



## **Badly advised, or failure to take good advice? Reflections on the publication of 'The e-University Compendium - Volume 1'**

As the UK Education & Skills Select Committee continues its quest to get to the bottom of the failure of the UK eUniversity (the new Higher Education Minister, Kim Howells, was grilled last week), it is instructive to point to the work of the new UK Higher Education Academy (HEA) to publish the mass of commissioned reports that informed UKeU's development. A strong theme of the Select Committee hearings has been whether UKeU failed to act on good advice, or whether that advice itself was too often flawed. Most of the documents now on the HEA website have never previously been published, on grounds of commercial confidentiality and delays in getting the UKeU's research centre off the ground. In September 2004, the HEA published volume one of the collection, comprising some 23 chapters and running to over 1000 pages. What light do the documents shed on the development and demise of UKeU?

Volume one brings together reports commissioned while the concept of UKeU (as it was to become known) was under development. The concept was first publicly announced by the then UK Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett in February 2000. The organisation that became UKeU was only operational from February 2002. The reports in volume one are from the period between these two events. The compendium contains a general 'market' study, various case studies of virtual university initiatives around the world, and a range of technical/ pedagogic reports (e.g. on learning management systems, e-learning materials, assessment and student support). Most of the authors were UK-based (a mixture of academics, vendor representatives and consultants), with a handful from abroad (e.g. USA, Australia, Spain) in respect of the 'competitor' case studies. The collected reports have been edited for consistency of style, but the main text has not been updated (e.g. to take account of the fortunes of different firms and initiatives over time). Footnotes have been used to indicate where the context or situation has changed in important respects. The editors did not attempt to offer judgement on the extent to which the reports were taken account of by UKeU as an organisation, and whether particular reports or recommendations, in retrospect, should or should not have been followed. The editors have written a useful introduction to each section. Volume 1 does not include the 'Business Model for the e-University' commissioned from PricewaterhouseCoopers, published by HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) in late 2000. (Please see the Observatory's article from [23 April 2004](#) for coverage of the demise of the UKeU.)

There is no space here for a chapter-by-chapter rendering of the compendium. For readers wanting a relatively brief overview of the entire volume, chapter two, 'Overview of the e-University Concept' is very helpful. This report was commissioned from an independent consultant in late 2001 precisely to distil the key messages from the various e-university reports published during 2000 and 2001. The editors of the volume note that this chapter has "stood the test of time very well". Given the sheer volume of material available to the first senior management team at UKeU, one can confidently assume that this summary chapter was widely read and was influential. If one does attempt to gauge the extent to which UKeU the organisation adhered to the key messages of this volume, what conclusions might one come to?

In many respects, it is difficult to answer this question using volume one alone. The first problem is that there is no detailed account in the public domain of the final operational UKeU. Chapter two, drawing on the other reports, makes many sensible points about student support, back office functions and course development, but there is no straightforward way of comparing this 'blueprint' with UKeU the organisation, let alone with the decision-making that

fashioned UKeU from 2002 onwards. A second point to note is that almost all the reports in volume one are discursive rather than directive. Few make (or were asked to make) specific recommendations to the emerging e-university, not least because no defined organisation was yet in place. The studies rather were designed to survey the competition, business models, markets and pedagogies/ tools, not to recommend specific ways forward. Of course, all the reports reach conclusions and make general recommendations. However, it is difficult to point to a recommendation and be clear how it 'should' have been interpreted by UKeU the organisation.

There are a few cases where there do appear to be disjunctions between the findings of chapter 2 and the final public form of UKeU. (The taking down of the UKeU website means that even the latter is now only a memory). For example, the chapter states that "perhaps one of the clearest lessons from the combined experience of all the players so far is how absolutely critical it is to have a clear definition and a good understanding of the specific markets being targeted". Moreover, the report continues, provision must be tailored to different markets, and insofar as possible, tailored to individual learners. On subject and form of provision: "Far and away the most common provision of content to date is in business, IT, management and English. Although there has been very little market analysis to support these choices, the rationale for them is so obvious that it would be hard to get them wrong. Even so, the mistake has generally been to think that it is full postgraduate degrees (e.g., MBA-type courses) that are wanted, when in fact, it is often smaller units of study leading to, for example, some form of certificate".

UKeU did indeed focus on business, IT and English (and also introduced a range of other subjects), but one can certainly chart a gap between the final offering of UKeU (a range of masters and certificates programmes) and this injunction for a 'chunk' approach to learning. No doubt credit systems were available for students at the different UK participating institutions, but 'chunks of credit' was not how provision was marketed. There was also little evidence of provision tailored to different markets, although UKeU's ill-fated in-house LMS might have played a role as a sophisticated content management system, permitting customisation of various hues. Of course, this idealised e-learning customisation has rarely been realised in practice. Indeed, many of the most successful virtual universities target a relatively narrow geographical area/ target group, making course design and marketing simpler, and avoiding complex customisation efforts. The 'global' push of UKeU, spanning several continents and language groups (UKeU's targeting of Brazil- in fact mentioned as worthy of investigation by one of the reports in volume one- has been widely mocked), meant that the more realistic assembly of generally uncustomised and little customisable programmes it first offered was a real problem. As detailed in a forthcoming Observatory report, an explicit credit approach is said to be key to the outstanding success (in terms of enrolments and revenue) of the Edinburgh Business School's longstanding distance/ e-learning provision. Beyond the early study of 'market issues', market research is conspicuous by its absence from volume 1. Post-2001 studies, not yet in the public domain, are understood to have tackled this issue head on. These documents may reveal whether the 'credit chunks' approach was actually preferred by the market or not, by whom, for what subjects and 'where'.

What is perhaps most striking about volume one is that it serves as a forceful reminder that attempting to predict the market for UKeU, whether through competitor, country or industry analysis, was fraught with problems. None of the organisations surveyed in volume one bear much resemblance to UKeU; and even where the form was somewhat similar (e.g. Universitat Oberta de Catalunya), the long-term funding model and timing were very different. Similarly, few were operating in what were judged to be UKeU's main initial markets- Hong Kong SAR, Singapore and Malaysia. Detailed knowledge of student preferences in these markets was almost nil (at least at close of 2001), as was the case with development costs and price sensitivity. One gets a strong sense of the 'decision and implementation gap' that must have faced the initial senior management team at UKeU. A national, commercial, high-end virtual university, drawing on provision from existing universities in the country, was and still is without precedent. That approach, more or less determined from the outset by the Secretary of State, may have put UKeU in a straightjacket that no amount of consultancy could directly address or free up. In retrospect, because the contents do not directly 'get at' UKeU the organisation to be, the decision (on commercial grounds) not to publish these reports at the time, may seem

odd. The decision may reflect residual dotcom 'fear' that there were mighty forces 'out there' intent on stealing UKeU's thunder (and the UK's international student market to boot), and/ or that publication would reveal the absence as much as the presence of the venture.

As higher education institutions worldwide continue to gradually develop e-learning in all its variety, volume one is a treasure house of considered comment and reflection. The editors, Paul Bacsich with Sara Frank Bristow, along with the Higher Education Academy that is hosting the material, are to be congratulated for assembling such a formidable and historically important set of documents. Volume two, which will get closer to the operational reality of UKeU, is awaited with interest, although no timeframe appears to have been announced. Most desirable would be a collective insider account of the development of UKeU as an organisation. Only then, juxtaposing early and later consultancy reports, internal UKeU documents, and organisational details, will it be possible to attempt any cogent assessment of whether on balance UKeU was badly advised, ignored good advice it had commissioned, or whether operational reality revealed insights that no consultancy report could offer up. As the UK sector awaits publication of HEFCE's e-learning strategy, the ghost of UKeU needs to be laid to rest. The publication of volume one is part of that process, but only part.