

Benchmarking elearning – outcomes and next steps

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From May 2007 to January 2008 Northumbria University was involved in a national benchmarking of elearning exercise. We explored where Northumbria stood against a set of 26 criteria from a methodology called Pick&Mix.

Outcomes identify both where the university has clear strengths and where there are opportunities for further development. Particular strengths include the robustness and extent of our ICT provision and the virtual universal uptake of the VLE. Additionally, the quality, ubiquity and extent of service for students is excellent and this was reflected in student feedback. In terms of future development, whilst levels of adoption of elearning are very high and its implementation very broad, we now need to look at a second wave of adoption which brings greater depth to what is delivered. In this paper we briefly discuss the approach taken by Northumbria to gather and collate evidence to identify our position against each of the criteria and share key findings for the institution. We were part of a cohort of ten institutions using the same methodology and a number of issues emerged which are common across the sector including effective costing for elearning, workload implications, staff recognition and reward for expertise in elearning and a range of issues surrounding accessibility.

The paper identifies our approaches to addressing areas for further development and our intentions with respect to future benchmarking, including looking at specific provision (e.g. distance learning), individual schools and services. We identify how this reflects and contributes to Northumbria's continuing cycle of improvement.

Keywords: benchmarking, elearning, improvement, sectoral findings.

1. Background:

The Benchmarking of eLearning exercise was a national project supported by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC). Northumbria joined phase 2 of the exercise which ran from May 2007 to January 2008, and delivered its final report in March 2008. Northumbria joined a cohort of nine other Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in using the Pick&Mix (Bacsich, 2007) methodology, one of three supported in phase 2 of the exercise¹.

The exercise built upon earlier work undertaken to measure Northumbria's progress in elearning against the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) elearning strategy "measures of success" (HEFCE, 2005). Findings from our involvement in the national benchmarking exercise made use of, and built upon the findings of that earlier exercise.

At Northumbria University, elearning is seen as an integral element of its overall approach to learning and teaching and the university is justifiably proud of the progress it has made. An early

¹ The criteria used by Northumbria are available at http://elitnorthumbria.org/nube/images/4/44/Northumbria_criteria.doc

adopter and one of the largest users of the Blackboard Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) in the UK and Europe, it has taken major strides to further develop this resource so that it now incorporates a wide range of additional elements, and is fully integrated with a range of other services. This has resulted in a massive uptake in the use of the (now renamed) eLearning Portal (eLP).

It is worthwhile to highlight two of the aims which underpin Northumbria's Mission and which are of particular relevance here.

- To deliver an outstanding student experience, as our first priority.
- To ensure outstanding services and facilities for the benefit of students, staff and the wider community.

The ambition to deliver an outstanding experience drives the continuing cycle of improvement in which the university engages. The benchmarking of elearning exercise has been part of this ongoing process. The outcomes are intended to celebrate what we have achieved so far but also to identify where further development is possible and how this may impact upon future strategies, in particular, the learning and teaching strategy.

It is not the purpose here to revisit the whole process for benchmarking undertaken by Northumbria in any detail as this information is already in the public domain² and provided a presentation at the 2007 ECEL conference (Bell & Farrier, 2007, 2008). It is worth noting, here that, for the purposes of the benchmarking exercise, we broadly adopted the HEFCE (2005) definition, "The Government e-learning strategy defines e-learning as any learning that uses ICT." (HEFCE, 2005) and, more succinctly the JISC definition, "Learning facilitated and supported through the use of information and communications technology." (JISC, 2005).

2. Outcomes by category:

Within the Pick&Mix methodology there are 20 core criteria and a selection of supplementary criteria. Institutions were encouraged to use a selection of five or six supplementary criteria taken from within the methodology or from other sources such as the E-xcellence criteria (EADTU, 2006). In order to enable us to focus clearly upon the emerging issues and themes, the Pick&Mix criteria were grouped into five categories, although some criteria could fall into more than one:

1. Organisational and technical infrastructures and strategic planning;
2. Quality assurance, enhancement and evaluation;
3. Staff experience, support and development;
4. The learning journey;
5. Student experience and support.

This allowed the final report to look not only at specific criteria but also to explore linked issues. What also emerged was that there was a great deal of common ground amongst UK HEIs in terms of a number of the key criteria and this will also be discussed later.

² Detailed information is available on the Northumbria University Benchmarking eLearning wiki and blog available at http://elitnorthumbria.org/nube/index.php/Welcome_to_NUBE

In dealing with each cluster of criteria we will provide an outline of the criteria and identify strengths and areas for further development.

2.1 Organisational and technical infrastructures and strategic planning

In this section we reported upon a broad raft of eight criteria which are largely related to higher level decision making and strategies. Briefly these criteria are: (03) tools, (06) elearning strategy, (07) decisions (projects), (10) training, (12) costs, (13) planning (annual), (15) organisation and (19) decisions (programmes). Numbers in brackets are taken from the full list of Pick&Mix criteria.

Northumbria is a large institution with over 30 000 students. Consequently it is also a very diverse organisation and, whilst some of the areas in this section are evidently addressed at institutional level, others are devolved to a greater or lesser extent.

Learners are provided with an excellent range of ICT tools and, in addition to those provided within the VLE where access is available to a range of support, services and learning opportunities, the university has provided institution-wide access to wifi and through its thin client server provides access to a standard desktop environment with subject specific software also available where needed. Further, there is excellent open access provision and tools are ubiquitously available to all, both staff and students. This reflects the university's excellent record in implementing major elearning projects (thin-client access, VLE, student record systems, library resource access, etc.). The embedding of elearning within the Learning and Teaching Strategy reflects the confidence the institution has in its systems.

Where further work is needed is in terms of ensuring that there is a two-way dialogue so that technological innovation reflects pedagogical need. This relationship is often too informal and can at times lead to unnecessary confusion.

Northumbria runs an extensive staff development and training programme and, through a central system, attendance is monitored and reported to schools and services. However, although there is a robust staff appraisal process in place which should respond to staff training and development needs, it is far from universal practice for the information garnered from the monitoring process to inform that process. A further problem relates to the existence of multiple providers of staff development/training which can cause confusion.

Decision making for elearning development takes place at a variety of levels, both at the centre of the university and in individual schools and services produce annual plans which reflect the diversity of delivery approaches – online, distance, flexible, collaborative – although for much of this elearning is implicit rather than explicit. Against this, it is uncommon for schools to have an appointed member of staff with a remit for developing elearning and this can hinder progress.

One of the key areas which emerged within this section relates to costing. Whilst there is a central costing model for the development of new programmes, that model is open to local interpretations and rarely takes into account the additional time needed to develop online courses. This is an issue which is not only evident at Northumbria but is reflected across the sector (Adamson & Plenderleith, 2008, para 3.9.4).

2.2 Quality assurance, enhancement and evaluation

Three criteria fall into this category, (14) evaluation, (17) quality assurance and (20) quality enhancement. The exercise demonstrated that there is in place a well regulated and robust system for overall evaluation. One of the aspects for development reflects that the process has been designed with conventional delivery in mind and needs to be reviewed to take into account the impact of delivery modes which are mediated through ICTs. This will also entail developing expertise to engage in evaluation of elearning provision.

Quality assurance processes for distance learning online teaching and learning materials are robust and comprehensive but, like many other institutions, the same level of scrutiny is seldom applied to teaching and learning materials which are online but related to other forms of delivery including campus-based, etc.

Quality enhancement is in place, comprehensive and under regular review. However, apart from new staff who are required to attend staff development in elearning, other staff only attend on a voluntary basis or as part of our continuing professional development (CPD) programme

2.3 Staff experience, support and development

Here the focus is upon six criteria, all of which have a direct impact upon staff and teaching. They are (01) adoption, (02) VLE stage, (08) pedagogy, (11) academic workload, (16) technical support to staff and (18) staff recognition and reward. Some of these could have been placed in other categories but, because of their influence upon the staff experience, they are dealt with here.

Adoption of elearning is very high in all areas of the university, reflecting our status as early adopters. The next task here is to take this to the next level moving on from base-line adoption and encouraging and supporting the use of the technology for collaboration, communication and interaction.

In the same way, whilst we have a ubiquitous VLE, based upon the Blackboard system and integrated with a number of other services, we need now to look to the next phase where, in common with other institutions, we should be exploring how we move beyond the tie-in to a single VLE provider. It is timely to explore alternative approaches, in particular in relation to web 2.0 technologies, ensuring that the technology matches pedagogical need for an increasingly diverse student population. The centrally provided technical support has a major role to play here. Furthermore, some schools have appointed dedicated staff to support staff developing new elearning approaches. The difficulty is that in such a large organisation it is not unusual for academic staff to be unclear as to what should be their first port of call to access this support.

The pedagogy criterion is closely linked to criterion 01 – adoption, and many of the issues raised are similar. At Northumbria, in common with other universities, all new staff are enrolled on a programme relating to teaching in HE. The Northumbria programme explores, among other things, pedagogical approaches in HE. An element of the course focuses on elearning although this is a minor part and not dealt with in depth. Further provision is within Northumbria's continuing professional development (CPD) programme where modules dealing with online learning and distance learning and their associated pedagogies are available alongside an extensive staff development programme which offers sessions focussed upon particular aspects such as managing discussion boards, using live online chatrooms, etc. However, as the

benchmarking consultants note³ (HEA, 2006), these are inputs and do not necessarily lead to outputs.

In terms of outputs, an exploration of a random selection of sites on the eLP showed an overwhelming use of the VLE as a document repository (75%) with little guidance or support, little signposting and minimal understanding of how online learning is different (enhanced). Some 10% showed sound insight into the nature of interactivity and ways of encouraging students to engage (enabled) whilst 15% were web-delivered but with variable levels of pedagogical insight. Whilst students do interact with the eLP, a proportion of this is not related to programmes and modules, but rather to other facilities available within it and which, often, themselves, display better pedagogical practice and insight into accessing materials and learning online. The HEFCE (2005) “measures of success” talk in terms of elearning being integral to the everyday experience of all learners. Northumbria has not yet achieved that.

A major issue for both Northumbria and the sector concerns workload. In common with other institutions, although there are examples of time allowances being built in for developing online learning, this is far from universal and it is currently rare for elearning to feature in role descriptors or promoted posts. This ties in with the whole recognition and reward structure for elearning. Although the university has a number of schemes to recognise expertise in teaching and learning, the rewards tend to be small grants. Additionally there are Teaching Fellow and Teaching Chair appointments. However these do not relate specifically to elearning. A limited number of schools do offer promoted posts for elearning but these are the exception rather than the rule.

2.4 The learning journey

This category comprises five criteria; (04) usability, (05) accessibility, (09) learning material, (51) uniformity and (52) ubiquity. These all relate to the learning and teaching experience. Consequently they overlap with both staff and student experience categories but are worthy of separate consideration.

Usability, as defined by Neilson (2003), “is a quality attribute that assesses how easy user interfaces are to use. The word “usability” also refers to methods for improving ease-of-use during the design process. Usability is defined by five quality components: learnability, efficiency, memorability, errors, satisfaction.” The majority of Northumbria’s provision for elearning adheres well to this definition with its thin client provision, “desktop Anywhere” and many eLP modules offering sound practice. However, this level of quality is not ubiquitous and some provision is confusing, muddled and difficult to navigate. The best practice offered in many areas needs to be disseminated effectively and it may be that a set of editorial standards needs to be developed to support this. Accessibility is closely related to usability. It is an area which, in common with many other institutions involved in the benchmarking exercise, and indeed the sector as a whole, can be problematic (Adamson & Plenderleith, 2008, paras 3.9.5, 3.9.6). Whilst major efforts have been made to ensure software is accessible, the same levels of vigilance need to be applied to online learning materials, again indicating that editorial guidelines and staff development are potential ways forward.

The learning material criterion is related to the previous two. The need for learners to have access to materials of a consistent style ensures that access and use are straightforward. The

³ see <http://elearning.heacademy.ac.uk/wiki/index.php/P08>

university does not impose guidelines for learning materials and nor do individual schools. There is evidence that, within many programmes, learning materials are consistent. The imposition of minimum standards for the eLP may assist here but there is not a pervasive culture of house styles nor of explicit editorial standards. Knowledge and understanding of copyright issues is limited and support in this area is insufficiently resourced.

In relation to the elearning service to off-campus as well as on-campus students, Northumbria is to be congratulated for the extensive efforts made to ensure equality and uniformity. Furthermore, the ubiquity of Northumbria's service to all users is to be commended. Access to elearning is supported through a range of initiatives including campus-wide wireless access and Desktop Anywhere. As regards external, collaborative delivery where the levels of service available in partner institutions may not always match those available to campus-based students, the increasingly flexible modes of delivery and diversity of stakeholders mean that vigilance is required to ensure equity of service.

2.5 Student experience and support

The core criteria of the Pick&Mix methodology do not relate directly to the student learning experience. It was for this reason that we chose the four criteria in this section, all drawn from the supplementary criteria. They are (70) widening participation, (72) personalisation, (94) student satisfaction and (95) e-portfolios. These criteria represent a number of national (and in some cases EU-wide) issues and initiatives.

Following the publication of a strategy for widening participation in higher education by the Department for Education and Skills⁴ (DfES, 2003) this area is of major significance to UK HEIs. Northumbria has in place a sound strategy to deal with the widening participation agenda and invests time and effort in understanding and catering for the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. What is more difficult to ascertain is how this impacts for the university on elearning and vice versa. It is also clear that there is only limited crossover between this strategy and other strategies. That elearning has the potential to enhance the widening participation agenda (particularly given the current national priority for work-based learning) and cater for the concomitant diversity of the student body is an area for further development.

The personalization agenda is a sector-wide issue and is only now slowly developing. A number of facilities within the eLP offer potential ways forward, particularly through the use of collaborative, networking software (commonly known as web 2.0). The introduction of e-portfolios is also important here in contributing to the successful development of personalization. There are examples of innovative practice across the university which could be built upon.

To gauge student satisfaction a number of steps were taken including an online student survey as a Students' Union-led focus group. Additionally data from the National Student Survey was also available. The feedback which emerged from these sources indicates that students are very happy with both the quality and quantity of facilities and see ICT as integral to their studies, with 89% expressing satisfaction with the former and 96% using ICT in their daily studies. They are also happy with the levels of support available. However, there are areas for further development. Uniformity of eLP sites is one area already being addressed, but uniformity of use and the disparity both within and between programme use requires further exploration and

⁴ Now reorganised into the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS).

implies a need for more robust quality reviewing as well as staff development and the dissemination of best practice.

Personal Development Plans (PDPs) are a requirement within HE in the UK (QAA, 2000) and the university has in place robust policies for the development of these. Although PDPs are not uniform across the university's nine schools, all programmes have them in one form or another. Provided within the eLP is an e-portfolio facility and this has been used effectively for PDPs in a number of programmes. Others have adopted ICT-based approaches for PDPs and developed their own version of e-portfolios. It is also important to note that, in some situations, an electronic PDP is not appropriate due to professional body requirements. However, the full potential of e-portfolios has not yet been developed and no firm institution-wide policy is yet in place.

2.6 Overview

The Benchmarking Exercise has revealed that Northumbria's approach to elearning (and indeed to all learning and teaching) has a great deal to commend itself upon. It also revealed that there are several areas where further development is desirable, if not essential, and which would contribute towards the delivery of an outstanding experience for all students and staff.

3. Sectoral issues

In this section we highlight a number of criteria where the outcomes which emerged indicate areas for development across the HE sector. During the Benchmarking Exercise, Northumbria was one of a cohort of ten institutions using the same methodology. The cohort was quite diverse including large institutions offering a broad range of subject areas through to some quite small, specialist institutions. The cohort was also geographically dispersed across England and Wales. Consequently areas of common concern are likely to resonate across the sector as a whole.

3.1 Accessibility and usability

Accessibility, and to a lesser extent, usability are areas which many participating institutions found to be problematic. Many institutions make available a range of assistive software but there is a recognition that, for example, through its use of frames, the Blackboard system which is the predominant proprietary VLE in the UK does not match existing accessibility criteria. Additionally, much online material prepared by academic staff has limited accessibility. Although Northumbria rated itself well against the usability criterion, this is not universal across the sector.

3.2 Learning materials

Closely related to accessibility and usability are issues relating to learning materials. Almost all participants reported that, whilst the rhetoric of quality assurance for learning materials is prevalent, this does not match the reality and that, for many, editorial standards and consistency of approach was not evident in many situations. This may be related to the lack of editorial standards or the reluctance of academic staff to adhere to these where they do exist.

3.3 Academic workload and costs.

In their final report on the Benchmarking Exercise, Adamson & Plenderleith (2008) note,

“Several respondents identified the need for a better understanding of the costs and workload requirements of e-learning and blended learning modes, including costing the time and effort required by both academic and support staff.”
Adamson & Plenderleith (2008) para 3.9.4

What is evident is that many institutions have not yet woken up to the impact of developing and delivering online programmes upon academic staff workloads. Models which exist for face-to-face delivery are often applied and as a consequence, the reality of the extra time and effort required to set up online learning and, especially with distance and blended approaches, support learners, are inadequate. A concomitant impact occurs to costing models which have usually been developed to meet the needs of face-to-face approaches.

3.4 Recognition and reward

The outcomes indicate that, although practice varies from institution to institution, there is still a heavy reliance upon the enthusiastic innovator who develops online learning because of interest rather than it being a specific aspect of their role descriptor. Certainly the evidence was not there to demonstrate a structured, organised approach to rewarding and recognising staff expertise in other than limited ways (small grants, short-term secondments, etc.)

3.5 Personalisation

Although this was a supplementary criterion, half of the cohort had used it. Those who did reported that, although it is high profile in a number of recent central government policies, it has not yet impacted upon the sector in any great way. It would certainly appear to be an area in which HEIs are dragging their heels.

3.6 Overview

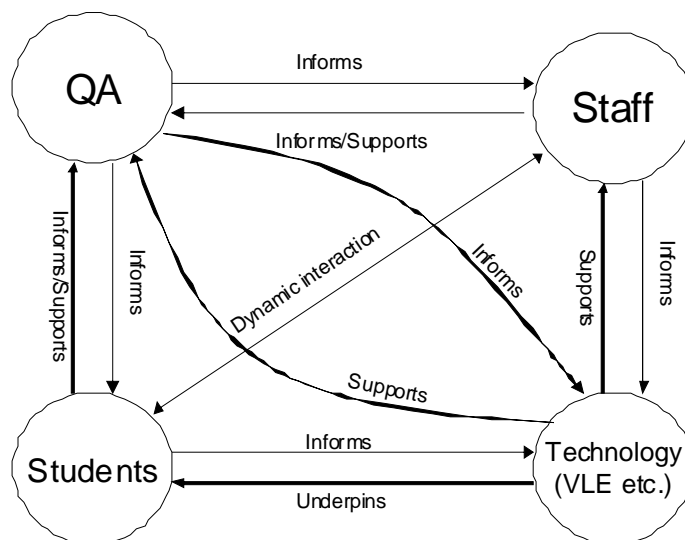
Perhaps the most succinct overview of those issues impacting upon elearning in Higher Education in the UK is provided by one of Adamson & Plenderleith's (2008) respondents who wrote,

“If our [methodology] cohort group was anything to go by, most institutions seem to be at similar stages of using technology to support learning, that is we've all rolled out some form of VLE that is used largely as a document repository, we've no real understanding of overall costs, we've all similar problems with accessibility, we aren't great at getting innovative practice rolled out beyond enthusiasts, so any national activities that support these and other areas of shared concern would be welcome.”
Adamson & Plenderleith (2008) para. 3.9.6

4. Ways forward

The final version of the report on Northumbria’s benchmarking exercise was delivered in March 2008⁵. Subsequently a meeting of staff operationally involved in the benchmarking exercise with a range of representatives from across the university including the Deputy Vice Chancellor (DVC) for learning and teaching, Associate Deans from a number of schools and heads of key university services (IT Services, Library, Human Resources, Academic Registry) was held in order to review the findings and identify key areas for development. Consequently the ways forward identified here reflect the views of a broad range of participants and are based upon the data gathered during the nine months of the exercise. As a result of this meeting an action plan was drawn up and presented to the university Learning and Teaching Committee for approval. The paper was then broken down into greater detail, identifying key issues, risks and short, medium and long-term actions. The action plan was split into four main sections, Quality Assurance and enhancement (QA), staff experience and development (Staff), student experience and support (Students) and technology issues including ICT innovation and VLE development (Technology). The fifth element, the learning journey overarches all other sections and was consequently integrated within them.

The diagram below indicates how the areas are interconnected:



We will deal with each section individually, providing a flavour of the main issues and risks involved in not addressing them. This will be followed by a flavour of the actions they will lead us to taking.

4.1 Quality Assurance and enhancement

⁵ Summary report is available at <http://elitnorthumbria.org/nube/index.php/Reports>

Issues within this section include: usability/accessibility, standards and editorial stances, copyright and related statutory issues, quality assurance and regular review for programmes and modules, and intentions relating to future benchmarking.

A number of these issues relate to standards. The university has implemented minimum standards for the eLP in terms of structure and content areas. However, aspects including accessibility, usability, editorial standards and materials development would benefit from the development of guidelines (both editorial and legal) to address these issue along with those of copyright and intellectual property. The risk of not developing these is that the university may find itself in some legal and other difficulties for not adhering to external policies. This would also ensure that programmes remained fit for the purpose for which they are designed.

Reviewing the validation process for programmes to take account of the need for online materials to be robustly quality assured also requires a long-term strategy. It will then be feasible to measure outputs against this and other strategies. Engagement in benchmarking slicing exercises will identify best practice at Northumbria and ensure this is shared. Revisiting benchmarking as a monitoring and review process across the whole institution will allow us to measure progress. Failure to do so risks losing direction.

Key actions here will be to:

- examine and report on external organisations' approaches to editorial practice and "rolling" quality assurance/validation/review of online materials leading to the development of editorial standards for online materials and disseminate exemplars of best practice.
- Develop accessibility and usability guidance and models with checklists to be applied to all materials delivered to students via the eLP and other means and introduce staff workshops to address the issues.
- Review and rewrite approval processes for distance learning, online learning and all approvals which involve elearning to reflect the QAA and E-xcellence criteria.
- Identify "slices" or specific provision (e.g. individual schools, types of provision such as collaborative partnerships, central services) for further benchmarking. Refine and Revise the benchmarking methodology for local need and undertake a re-benchmarking of whole institution

The timescale for these actions involves short-term exploration of the situation as it pertains to Northumbria and across the sector then implementation of outcomes over a period of approximately two years.

4.2 Staff experience and development

Several key issues emerged within this section. Engagement with elearning and the new and innovative pedagogical approaches it implies is of major concern. Allied to this is staff development and staff training. Issues which concerned academic staff in particular relate to recognising and rewarding strength in the field of elearning, ensuring technical and other support is appropriate and accessible and the need to review workload models as they relate to developing online courses. Strengthening approaches to communication is also seen as important.

The university must recognise that both staff and students are stakeholders and an intellectual resource. However, as the theory of zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) highlights, aspirations must be within the range of what is achievable otherwise disengagement occurs. Many of the issues in this section are inter-related and concern staff engagement, support and recognition/reward. An additional overarching issue relates to the danger of staff experiencing training rather than development and learning as this poses a risk of lack of engagement through lack of appropriateness. A number of the issues are specifically related to problems encountered by staff when developing online learning – support, workload (specifically time to develop materials), lack of recognition for the work done and the difficulty of identifying where to go for help. The additional problem is in relation to technological and pedagogical innovation. If change is too much, too quick and there is a lack of clarity as to what is driving the change then disengagement is likely to occur.

Key actions here include:

- Review and, if necessary redesign the teaching in HE course for new staff to ensure an effective elearning strand is incorporated. In the same way, raise the profile of CPD to ensure elearning is central to at least one strand. Further, ensure staff development programme is coherent and matches the needs of individuals, programme teams, subject teams and delivery types. It should also include the development of a programme of master classes which celebrate and disseminate innovative and best practice in learning and teaching online.
- Review current technical support provision and develop a recording system to track access. Discuss schools' technical support needs with a cross-section of staff and ensure these are addressed and accessible.
- Ensure the appraisal process is used to assist targeting of appropriate staff development.
- Reward/recognition approaches to be reviewed and revised to ensure that new policies are in place which reflect academic staff's strengths. Implement the inclusion of elearning requirements in role descriptors or job specifications of all staff.
- Review and, if appropriate, revise workload models to take real account of the impact of developing online learning materials.

It is important that several of these actions are in place as soon as possible as they will have a major positive impact upon staff perceptions.

4.3 Student experience and support

Key issues include: technology fitness-for-purpose and use (web 2.0, etc), need for involvement in new developments (student voice), new learning approaches, prior experience and expectations diversity, personalisation, e-portfolios and adoption of standards for online learning.

In an increasingly competitive market, ensuring a positive student experience is crucial for the continued success of the university. In addition, the increasingly diverse nature of the student body means that working patterns and attendance modes are constantly evolving. Prior experiences and learner expectations impact greatly on the way provision should be offered and the emergence of social learning practices based around web 2.0 technologies have major significance. There is a danger of a mismatch between prior experience and expectations and what is offered at Northumbria. There is a need to give students, in common with other stakeholders, a voice in steering developments to ensure they meet needs. These issues reflect the increasing diversity amongst students especially given recent priorities relating to access

and, for example, work-based learning. In common with other stakeholders students have expectations about standards and the personalisation and widening participation agendas are also crucial and need to be developed. There need to be decisions made about the use of e-portfolios as these impact upon the learning experience. In a time of changing demographics, it is essential these issues are addressed.

As some of the issues raised here are dealt with in other sections above, key actions include:

- Engage with the learning community, both internal and external, in order to identify emerging trends. Use the outcomes of this engagement to inform learning and teaching strategies, the widening participation agenda, accessibility, personalisation and social equality.
- Design and implement a partnership approach to learning needs through collaborative research projects involving schools, students, central services and research teams.
- Decisions to be made regarding e-portfolios and, depending upon the outcomes, develop an implementation strategy and put it into action.

It is essential that student needs are listened to and acted upon. The technology must follow pedagogical need and not the other way round.

4.4 Technology issues including ICT innovation and VLE development

Some of the issues in this area also fall into other categories and have been dealt with there. However, some issues which are firmly within this section include: VLE implementation/choice, appropriateness of technology, standards, costing models, communication and effective response to need.

The overall strength of ICT provision at Northumbria is excellent. However, in terms of elearning there are some key issues to be addressed. Currently Northumbria bases its eLP upon the Blackboard VLE. This is expensive as regular upgrades are required. Given the rapidly changing technology scene it is timely to explore alternatives. The impacts of distance, blended, work-based and flexible learning patterns are increasingly significant. It is important the technology is introduced following identified needs in teaching and learning situations and stakeholder participation in decision making will enhance ownership and engagement. The same applies to communication and collaboration tools. Minimum standards impact here too (however they are dealt with in the Quality Assurance and enhancement section above). Effective and realistic costing models need to be developed for elearning which take account of its impact in relation to preparations and maintenance time.

Key actions here include

- Review national trends in VLE provision and explore/identify options, leading to the identification and trialling of alternatives/supplementaries to Blackboard with implementation where appropriate.
- Examine external approaches to minimum standards and begin implementation of a standards based approach, incorporating ongoing review and development.
- Examine social learning trends and create realistic costing models for existing and new online learning models.
- Publicly seek support for trials of developments within the academic community so that proof of concept takes place at the “chalk face” and decisions are made accordingly.
- Actively engage teaching staff and students in decision making about technical developments which overtly impact upon the learning experience.

- Develop a two way information process so that technology is implemented to meet pedagogical needs and is trialled in a teaching and learning situation before final roll-out.

Many of the actions are inevitably long-term in nature. However, initial exploration of current practice both internally and externally can be undertaken in the shorter term.

6. Conclusions:

The benchmarking elearning exercise has been very effective in identifying where the university currently stands and in highlighting areas for further development. It has the potential to re-shape the university's future direction. In particular it emphasises the need for enhanced flexibility and coherent development. Given the constantly changing demographic and the drives, both internal and external, as part of the university's commitment to a continuous cycle of improvement, key questions concern how the identified actions are operationalised.

What is evident is that, in an organic and constantly changing institution which has nine separate schools as well as large central services, there is a danger of a silo mentality being adopted with different schools/services interpreting actions and priorities according to local needs and circumstances. Consequently there needs to be a platform for the imperatives identified here to be addressed and to ensure a clear focus and coherent approach, an approach which ensures that the demands of stakeholders, both internal and external, are clearly identified and considered.

The approach currently being adopted is that a pre-existing body, the eLearning Innovation Enhancement Group, has been given the task of overseeing and strategically guiding development. This group is representative of all nine schools within Northumbria and of central services so should approach the task in an informed and democratic way. However, this committee does not have any operational power and is largely advisory. This is a weakness and, to that end, there needs to be some resolution to the dilemma this provides if real change is to be effected. On the positive side, a newly formed team to support learning technology has been created and this may well take on operational responsibility for implementing the identified actions.

We are at a crossroads at the moment of writing. The actions identified as a result of the benchmarking exercise have the potential to move the university forward in ways which will enhance its success. However, the incipient dangers of dissipation and drift may result in only limited progress. Given that many of the issues at Northumbria are reflected across the HEI sector we would hope for real progress and change.

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