

# Interview guide for case studies in the Megatrends project

## Institutional factors

Name of institution: University of Ulster 048-90366064

Manager of e-learning: n/a

URL of e-learning: campusone.ulster.ac.uk

Number of online courses: 222. 23 fully online programmes

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): More than 1.500  
fully online students each doing a number of subjects

## Historical context

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

The University of Ulster's history of distance education was low key until 1998. In the period 1997-1999 there were a number of e-learning initiatives especially in Biomedical and Education. In 1999 a new Vice Chancellor brought the initiatives together and gave e-learning a new priority as a key initiative. E-learning was brought in to meet Biomedical and other demands. The Institute of Life Long Learning was founded. A virtual learning environment (VLE), WebCT, was installed. More than 300 computers were placed in the Learning Resource Centres (LRCs).

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

Competence was developed in looking after e-learning behind the scenes. It was an institutional development and not a niche group. There was a focus on user support, studying online and orientation. Access to library resources was important and the library service was integrated into e-learning. Competence was developed in three areas: technical; user support and staff development.

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

In staff development the Institute of Life Long Learning provides consultancy and makes learning technologists available, especially in curriculum development and the use of tools. Fully online elearning uses a course team approach with a focus on content and communication. Gilly Salmon's e-Moderation initiative made courses in e-Moderation essential at the University of Ulster.

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

There is a lot of ongoing quality evaluation of courses. E-learning came out well from a recent official evaluation by the United Kingdom Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education The Life Long Learning Institute is a central unit and does not contact students directly. Library and student induction services are highly regarded and contribute to the recent university bid for funding for 'Centres of Excellence'.

### **Technical issues**

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

E-learning has been, since 2000, seen from an institutional perspective from the view of information and communications technologies. With the very large scale developments there was a need for resilience and scalability. There is full linkage from e-learning to student enrolment and the library services. E-learning and the library and staff development are integrated services.

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?

Course development for widely used technologies underpins all our activities. Some statistical packages are on CD Rom. The general requirement is for a reasonable specification to make use of the availability of broadband.

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?

Every module has its module space on the VLE. Student e-learning accounts are created at enrolment. There is complete integration between the student record system and course enrolment. In each module space there are deep links to the library. Students have automatic access to all library resources, databases and journals and need no additional credentials to access these resources. The library service is integrated into the enrolment system. There is an immediate link from the university homepage to the library and to the subject librarian's homepage.

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

The strengths are that it is not a top down approach and that the library is integrated into the VLE.

### **Courses**

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

The courses are clustered around research, especially in biomedical, environmental science, languages, certificates for carers, energy management. You click on the courses and take a single module at a time Students are encouraged to take a credit bearing module and then later decide on the course or programme.

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?

e-learning courses run every semester starting in September and January. All are post-graduate courses. Compulsory modules lead to optional ones. They enrol in a credit bearing module first, not the programme.

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

We offer tools in both synchronous and asynchronous communication and encourage both. Education uses synchronous communication and an extra 15 students means another e-tutor.

### **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?

The Vice-Chancellor says e-learning is important. There are 1500 fully online e-learning students. 50% of MAs are online. There is rapid growth in fully online students.

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

There are different drivers for different groups of staff, some are very keen. The fully online programme is well supported and staff are enthusiastic. A dwindling part-time course enrolment means that staff are keen on e-learning. Attitudes can differ but because there is a strong scaffolding around the e-learning courses, they are better prepared. Some staff grow their courses in a different way.

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?

We have an e-learning strategy which is linked into the corporate plan.

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

All teaching at the University of Ulster is treated the same from the point of view of quality. The same quality processes apply to elearning as to face to face. Many of the university courses are also subject to professional accreditation and this gives a second control. The university has a vested interest in quality control because if it has good quality it can compete with others.

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

Face to face enrolment and flexible options can be a problem and cause tensions in administrative routines. We start the online courses a week later to help solve this problem.

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

We have tried to address the question of workloads in elearning. The business model and time line is 12 months in advance. E-tutors are appointed for 10-15 students per module.

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

The University of Ulster runs a few joint ventures, nearly all hosted on our system. These have been with Flinders University of South Australia in maritime education Rochester University, USA, another in Hong Kong and another with Regis University, Colorado, USA.

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?

The University of Ulster is very credible but this has no influence on the development or success of e-learning. The university is not doing e-learning because of the government but for educational reasons.

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

The university is proactive about support induction and orientation of students. There are welcome packs and an orientation course on access to the VLE. We take a proactive role in community building and focus on awareness rather than training. We concealed all the e-learning problems behind the scenes. The library resources and journals are automatically available to all students and this contributes greatly to success.

## **Economy**

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

Cost-effectiveness is difficult to calculate, it is a question of how you allocate resources, how good the business predictions are. We have a pump-primed central unit, the Institute of Life Long Learning, with permanent staff which exists to support e-learning. The courses generate money. However, the university has the danger of being geographically marginalized.

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

Income from online education has been growing nicely, especially the growth in fully online student enrolments. The enrolment is nicely flat and stable now but it is a very volatile market.

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

We are trying to be flexible and to adapt to the market. It is a question of not putting all one's eggs into the same basket.

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

N/a

### **Additional factors**

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

- It is a fact that elearning is delivering students to the university who would not otherwise have come
- Supporting over 1000 fulltime elearning students with success is not risky any more
- The enthusiasts came first. Now it is good practitioners in teaching and learning and not from a technology focus any more.

Thank you

