of course (a 10 to 60 point module) and online to mean any course with a requirement to use a computer to study the coruse.

Note 2 – again this needs some definition. Do you want head count or full time equivalent? I have gone for headcount.

Historical context

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

The UKOU was established in 1969 to deliver high quality distance education to students and developed its supported open learning model (involving local tutors, feedback on assignments, centrally produced course materials).

The OU is the UK's largest University, teaching 35% of all part-time undergraduate students in the UK each year.

Nearly 21,000 OU students study outside the UK.

The OU received the highest rating for overall student satisfaction in the 2005 National Student Survey amongst all universities surveyed.

Since the first students were admitted in 1971, over 2 million people have studied with the OU, achieving over 550,000 awards.

The OU promotes educational opportunity and social justice by providing high quality education to all who wish to realise their ambitions and fulfil their potential:33% of undergraduate students have fewer than 2 A levels; 6% of undergraduate students have a disability; 9% of new students disclosing their ethnicity are from minority ethnic backgrounds; 17% of new students qualify for financial assistance.

The OU has been rated very highly for teaching quality. Of the 24 subjects assessed by the Quality Assurance Agency, 17 were placed in the top 'Excellent' category.

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

We first introduced eLearning using the IBM PC in three courses in 1988 (we were using eLearning before this by using teletext terminals in study centres). These were what I would call 'medium is the message' courses – e.g. in computing and technology. Since then there has been a gradual increase in the use of eLearning mainly in the Technology, Computing and Business Faculties, though with some good examples in other Faculties such as Science. This meant that certain areas of the university were building considerable experience and competence, whilst in other areas competence remained lower.

It would have seemed odd not to be using a computer to support studies in Technology, computing and Business, so the introduction of eLearning in these subjects kept them up to date and relevant for students. With the introduction of asynchronous computer conferencing in 1992 we were able to build on the benefit of greater communication to build learning communities for distance students and introduce different pedagogies such as group work and accessing digital library resources. There is evidence that provision of these tools helped with student retention.

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

Development was progressing in a step-by-step fashion, but we published our Teaching and Learning strategy in 2001 which set some ambitious targets for the adoption of eLearning. Principally target 6.5: *Establish the critical baseline of IT provision for all students by 2002; build IT elements into programmes to achieve compulsory IT elements for all University degrees by 2005; increase Web-focused courses to at least 20 by 2002.* This set out that we would provide optional eLearning activity on all courses from 2002 and all named degrees would contain some courses that contained eLearning elements by 2005.

The 2004 Learning and Teaching Strategy took these targets further forward, for instance: *There will be an increase in the numbers of courses where the use of ICT is*

required over the period 2006-07 and by 2007 around 60% of Level 2 courses and 75% of Level 3 Courses will have compulsory ICT elements.

Setting such targets and setting out a policy for eLearning as an institutional strategy brought about a step change in the pace of change.

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

We have a large academic unit – The Institute of Educational Technology who do institutional research evaluating student performance with eLearning. They are also responsible for academic staff development so can feed their findings back into staff development programmes. This has made a significant contribution to the quality of our eLearning materials and activities.

Technical issues

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

This question is also ill defined. Do you mean basic ICT skills, or do you mean the skills to develop effective use of ICT in teaching and learning?

For the former I would say that all staff are competent in the use of ICT for word processing, email and Information literacy

For the latter we have an increasing number of staff who are competent at designing eLearning activities. We also have a large media development unit, so as long as academics are skilled in specifying eLearning activities these can be realised through our technical teams.

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?

In general we try to use standard browser technology. Currently our main asynchronous communication tool (FirstClass) needs client software, but this is provided on a free applications CDROM to all staff and students. Our multimedia simulations play on standard media players. Our documents are transmitted in PDF format and Acrobat reader is free software (also on the CDROM). If a wordprocessor is needed then it is possible to use the shareware Star Office (also on the CDROM) So although students need to load additional software none of it needs to be bought.

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?

This is an area where we have suffered by being ahead of the game. We have a suite of different systems/ applications performing different parts of our eLearning infrastructure. Integration is much harder than it would be if we had adopted a single VLE (though that would probably have other downsides such as limiting our pedagogic choices). We are about to introduce a VLE based on Moodle which will address some of these issues.

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

Strengths: robustness, scaleability, automated processes (imagine having to do hand workarounds for 180,000 students).

Weaknesses: system was developed some time ago and it does not easily adapt to changes in business processes. For instance initially the system was intended for staff use on the campus network, now we want to provide more interactive services for students logging in from the Internet.

Courses

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

I don't understand the phrase relative importance of subjects.

The following table give a breakdown of the percentage of eLearning courses in each faculty

Faculty	% eLearning courses
Arts	31%
English/ languages	44%
Health & Social Care	41%
Maths & Computing	65%
Business	94%
Science	53%
Social Sciences	27%
Technology	77%

This shows that even in Faculties that have been lower on the adoption curve (Arts, Social Sciences) over a quarter of the courses incorporate eLearning.

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

As mentioned above the obvious starting point was ‘medium is the message’ courses. Our main driver has been that students have had to supply their own equipment, rather than the onlineability of the subject. So we have introduced eLearning faster in Faculties where students have had better access to computers and the Internet.

One factor that may change this in the future is that we are looking to enhance the opportunities that computer assisted formative assessment offers. Currently this is better suited to numeric than discursive disciplines.

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

By this do you mean students can start at any time and progress at their own rate? If so the answer is no. Many courses have two presentations per year, but all our courses (for accreditation) run with cohorts of students to a given timetable. We find that pacing the timetable with continuous assessment provides a framework that motivates students. Also eLearning opens up the possibility of collaborative project work. This cannot be undertaken if you don’t have students at the same place in the course at the same time.

We have just launched our open learn site - http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/ which will provide

- Over 5,000 hours of online free learning material taken from Open University courses
- state-of-the-art learner support
- tools connecting learners with learners and learners with educators
- learning media and technologies on a large scale

Anyone is free to use open learn, they are not registered as students and they are not studying for credit.

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

Very important in a distance learning context.

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?

See Q3 above – setting out a clear university strategy supported by senior managers was instrumental in achieving our aims.

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

Some Faculty staff needed convincing of the need to change (and pace of change). The introduction of national benchmark standards in each curriculum area and the need to keep the quality, standing and value of our degree inline with conventional universities has helped to make the case.

Some of our part time, home based, associate lecturers have been concerned about additional workloads that might arise with the introduction of eLearning. It is probably the case that the work is of a different nature rather than simply taking more time and that the difference introduces a learning curve which, initially, appears to increase workloads. It is true that the open ended nature of some eLearning activities require a greater application of time management techniques (this is true for both staff and students).

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?

Yes

Student-centred objectives

The application of ICT-based methods of learning, teaching and student support should allow students to;

1) experience and benefit from a wide range of effective learning opportunities mediated by ICTs (e.g., collaborative learning, resource-based learning, group project work, computer-assisted formative assessment, online tutorial support, information search and evaluation, integrated multi-media assisted learning);

2) experience a graduated development of ICT skills and eLearning skills as they progress along a pathway to a named degree or other qualification;

3) achieve particular outcomes required by the University's award structure or external body expectations: (eg. programme-based learning outcomes, QAA benchmark statement objectives, criteria of "graduateness", professional body accreditation requirements);

4) develop, through using ICTs in OU study, a range of modern work-related and independent-learning skills that enhance their employability in the knowledge economy and increase for them the pleasure and effectiveness of future learning experiences;

5) achieve OU qualifications and more general learning outcomes that are the equal of those of other UK universities;

6) experience an enhanced sense of participation in a "community of learners" during their OU study.

University Objectives

To provide the learning materials, services and support that allow OU students to achieve the objectives set out above, and to deliver the tenets of the Vision Statement, the University should achieve the set of objectives set out below.

1) construct a OU-wide framework for the development of eLearning materials, services and support, which would achieve the following sub-objectives:
    i) maximise the collective understanding of effective uses of eLearning;
    ii) enhance information sharing about eLearning across units;
    iii) move past "lone ranger" eLearning development by individuals and course teams;
2) place pedagogic effectiveness and robustness as well as efficiency of delivery at the centre of our activities in eLearning creation and implementation;
3) assure delivery of learning outcomes for which eLearning provides the only, or the most effective, delivery mechanism;
4) ground present practice, to the greatest extent possible, in evidence from research, evaluation and successful practice;
5) learn from other eLearning providers (both the successes and the failures) in order to surpass the competition in levels of "learning excellence" and student appreciation;
6) deliver adequate levels of appropriate training to staff (central, regional and ALs) and to students;
7) provide the appropriate ICT infrastructure (VLE, the Enterprise Content Management System (ECMS), the Customer Relations Management System (CRM), digital assets, structured authoring) and assure its continuing development;
8) use the "OU Futures" strategic objectives (especially numbers 1,2,3,4,5 and 9) to orient the development of the eLearning policy;
9) through OU-based research, evaluation and "horizon-scanning", maintain informed awareness of pedagogic and technological future developments – bring from the "horizon" to the "operational" as quickly as appropriate.

An action plan was drawn up to deliver these objectives and progress against the plan is monitored.

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

Not enough time to answer

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

Not enough time to answer

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

See point 14 above.

For full time academic staff it is clear that the introduction of eLearning changes working practices within the institution. For instance we have run a successful model for 35 years which clearly separates course production from presentation, with course production being an intensive operation carried out in academic teams. The introduction of eLearning is blurring some of those boundaries between production and presentation and we are adapting our systems and working practices to account for this.

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

To a large extent we have developed our own approaches to eLearning.

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?

Highly credible. Important for success. See answer to Q 14

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

By having robust and scalable systems in place to handle the business processes

Economy

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

In some ways eLearning is more expensive than our conventional models. It is the improvement in the quality of the student learning experience and the different modes of learning that are opened up for distance students (eg collaborative learning, access to digital library resources) that delivers cost-benefit- effectiveness rather than a simple measure of cost-effectiveness.

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

Not enough time to answer

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

We all experience this pressure.

To quote form the eLearning policy (my emphasis):
. For both pedagogic and **competitive** reasons the OU now needs to expand and integrate the use of ICT-based teaching and learning support into its courses and programmes and to promote the development of learning communities of students and staff. In so doing, we shall assure our position at the leading edge of open and distance learning development and of online delivery of courses and programmes into **increasingly competitive markets** around the globe.

See also university objective 5 in answer to Q15

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

Not enough time to answer

Additional factors

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

Not enough time to answer

Thank you