

Interview guide for case studies in the Megatrends project

Institutional factors

Name of institution: learndirect 00447787106127

Manager of e-learning: Darren Sidnick dsidnick@ufi.com

URL of e-learning: n/a

Number of online courses: 600

Number of e-learning students: 500.000

% of e-learning students who could be said to be distance education students:
(defined as students who do at least 50.1% of a course online): All 100%

Historical context

1. How would you describe the history of distance education in your institution?

Learndirect had no background in distance education. It was a new foundation that came straight to e-learning. It was set up for the first time in 1999-2000.

Learndirect got no help from government and many of the staff had a good background in distance education skills.

2. How has competence in e-learning developed in your institution and how has it contributed to your success?

Competence in e-learning at learndirect was essentially due to the fact that we had some of the best people in the relevant areas: elearning content development; elearning standards; instructional design; technology skills.

Choosing the right LMS system was central to success The learndirect LMS is internally developed and maintained.

3. Has this development been abrupt or would you describe it more as a gradual step-by-step process)?

A further development was the creation of 790 learndirect centres across the UK. These centres have tutors for learning, machines for use and motivational factors for encouraging students to continue in study.

4. How has online education been followed up by evaluation and research and how has this contributed to your success?

Research at learndirect is getting under way. This is government backed and uses both the public and the private sectors. A major focus is the United Kingdom QIA (Quality Improvement Agency). Much of the research is a comparison of learndirect activities with best practice. Research on pedagogy is focused on the learndirect way of doing things. We learned by our mistakes. We are developing a manual of best practice in e-learning.

Previous research studies had highlighted the importance of hard-to-reach learners and learndirect set out on the path of providing access for hard-to-reach learners.

Technical issues

5. How would you describe competence in information and communication technology in your institution?

Learndirect has 100 people with high expertise in information and communications technology. This expertise allows half a million student a year to study by elearning at learndirect.

The learndirect LMS is internally developed. It is robust and has 3 minutes downtime a week only. It has a working rate of 99.98%. It handles online chats, tutor reports and student qualifications. However, some course development or course purchase is non-compatible because it is a hoe developed system.

6. To which extent are e-learning courses in your institution based on widely used technologies that can be taken into use by students without requiring them to buy additional hardware or software?

Learndirect students do not have to purchase software to do learndirect courses. Hardware requirements have low standards compared to even 3 years ago. Students can study at the office or at home. The learndirect centres are available for use for those who need them. There is a centre only minutes away from every student. Only McDonalds has more locations in the UK than learndirect. Learndirect centres are friendly places with biscuits and a welcoming atmosphere. Thus all learndirect students have 3 possibilities for study: home, office or learndirect centre.

7. How would you describe the integration between different IT-systems that are involved in e-learning in your institution? How has this contributed to your success?

The integration between IT systems is a good idea; it's good to have it all linked. At learndirect, however, the focus is more on robustness and scalability. The goal is that the system does the basic things well all the time.

8. What are the strengths and weaknesses of your e-learning administrative systems (from enrolment through delivery to certification)?

N/a

Courses

9. Which types of subjects are covered by online education in your institution and what is the relative importance of different subjects?

Learndirect has three main types of courses:

Information technology courses

Leadership and management courses (100 of these)

Basic skills – numeracy and English

Also there are courses in Health and Social Care, Customer Services, Food Hygiene and Health and Safety at Work.

10. How would you describe the “onlineability” of the subjects your institution has chosen for e-learning?

N/a

11. Do the online courses provided by your institution have flexible start-up and progression?

Yes. The learndirect goal for student access is Any time, Any place, Anywhere. Students like flexible start-up and students want it and research shows a 92% student satisfaction rate with access at learndirect. This is unique compared with universities or college classroom structures. Learndirect offers full qualifications to students, with 60.000 fully online assessments

12. What is the role or importance of synchronous and asynchronous communication between students and teachers and among students themselves?

The role of synchronous and asynchronous communication is a balance between the two.

Management, strategy and attitudes

13. How would you describe involvement from the institution leadership in terms of being supportive, and how has this been important for success?

It is vital for learndirect to have the right people. Learndirect is organised in 5 different Directorates. The learndirect philosophy is learning by doing. Things have changed greatly since 5 years ago and management leadership has been very important.

14. How would you describe the attitudes of the different groups of staff towards online teaching? How has this affected your success?

There are no attitudes of different groups of staff to e-learning. This does not apply.

Learndirect employs 400 people fulltime and 1500 are employed in total. All of these use e-learning. The culture of the company is focused on elearning and is believed in by staff, especially the elearning dimension. They would not work for learndirect if they did not believe in elearning and in reaching out to those who need the courses and don't want a university culture. This is central to staff satisfaction.

15. Does your institution have a strategy for online education? If yes, what is (briefly) the content of the strategy and how is it followed up by employees in your organisation?

The policy of learndirect is based on the fact that we are an elearning institution and elearning is central to all we do.

16. How does your institution deal with quality issues related to online education and has quality contributed to success?

The learndirect goal is to improve the quality constantly. Learndirect is organised in 5 year phases for quality control The focus is on improving the quality rather than stating that we do it.

17. How would you describe the effectiveness of your administrative routines in online education?

Their effectiveness is shown by the successful handling of 500.000 students in elearning courses

18. To which extent do teachers involved in online education have predictable and manageable workloads?

The centres work like retail shops by predicting and providing the right number of staff at the right times. The centres have trainers and tutors and have a ratio of one tutor/trainer to 10 to 15 students. The centres operate in different ways but a basic structure would be that 50% of students book their times in advance, and 50% just visit the centre. The goal is to have the correct ratio of tutors to students at the busy times.

19. To which extent does your institution collaborate with other educational institutions and how has this affected success?

Learndirect works very closely with a lot of colleges. Learndirect has a network of 60 to 100 colleges who use learndirect courseware and embed it in their programmes or have local learndirect centres on their campuses. Learndirect also works with 10 to 15 universities with who it has 50%/50% joint ventures. Learndirect also cooperates with small, private sector providers averaging less than £1 million per annum turnover.

20. How would you describe the credibility of your institution (both formal and informal) with the government and public administration and how has this been an important criterion for success?

The University for Industry (Ufi) is the Holding Company and learndirect is the brand. Learndirect's credibility is very good. The government started it up and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, and the Department of Education have been very supportive. It has been labelled by government as 'the best innovation' and members of parliament have been amazed by its performance and government ministers and members of parliament attend its functions.

21. How are you able to handle the large number of online courses and students?

Learndirect is able to handle its half a million students by having the technology platform robust. It has a 24 hour support line for any technical issues and a 60 second response time to all technical matters.

Economy

22. How would you describe the cost-effectiveness of online education in your institution? How has cost-effectiveness affected success?

E-learning is a lot cheaper than other forms of provision. It is cheaper to supply training by e-learning than by other methods. The learndirect model shows that on average e-learning is cheaper. The Leitch Review on Post 16 Education showed that the shape of the future is online learning.

23. To which extent is income from operation of online education stable and predictable?

There are two categories of students enrolled in learndirect: (i) students who pay fees and (ii) students who do not pay fees – these are students who have no GCSE, who get the learndirect courses free of charge. Income is stable. Learndirect is trying to employ more sales people. It wants to set up a new team who will sell training in bulk to large employers.

24. To which extent does your institution experience pressure to be flexible to be able to adapt to a changing market?

Governments always have changing priorities One day the government wanted byte sized courses, then it wanted full qualifications with full assessment. What is important is that learndirect can meet these targets more quickly than other providers. Learndirect can achieve a 7-9 months turn around time on changed priorities.

25. To which extent does your institution apply a strategy of flexible employment and use staff to adapt to changes in markets?

Central staff at learndirect in Sheffield are all full-time staff. The call centres all over the country have more turnover. The tutors in the call centres mirror the sector average – there is more change over. Learndirect has developed 15 modules for prospective staff: 'How do you teach in e-learning'. All applicants have to study this. There is then a second qualification on 'How to teach a particular subject by e-learning'. This was also developed by learndirect.

Additional factors

26. What other factors have contributed to sustainability, robustness and the achievement of critical mass in your institution?

Other factors which have contributed to success are successful lobbying techniques with government, emphasising why the learndirect model is unique and describing how we spread our experience.

The learndirect brand is vital to success. It is now the second biggest educational brand in the UK after the Open University. Our research shows that 82% of the UK population recognises the learndirect brand. The learndirect marketing department are all retail brand people and learndirect advertises online, on news programmes and TV and uses experts in brand positioning The goal is always to get students into e-learning who have never successfully studied before.

Thank you