Chapter 23
Quality E–Learning Guidelines and Their Implementation

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ABSTRACT

Quality e-learning guidelines have the potential to support staff and help provide e-learning that is learner centred, follows good practice, and is innovative, collaborative and sustainable. This chapter will introduce the e-Learning Guidelines for New Zealand and show how organisations have used them. It will present some of the benefits of the guidelines as well as the limitations and discuss how these limitations may be managed. The guidelines have been used in various ways in different organisations. Teaching staff have used the guidelines to search for information and ideas or to help in course design or redevelopment. Managers have used the guidelines to develop procedures to help staff in their use of e-learning. Staff developers have used them as a tool to inform debate about the quality of e-learning. The guidelines allow organisations to share their e-learning knowledge and experiences. Direction from the literature and experience from this project show that guidelines can enable organisations to improve their e-learning but that guidelines need careful implementation and staff support.

INTRODUCTION

The e-Learning Guidelines for New Zealand (e-learning guidelines) enable a community of practitioners to enhance learning and teaching enabled by technology, and to share good practice. The e-learning guidelines provide an overarching framework that an organisation can localise for its own situation and priorities. The e-learning guidelines inform staff of good practice, contribute to the design of effective learning, and offer a practical entry to discussions about quality in teaching through e-learning. People can contribute their expertise to them and so keep the guidelines relevant. The e-learning guidelines are a living concept and can be applied to diverse tertiary contexts.

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Quality guidelines provide the criteria organisations can use to identify good practice and point to improvements. In discussing quality guidelines for e-learning, the focus is on educational effectiveness and the support provided for teaching and learning. The philosophy underlying the pedagogical approach to the e-learning guidelines is that they promote reflection on teaching practice. For the organisation, Marshall (2004) suggests that guidelines identify areas that need strategic direction, development and support. This applies throughout the institution as the guidelines can operate at the management level as well as the teaching and learning level. As Ehlers (2009) in citing Wolff (2004) notes (p343):

*We are entering a new era in quality management for higher education. While it is difficult to mark its exact beginning, it is clear that it is moving away from a mechanistic to a holistic and cultural view of quality in education.*

And continues:

...*the focus is more and more on mastering change, allowing ownership for individual development, promoting champions in organisations and enabling professionals in higher education contexts.*

With the rapid increase of technology in education, there is a real danger that the technology will drive the learning. The e-learning guidelines provide a clear focus on the pedagogy and see the technology as an aid. This is further emphasised by Ellis, Jarkey, Mahonney, Peat and Sheely (2007) when they comment (p.10): “A separation of the responsibilities for resource allocation and for quality learning outcomes can be problematic when teachers want to integrate e-learning into course design. This is because decisions based on learning and teaching imperatives often have implications for the resourcing base of the information and communication technologies (ICT)”.

Guidelines provide information on techniques to help perform certain tasks. They help to streamline processes and allow the processes to be more predictable, with the aim of improving the quality of the outcome. A key point of a guideline should be its flexibility. From this perspective a guideline should be a suggestion, not a rule that must be slavishly followed.

The e-learning guidelines help teaching and support staff, policy makers and managers. In our view the guidelines are a road map to effective practice, flexible so they can be adapted to different contexts, and evolving as technology and pedagogy change. They are a vital tool to enable teachers and administrators to ensure quality of teaching and learning remains their goal.

There are many sets of quality guidelines supporting and informing tertiary organisations and their staff in the e-learning context. Some are specific to distance education (AFT, 2002; ADEC, 2003; ODLQC, 2005) while others are specific to e-learning (IHEP, 2000; Barker, 2002; Barker, 2007; JISC, 2004; Butterfield et al. 1999; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Many similarities have been reported in the guidelines (IHEP,2000; Twigg, 2001; Frydenberg, 2002; Bates & Poole, 2002). This is reassuring as it reflects general agreement on what is good practice. However the guidelines do have differences in their focus and scope. They also differ in the ways they are implemented. Some are designed for the regional or organisational level while others operate at the level of degree or course. The number of different sets of guidelines reflects the differing contexts for the guidelines and shows their potential to support staff and organisations to provide effective learning environments.

The New Zealand Tertiary Education Commission through the Innovation and Development Fund funded a year-long project on implementing a set of e-learning guidelines which had previously been developed in another Tertiary Education Commission-funded project led by the authors. The project started in July 2007 and involved
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