The UK Perspective – e-learning in Post-Secondary Education

1. Definition and Strategies

There is no single, universally accepted definition of e-Learning. Definitions currently fall into two categories - the first restricts it to web based learning. The second, which is preferred for UK policy and programmes, covers all learning using electronic delivery, and is as follows:

E-learning is the delivery of content via all electronic media, including the internet, intranets, extranets, satellite, broadcast, video, interactive TV, and CD Rom. E-learning encompasses all learning that people undertake, whether formal or informal, through electronic delivery.

In the UK strategies fall into two main areas:-

- use of E-Learning as a means of delivering learning as an alternative to more traditional approaches, to gain benefits of access, convenience and cost.
- as a means of addressing the ‘digital divide’ - making skills in the use of ICT available to all in society who need to use them.

2. e-Learning in Higher Education (HE), Further Education (FE), for Adult Learners and in the Corporate Sector

e-Learning is now well established in the HE sector. All HE institutions make use of e-Learning in some form or other. In the main this involves the use of intranets, often using materials developed ‘in house’.

The Open Learning Company and the Open University (OU)
The Open Learning Company is a commercial organisation, partly owned by the Open Learning Foundation (a representative body for the UK universities which were formally polytechnics) is developing a range of ICT materials specifically for UK Universities, the corporate sector and for overseas sales. Key areas include business studies, management, health and social care, staff development and information technology. Delivery approaches include web based, CD Rom and other electronic formats. Contact: d.hardy@openlearningcompany.com . Website address www.openlearningcompany.com The Open University is the UK’s main distance learning provider and many of its course are delivered by E-Learning.

The UK’s OU has over 125 courses which have a requirement to use ICT in the teaching components. Currently over 130,000 students are using the FirstClass conferencing system to collaborate with fellow students and nearly 3000 tutors have been trained to support students over this medium. Through the Learning Schools programme a further 120,000 school teachers undergoing in service ICT based training generating the largest online conferencing environment for UK teachers. The OU’s learning and teaching strategy includes targets to establish a critical baseline of ICT elements for all courses and programmes by 2002; build ICT elements into courses to achieve compulsory ICT elements for all University degrees by 2005 and increase the number of Web-focused courses to at least 20 by 2002. The OU has recently invested £12M in enhancing its electronic infrastructure and curriculum. Further details can be found at http://www2.open.ac.uk/ltto/index.htm

The e-University Project
The e-University project was announced by the UK Government in February 2000. It is run by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the main public funder of higher
education (HE) in England, working in partnership with the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and other HE funding bodies in the UK. Its aim is to develop a new vehicle to deliver UK higher education programmes globally over the Internet.

The HEFCE published the Business Model for the e-University in October 2000 (available on the hefce website, with other e-University documents, at http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Partners/euniv). Under this model, the e-University will be a facilitator of on-line learning:

- identifying and making available a portfolio of HE programmes, learning materials and support services to meet market demand for e-learning overseas and in the UK
- securing the development by HEIs (and others) of learning materials for that portfolio, commissioning new materials where necessary
- securing and managing the necessary services to distribute programmes, including tutorial support services, a quality gateway, a technological platform, student advisory services and other forms of support.

The Business Model has been endorsed by the HE sector in the UK. The UK Government has committed £62M to the project over the next three years. The e-University aims to go on-line with programmes in April 2002.

**Further Education - The National Learning Network**

The National Learning Network (NLN) is a national initiative, supported by the £74 million of Government investment over three years, to help transform the FE learning environment. It is a comprehensive package designed to improve the FE sector's ICT infrastructure and increase the uptake of Information Learning Technology (ILT) across FE.

The total package supports an all-embracing approach to ICT that will improve hardware and connectivity, develop staff skills, provide learning materials and guide effective learning, teaching and management.

A National Learning Network linking all FE colleges to HE institutions is in the advanced stage. The planning, preparation and delivery of the National Learning Network has brought together the ICT communities in Further and Higher Education in both spirit and practice and sees the start of close co-operation between the two sectors and their representative bodies.

**Adult Learning – leardirect/University for Industry (Ufi)**

Through initiatives such as leardirect (the brand name for delivering the University for Industry concept) those people who may previously have felt excluded are now gaining access to ICT and - vitally - to learning. Centres have opened in urban and rural locations, in colleges, sports clubs and employers premises – narrowing the gulf between learning and the touchstone activity of work. leardirect alone has now provided advice for over 2.7 million callers, the website has received over 2.1 million searches, there are now over 100,000 leardirect learners and more than 1,000 learning centres.

Website addresses: www.Ufi.co.uk and www.learndirect.co.uk

**e-learning in the corporate sector**

E-learning in the corporate sector has expanded rapidly in the UK in recent years. This is particularly true in those sectors which make use of ICT as a major part of their business activity such as banking and finance. A survey of e-Learning in the corporate sector carried out in 1999 by Epic PLC, found that major reasons for companies making more use of e-Learning included accessibility, reducing time take to deliver training, exploiting ICT, and reducing costs. At the time of the survey the most favoured subject was use of ICT, but
respondents predicted that in 5 years time e-Learning will be used to address all major subject areas.

**Use of e-learning by employers**
- A recent case study found that the proportion of companies undertaking training was 39% with only 19% using ILT-based training.
- The use of ILT is concentrated in larger companies and those in the service sector. Businesses not making use of ILT at all for training purposes tend to be smaller companies or concentrated in the primary, construction, retail and transport sectors. Companies using ILT, although including a large proportion of larger companies also include: smaller SMEs motivated by flexibility and time saving but requiring mentoring; medium and larger SMEs committed to promoting ‘learning’ more widely within the company; companies that sought a specific training ‘topic’ that happened to be delivered via IT; and, companies in remote rural locations without easy access to training providers.

**3. IT SKILLS AND ADDRESSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE**

There are two major reasons to raise IT skills levels – these can be separated into (a) the increasing necessity to have IT capability as a basic skill – just as with literacy and numeracy and (b) the increased demand for highly skilled IT specialists.

Basic level IT skills are central to the issue of social exclusion - including the threat of the digital divide. 90% of jobs in the UK now involve some sort of interaction with IT but 37% of people do not use computers and are not interested in using them. Disturbingly this figure rises to 58% in estates with high unemployment.

**UK online**

UK online centres (formerly known as ICT Learning Centres) support the Government’s strategy to provide access to ICT and the Internet to all who want it by 2005. Their main aim is to bring access to ICT and learning into disadvantaged communities, including the 2000 most deprived local authority wards; rural areas with significant transport and deprivation problems; and small areas of deprivation within more prosperous areas, and to bridge the gap between those in society who have access to ICT and those who do not.

There are now over 1250 UK online centres open, with more opening each week. This figure includes 1159 IT centres who successfully applied for the UK online centre brand. It is estimated that there will be around 6000 UK online centres by the end of 2002.

Website address: [www.dfee.gov.uk/onlinecentres](http://www.dfee.gov.uk/onlinecentres)

**The global trade in IT skills**

It is not only basic skills and basic level IT skills which are increasingly in demand. Figures for the number of work permits issued to non-EU nationals to work in the UK illustrate not only the intrinsic skills gap but also the increasing global trade in e-skills.

**4. THE LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR E-LEARNING**

The UK observes international agreements on intellectual property. Apart from that there is no legislative framework, and no plans to establish one for e-Learning for the post 16 sector.

**5. QUALITY ASSURANCE**

Quality Assurance within e-Learning is approached in a number of ways. Those commissioning e-Learning materials or funding its delivery may stipulate their own standards.
Ufi aim to work within the key features of the emerging National Qualifications Framework (NQF) by collaborating with the appropriate agencies like the regulatory authorities for qualifications, standards-setting bodies and awarding bodies. One of the key specifications of qualifications within the NQF is that they should be unitised, with Ufi-developed units providing a linking mechanism between leardirect courses and identified components of an existing qualification. NQF defines a unit as ‘the smallest part of a qualification that can be separately certified’. Ufi defines a unit as ‘a coherent set of assessable learning outcomes’. The outcomes of the unit validation process are good quality units fit for purpose with documentation to assist awarding bodies wishing to use the unit in a qualification to be submitted to NQF.

Online learning materials for use in the FE sector are being developed in accordance with Ufi standards in order to ensure consistency across learning delivery.

The private e-Learning Sector is considering the development of quality assurance standards for e-Learning to cover all aspects including materials development, tutor support and delivery. This could develop as a joint initiative involving the representative bodies for E-Learning, the main one being the British Association for open Learning (www.@baol.co.uk), the Forum for Technology in Training (jim@gensol.u-net.com), the e-learning network (eln@tfbal.co.uk), the British Interactive Multimedia Association (www.bima.co.uk) and the Open and Distance Learning Quality Council (www.odlqc.org.uk). It is generally recognised that a cross European initiative would be an advantage.