Chapter 5

eLearning: Institutional Provision and Student Expectations

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ABSTRACT

Students who have grown up in the digital age have certain expectations for learning in Higher Education (HE). “Using a complex mix of virtual and face-to-face environments, personal and institutional technologies, learners of all ages are developing new working practices around the technologies available to them. Increasingly, they look for flexibility and openness in the institutional policies and provision that support their learning.” (JISC, 2007). The divide between the institutional eLearning provision and the expectations of students who have grown up in a digital world was highlighted through the UK eLearning benchmarking exercise. Institutional eLearning provision and processes within the HE sector were investigated and analysed through this exercise, which was led by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in collaboration with the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC). This paper presents the experience of two UK Universities, Bournemouth and Reading, whose participation in the benchmarking exercise provides examples of institutional provision. Subsequent Pathfinder funding enabled them to build on their strengths with projects aimed at narrowing the divide between student expectations of eLearning and institutional provision. The eRes: Innovative eLearning with e-Resources project (Bournemouth) encourages students to use quality e-resources in their learning. The “Driving Institutional Reform: Exploring Change with Technology” (DIRECT) project (Reading) has developed a framework to transform its internal quality management processes.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a digital divide between institutional provision and individual student expectations of eLearning in Higher Education (HE). This has been highlighted by the eLearning benchmarking exercise that has investigated and analysed institutional eLearning provision and processes within the UK HE sector. This major UK initiative has been led by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in collaboration with the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC). Five methodologies were used for the exercise with most institutions selecting the Association of Commonwealth Universities Observatory on Borderless Higher Education (ACU/OBHE) methodology. The ACU/OBHE process is presented here through the experience of two UK Universities, Bournemouth and Reading and its outcomes provide examples of institutional provision by identifying areas of strengths and the level at which eLearning is embedded.

Students who have grown up in the digital age have expectations for their learning experience in HE. “Using a complex mix of virtual and face-to-face environments, personal and institutional technologies, learners of all ages are developing new working practices around the technologies available to them. Increasingly, they look for flexibility and openness in the institutional policies and provision that support their learning.” (JISC, 2007) However, there seems to be a digital divide between the institutional provision and use of eLearning and the expectations of students who have grown up in a digital world. Funding through the Pathfinder Programme has enabled both Bournemouth and Reading Universities to implement projects which attempt to align institutional provision and student expectations.

Bournemouth and Reading Universities are both situated in southern England and have a similar number of undergraduate students. The University of Reading has more postgraduate students and academic staff. Bournemouth has been going through a period of great change with a new Vice-Chancellor, new Pro Vice-Chancellors and three out of six Schools have new Deans. The new Corporate Plan 2006 – 2012 states “Our student-centred learning environment emphasises both intellectual achievement and employability” (Bournemouth, 2006). Reading is a research focussed University and is also going through change with a review of the Centre for Development of Teaching and Learning (CDoTL), the establishment of the Enhancement Committee as well as a review of the Directorates and a new Teaching and Learning Strategy. Both Bournemouth and Reading use Blackboard for their Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Bournemouth has been using Blackboard Basic since 2002 and the full Blackboard Academic Suite since 2006. There was major change in eLearning at Bournemouth as the University moved from four VLEs to one during 2006 and 2007. Reading has been using Blackboard since 2001 and moved to a pilot phase of the Blackboard Academic Suite in 2006. In both Universities the VLE provides a personalised student learning environment as the students see the modules in which they are enrolled. This environment usually includes resources such as lecture materials handouts and PowerPoint slides and communication through the use of announcements and email. Collaboration is possible through discussion forum, blogs and wikis within whole module or group areas. Assessment may be through e-assessments such as multiple-choice quizzes or through assessment of contributions to collaborative work.

STUDENT EXPECTATIONS: LEARNERS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Student expectations of their learning experience in HE have changed. Students in different age ranges, such as the Baby Boomers and Net Generation, have different attitudes towards using computers for learning (Tapscott, 1997). Tapscott
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