



New UK strategies for e-learning are released – do they signal a major shift in the approach to online education?

Over the last couple of weeks, two major UK educational bodies released their strategies for e-learning. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) published its strategy on 8 March followed by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) on 15 March. Focusing mainly on the higher education area, what are the key points of the two strategies and what are the likely implications for the sector? What changes do the strategies signal in their approach? How does the UkeU project (an initiative that received £50 million in public funding but is hardly mentioned in the strategy) appear to have influenced the strategic approach to e-learning in higher education? Finally, having opted for a broad definition of e-learning and deliberately excluded specific targets for online developments, how will HEFCE measure whether its strategic objectives have been met?

The [‘HEFCE strategy for e-learning’](#) was released on 8 March 2005 after more than a year’s delay. The organisation waited for the final report from the House of Commons Select Committee on the UKeU to be released and for the government to finalise its strategy so that the two approaches could be linked (refer to the Observatory’s [6 March 2005](#) article for coverage of the report). The paper outlines the Council’s strategic approach for the next ten years, with a review scheduled every three years. The [DfES strategy “Harnessing Technology: Transforming Learning and Children’s Services”](#) was released a week later and covers all sectors of education. The DfES strategy sets out a series of objectives for the education and skills sector to be realised in “the next five years and beyond.” A consultation process with stakeholders was incorporated into the development of both strategies.

Overall, the two strategies seem to signal a major change in the approach to e-learning and how to encourage development within this field. Both the government and the Funding Council seem to communicate a shift from funding centralised initiatives (UkeU being the most prominent) to de-centralised activities (funding will now be allocated to individual institutions). The other significant change concerns the growing focus on e-learning activities, where the emphasis is placed on the importance of developing pedagogy methods rather than on technological developments (which to a large extent have dominated in the past). HEFCE claims that e-learning has already (albeit relatively recently) started to focus less on technology and more on the learning experience for the student. In connection to this, it has also been recognised that technology has affected but not transformed education, and that good pedagogy plays an equally important role in ICT-enhanced education as in “traditional” provision.

Research points to the discrepancy between ICT infrastructure and the actual impact in the classroom. The findings of the Observatory’s survey on Online Learning in Commonwealth Universities show that whilst a majority of institutions have adopted institutional e-learning strategies and implemented technical facilities for online learning (such as Learning Management Systems), the actual number of students enrolled in web dependent or largely/wholly online programmes reflects much slower developments. Implementation of strategies and technical developments do not necessarily secure successful e-learning activities benefiting all students. (Please see the Observatory’s [October 2004](#) and [December 2004](#) reports for analysis of the Observatory’s 2004 survey findings.)

HEFCE has deliberately adopted the broadest definition of e-learning as “the use of technologies in learning opportunities”. The Council’s rationale for producing an e-learning strategy is “to help institutions and practitioners explore the possibilities of transforming the future learning experience”. The highest priority objective enables “institutions to meet the

needs of learners and their own aspirations for development.” The strategy also supports the view that institutional ICT strategies should be closely linked to other institutional plans (e.g. teaching and learning, human resources, etc), and that institutional approaches should focus on student learning rather than on technology. Finally, the role of life-long learning in the knowledge society is addressed by emphasising the importance of strengthening connections between the academic learning sector and professional development/other training.

Many of the key points reflect the views of the participants involved in the consultation process leading up to the development of the HEFCE strategy. This was carried out between August and December 2003, and garnered 114 responses from stakeholders. According to the main findings of the process, there is a perceived need for benchmarking the present state of e-learning in higher education and adopting a cross-sectoral approach (e.g. links to the DfES strategy); ‘ICT’ would provide a more helpful definition of e-learning than ‘distance learning’; online strategies should be institution-wide and encompass other strategies, such as those for learning and teaching and human resources.

HEFCE will facilitate a benchmarking tool designed to allow institutions to measure their relative position and progress in the area. HEFCE’s two partner organisations, the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) will develop the system. JISC is funded by all of the UK’s post-16 and higher education funding councils and provides guidance on incorporating ICT in teaching, learning and research methods. The HEA is an independent organisation funded mainly by grants from the four UK funding bodies and subscriptions from higher education institutions, and works to enhance all aspects of the student experience. There is no further information about the benchmarking programme at this stage. A tool enabling institutions to benchmark their development within this area has been developed by the Observatory through its survey on Online Learning in Commonwealth Universities.

It is clear from the paper that HEFCE does not plan to establish a new and separate organisation for e-learning, but will build on investments already made in learning and teaching. Some additional funding, however, will be made available. According to one of the recommendations of the Select Committee’s report on the UkeU, the government should explicate through HEFCE how it intends to invest the £12 million remaining from the UKeU initiative. HEFCE has announced in its strategy that the residual grant will be distributed between individual institutions and partnerships through the “current capital funding process”. Annex A of the strategy sets out allocations by institution for 2005/06. In addition, some funding will be allocated to the two partner organisations, JISC and HEA, to assist higher education institutions in their e-learning activities. A ‘virtual’ national e-learning advisory and support centre will be established in co-operation with the two organisations to “co-ordinate activities and provide leadership with the overall objective of embedding e-learning in higher education.” The centre will draw on the expertise of other stakeholders such as the Leadership Foundation (LF, which provides support and advice on leadership, governance and management for institutions in the UK further and higher education sectors) and the Association for Learning Technology (ALT, which seeks to bring together stakeholders with an interest in the use of learning technology).

The Council plans to implement its strategy through seven strands: pedagogy and curriculum development; learning resources and networked learning; student support and collaboration; strategic management, human resources and capacity development; quality; research and evaluation; and infrastructure and technical standards. The broad definition of e-learning adopted for the strategy, coupled with the experience that e-learning developments are rarely linear or straight-forward, has made it difficult to set targets for progress in the area. In order to determine whether the strategy has been able to meet its overall objective (and make e-learning ‘embedded’), the Funding Council has outlined eight “Measures of Success.” These include ensuring that “ICT is commonly accepted into all aspects of the student experience of higher education, connecting areas of HE with other aspects of life and work.” Additionally, there is an emphasis on incorporating online elements into pedagogical methods to ensure that “staff are supported at all stages to develop appropriate skills in e-learning, and these skills are recognised in their roles and responsibilities and in reward structures.” No recommendations are put forth vis-à-vis the funding or structure of ICT teacher training and incentives programmes.

To date, the strategies have attracted limited coverage in the UK media and the interest shown appears to be connected to the aftermath of the UkeU closure. Interestingly, the UKeU receives very little attention in the HEFCE strategy. It is referred to in the introduction where the Council states that the major activities have been transferred from the University to the HEA and individual institutions. However, the strategy appears to draw on several lessons learnt through the experience of the UkeU. This is evidenced by the decision to encourage individual institutions to engage in developing their e-learning activities, as well as the decision not to adopt targets for online programmes, online elements in courses, students enrolled on such programmes, etc. The paper also seems to communicate an appreciation that teaching and learning development is central to ensuring that an e-learning initiative is successful (the millions spent on the platform developed specifically for the UKeU was not enough to recruit students).

The DfES document was released a week after the HEFCE strategy, and covers all areas of education. Similarly to HEFCE, the Department has adopted a broad definition of e-learning and defines this as “any learning that uses ICT”. The Department claims that technology has already had a significant impact on the daily life of the UK population, but is concerned that the use of ICT has been “haphazard.” According to the report, systems are rarely compatible or cost effective due to a lack of co-operation between organisations and higher education institutions. The DfES believes a more strategic approach to ICT could alleviate this problem. Similarly to HEFCE, the DfES strategy does not aim to prescribe how e-learning developments should be taken forward in individual institutions.

More than 400 organisations from all areas of the education and training sectors (including the commercial) participated in the DfES consultation process and provided feedback on the government’s proposal. The funding of the strategy was addressed in most responses with the majority expressing the view that the government should underwrite the costs. Many organisations expressed the belief that education and industry leaders must be convinced of the benefits of e-learning in order to drive strategies forward within their institutions. The lack of e-awareness and e-skills at the senior level was also a cause for concern among many respondents. The digital divide was a consistent concern expressed by most respondents, including broadband access. In addition, many respondents expressed a desire for a blended approach towards e-learning and assessment, retaining traditional pedagogy where appropriate.

The DfES strategy reflects a more cautious approach to ICT developments and their impact following the dot com bust (e.g. the experience of the UKeU). The strategic paper appreciates that technology has “not yet transformed teaching and learning, but it has made a major impact in many schools, colleges and universities”. In addition, the Department makes clear that it does not advocate “a complete switch to new technology. Traditional pedagogy and e-learning could and should complement each other”. The DfES paper states that the UK higher education sector starts “from a position of strength” as it has a good infrastructure and a high level of general ICT skills.

The paper lists four main priorities for the higher education sector: provide an integrated online information service for all citizens; ensure integrated online personal support for learners; develop a collaborative approach to personalised learning activities; and provide good quality ICT training and support packages for practitioners. In connection to these four objectives, a range of ‘milestones’ have been identified, including a “feasibility study on new models of cross-institution partnerships in support of flexible learning pathways for 2006” and “research in e-learning and the pedagogy of subject teaching to be fully recognised within subject panels by 2007-08.” These ‘milestones’ appear to indicate the government’s targets.

The main developments outlined in the strategy focus on teaching and learning developments, research and links between the higher education sector and industry. In terms of teaching and learning, the Department wishes to encourage partnerships for the sharing of experience, systems and best practice, and promotes the development of open and flexible learning opportunities for domestic as well as international students. With regards to research, the strategy emphasises the need for collaborative research into pedagogy and e-learning in order to maximise ICT effectiveness in the classroom. The Department states that “teaching staff are encouraged to experiment and innovate”, and reiterates HEFCE’s appreciation that adequate

e-learning is not developed by simply adding technology to what is already being done. Additionally, DfES wishes to encourage links between higher education and industry in order to ensure that the sector delivers what is needed in the labour market. The DfES will mainly work with JISC and BECTA (the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency – an organisation established in 1998, which assists in developing and delivering ICT strategies in the educational sector) on the implementation of the e-learning strategies.

The HEFCE and DfES e-learning strategies arguably draw on lessons learnt through the experience of the UkeU, and could reflect a broader shift in their approach to e-learning in higher education. The appreciation that it is time to let pedagogy and student need drive e-learning initiatives rather than technical developments could indicate an important change in the way e-learning is encouraged and funded in the UK. The main conclusions stating that developments need to be led by institutions, that online strategies need to encompass more than technical aspects and that developments should be driven by demand rather than supply could have value-added potential for the sector.

The practical implications remain less clear. Additional funding to implement the e-learning strategies appears to be limited. The Department states that “all the actions proposed in the strategy can be met within existing budgets up to the milestones listed”. Although the e-learning strategies emphasise the need to integrate online elements into pedagogical methods, the issue of funding such an initiative is not explored. The development of ICT staff training and incentive programmes is arguably central to maximising ICT effectiveness in the classroom, and could require substantial resources and a lengthy timeframe. As reported by findings from the Observatory’s 2004 survey, the vast majority of responding institutions appear to have accepted a major future role for ICT in respect of teaching and learning, but the nature and timing of ‘implementation’ and mainstreaming generally remains much less clear and further off. It will be interesting to monitor whether the shift towards a more student-centred and institution-led approach will enable online learning strategies to become more modest and localised and gain more practical value in the classroom.