

Interview guide for case studies in the Megatrends project

Institutional factors

Name of institution: Staffordshire University

Manager of e-learning: Professor Mark Stiles

URL of e-learning: n/a

Number of online courses: 700 course modules are on the Blackboard VLE.
They are either Blended or Work Based or Pure Distance Education.

Number of e-learning students: Between 5.000 and 6.000 of these 600-800 are
Pure Distance Education

% 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):

The 600-800 distance students are doing Foundation Degrees at the SURF Colleges – the vast bulk of this is off-campus, with perhaps half a day a week attendance. Masters degrees are offered worldwide, especially in Hong Kong and Singapore.

Historical context

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

Those who say that a successful history of distance education is needed for success in e-learning are wrong. We don't have much of a history of distance education. We have a history of delivery overseas of distance education courses with partner organisations in places like Hong Kong or Singapore, especially in computing courses. Our Geographers were under threat of losing their jobs as not many people wanted to do a degree at a 'New University' in Geography. Now they have many hundreds of Masters degree students at a distance by e-learning.

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

The development of competence in e-learning at the Staffordshire University has been described at length in Stiles' (2003) article 'Embedding e-learning in a higher education institution'. It is a fairly distinctive story. The university entered e-learning as a means of making the university distinctive, with a focus of learner centredness. The university had a Learning Development Centre, which is now called the Learning Development and Innovation Centre. Senior management made it clear that success in e-learning was not optional – e-learning had to succeed. E-learning followed a classical roll-out strategy which made little impact. The university then went to funding projects in faculties to contribute to the corporate pattern. A lot of organisational change occurred in the years 1998 – 2002. The development slowed in 2002. We were rolling out e-learning in all departments. It was a totally converged system. We were not a learning organisation.

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

Staffordshire University has a very long history of e-learning dating back to 1997. This had an instructional focus and Lotus Learning Space was installed for e-learning in 1998.

The university then changed its VLE from Lotus Learning Space to Blackboard. This was a traumatic experience but was necessary to scale up e-learning to an industrial level. Developed expertise in Lotus Learning Space was a requirement for participation and two day courses were organised which were two-thirds pedagogy.

By 2002 we had a very good spread of expertise but there were gaps in it. We developed an Integrative Approach to Staff Development. This embedded e-learning into quality control and into academic planning. We worked with the staff on validation and on quality assurance with workshops at intervals.

The newest developments involve workplace modules in e-learning for 30 Masters Credits. Staff don't have to apply for the Masters Credits if they do not want to.

Since 2002 there is competence based on delivery workshops for development. The essence is putting the right support staff with the academics at the right time.

The university has had a stable Centre for Research and Development led by Professor Mark Stiles for many years.

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

The majority of academics are poor at evaluating e-learning. Quality assurance is evaluation of what you have done There is no mass evaluation of e-learning.

We do research in nationally funded research projects. We got £1.5 million from JISC for major projects. The focus was on individualised support of work based learning using technology.

Technical issues

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

We were doing Research and Development with JISC in 1996 and developing our own VLE called COSE. This work has been stable over the years. We are quite well known for research in e-learning and have been constantly at the front end of e-learning development, both pedagogic and technical.

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?

Nothing has to be bought by students. We have always used basic VLEs and our own development, COSE. We migrated from Lotus Learning Space to Blackboard and worked at integrating systems into Blackboard. We have been a pioneer in the academic use of eBooks (Ebrary), with access to hundreds of thousands of ebooks and online databases.

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?

The integration between Information Technology systems is very important. Our VLE has direct links into the Management Information System and to the Library but we have not yet installed e-enrolment. Our approach is to use the IMS specifications. We were one of the first UK universities involved in contributing to IMS and to IMS web-based services.

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

There is no e-enrolment. The Student Records System is directly linked into the VLE. Quality assurance and academic planning are also linked to it. Weaknesses are that the administration is not linked to e-learning and course catalogues and prospectuses are not online. We want to be able to aggregate all course descriptions (for instance, all the biology courses in the United Kingdom) in a project with Manchester Metropolitan University and JISC, called XCRI.

Courses

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

Most subjects are now involved in e-learning. There is a full Computing Studies offering (mostly blended), Engineering and Technology (some blended, some work-based, some distance education), Health Education (some blended, some distance education), Sciences, Forensics, Biology (mostly blended), Psychology and Law, Social Care and Advice, Business Studies, Ceramics, Art, Media and Design (distance education)

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

An important aspect is the SURF (Staffordshire University Regional Federation) regional federation which is funded by the Higher Education Funding Council and links the university with 11 colleges. They teach 18% of our FTESs (Full Time Equivalent Students), a lot of the courses using e-support and e-work based learning.

There are no subject barriers to e-learning. It's the right tool for the right job that counts. Mathematics at university level does not go well at e-learning Nationally computing departments are weak for e-learning – traditional distance education and not e-learning is the norm for computing.

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

We do not have flexible start-up dates or flexible progression. The university business model does not favour it.

Business Studies and Computing Studies do not go well at e-learning. The university's first e-learning course was in English Literature – in a problem based learning presentation.

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

In general the bulk of communication in e-learning is asynchronous. In pure distance e-learning some courses have weekly chat sessions. These are optional and seem to work. The tutors provide either synchronous or asynchronous support mechanisms.

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?

e-learning at Staffordshire University was completely driven by the university leadership. It was driven by the Vice-Chancellor from 1996 onwards. All the e-learning work is always part of the corporate level. There have been developments at Faculty level too. Institutional leadership has been very important for success. The Vice Chancellor and the other administrative levels have been very involved.

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

There are no differences in different groups of staff. In all departments you have those who stick to their ways. It is not discipline specific. Some are keen, some are not. It is not a major issue. The Geographers were keener to get involved as they had strong external motivators of job preservation.

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, we have. It is a policy, and not a separate strategy, and is the first policy document for e-learning in the United Kingdom. We embedded e-learning into university assessment. We have also embedded the e-learning policy into the University Business Plan. By 2010 we will stop talking about e-learning and regard it as a normal form of provision and this will be the proof that we have embedded e-learning as a normal component of the university. If staff see e-learning as something separate then e-learning is in trouble.

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

We are United Kingdom leaders in the embedding of quality into academic planning. We justify the quality of the intended e-learning experiences at the planning stage and repeat it each time a course comes up for consideration. Some like it, some do not.

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?

Distance education challenged the nature of university contracts. We now focus on student hours facilitated, than on student hours delivered. From day one in 1988, an issue arose with a teacher who reduced her contact hours by 80% by using distance education – she was given an extra course to teach. We now have service level agreements. The nature of university teaching has been changed.

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

Our regional federation is important to us and is a source of recruitment for the university. It is directly funded by the Higher Education Funding Council and is much stronger than a franchise arrangement. 18% of our university numbers come from it. This consortium bids for funding and also bids for JISC funds. We also do lots of work with other universities in research and development.

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?

Staffordshire University is a typical modern British university. We are the same as the others in terms of credibility. We have high credibility in e-learning.

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

By being well organised. We have achieved robustness and sustainability and have moved from one VLE to another. We are now looking at a Learning Object Repository. We want to suck the content out of Blackboard which does not facilitate a portal service. We could move to another VLE. We need a repository to find the content, to reuse the content, to reformulate it and to make it available to all.

Economy

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

No comment. It is not quantifiable. It is money in, money out. There are cost benefits like enhanced retention and better recruitment. The benefit of distance education is its cost-effectiveness. Blended learning is not cost effective but could be cost effective. The benefit of e-learning would be if you were losing 30% of the student body a year and e-learning reduced that.

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

The answer is that it is not any less stable and predictable than on-campus education. A new course succeeds or it doesn't. The ability to sustain a course by e-learning is the same as in any other form of provision. The success of an e-learning course is not any more or any less than any other course. If it is rubbish it will not succeed. Our Geographers now have 600 post-graduate e-learning distance education students.

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

We are always suffering from market pressures. This year we are piloting new two year degrees There will be three semesters a year instead of two. This is called the Pathfinder programme. One of the three semesters will usually be distance education and e-learning.

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

There is no problem. It is all done by full time and part time staff. It is the same mix as all the rest. We are realistic and know what we are good at: distance education and on-campus education, blended by e-learning.

Additional factors

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

No, we have covered the lot. In e-learning the experts are those who know the scene. The JISC Landscape Studies of 2003 and 2005 showed that in 2005 everyone was doing a little. There was not great use of VLEs (Virtual Learning Environments).

Thank you