

Interview guide for case studies in the Megatrends project

Institutional factors

Name of institution: University of Leicester 00441612522440

Manager of e-learning: Professor Gilly Salmon

URL of e-learning: www.le.ac.uk/beyonddistance

Number of online courses: All the university courses, nearly 100% are on the Blackboard VLE. There is a second VLE called Tribal.

Number of e-learning students: 18.000. Over 95% of all students

% 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):
There are 6.000 distance learning students.

University policy is to embed e-learning throughout all relevant university departments.

Historical context

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

Distance learning at the University of Leicester began in the faculties of management and law (MBA, MA Law) as an additional revenue earner. It flourished in post graduate courses and professional development courses for 14 years. Most e-learning has been in on-campus courses. It was a question of encouraging academics to participate. Crossfertilization is difficult. Departments don't learn from each other. Conferences for staff were held.

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

In an ideal world if you could design from scratch and buy in expertise it would be good. In fact the university adopted Blackboard 5 years ago. A few people were keen advocates of e-learning and got a good 2000 staff involved and provided practical help. All this was campus based.

Then two and a half years ago the university took a new approach and a scaling up of e-learning and appointed two leading academics from the Open University, Professor Gilly Salmon and Dr David Christmas to head up the e-learning and the distance learning activities.

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

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

The Beyond Distance Research Alliance has been founded. The 4 quadrants strategy document has been published listing new and existing technologies and pedagogies for e-learning. Professor Salmon has published 'Flying not flapping: a strategic framework for e-learning and pedagogical innovation in higher education institutions'. The university works closely in research with the UK Higher Education Academy. There has been extensive benchmarking. The research focus is on outcomes for student learning and for institutional change.

Technical issues

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

It depends on what you compare it with. In recent government benchmarking the university came out really well. Knowledge management, however, would be poor if compared with the Open University.

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?

We agree with this policy. It is absolutely critical for our distance learning operation. No specific software has to be installed to do our e-learning courses. Every University of Leicester student must have regular access to the Internet. There are, however, many university library machines so nothing has to be bought.

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?

We do not have this IT systems integration, there are, for example, no student records on Blackboard. It is desirable but not essential. Our emphasis in e-learning is on pedagogy, not on systems.

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?

e-learning covers everything from hard engineering to languages, biomedics and genetics. Laboratory-based sciences are difficult by e-learning. However, a problem-based approach, providing databases of problems, works well in e-learning.

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

Our policy is not to convert everything to e-learning but to add e-learning to the teaching and learning mix. It's horses for courses. There are, for example, 12 research training modules for Ph. D. student support. There are courses for Geologists on a field trip, based on varied learning locations. In Geology many forms and web based materials were taken over to Blackboard.

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

This policy would reduce flexibility and is not suitable for e-learning courses. Our Distance learning programme has four starting bases and reasonable flexibility of progression. Flexible start-up means no group work, high drop-out and you don't have any flexibility. Every course at the University of Leicester has some e-learning in it. The first MA to be 100% online is due soon.

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

We agree that asynchronous communication is the more important of the two. Asynchronicity means working together. Synchronous use gets elearning a bad name. We have videoconferencing tutorials and podcasting. We design for asynchronous work. It is important to remember that the telephone is still a very important synchronous tool.

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?

The management created Professor Salmon's and Dr Christmas' positions. The Vice-Chancellor is forward looking and gives outstanding support. The university had a need to sort out its distance learning operation. There is a Pro Vice Chancellor for Learning and Teaching to whom the Professor of e-learning reports but the attitude is 'You do it'.

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

We developed in a very collaborative way, with 100 different people. Everyone is on Blackboard and there is also podcasting. There were sceptics but the majority have now bought into e-learning, convinced by the business model and by the value for student learning. Very few members of staff do not participate. A previous technology acceptance has now moved to mass acceptance today.

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?

There is an official university strategy document developed by Prof Salmon. It is called 'E-learning strategy'. It stress that e-learning is critically important for the University of Leicester in 2005 and beyond.

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

Quality in e-learning at Leicester is subject to the same procedures as any other teaching format. The same approval, the same Quality Assurance Agency is applied to e-learning as any other form of teaching. E-learning is no different, it is just another way of teaching. Students exiting Leicester in the last two years have tapped into all forms of learning, including e-learning.

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

N/a

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

e-learning can take up more time up front than on campus teaching. You can't prepare for the class half an hour before delivering it. You have to give lecturers an understanding of the workload.

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

Competition is in vogue today. Collaboration is a criterion for failure. Collaboration occurs in research, but it adds complexity. The UK Healthcare Partnership for Online Nurse Education is an example of research in which Leicester has cooperated.

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?

Credibility is very high. Leicester is in the top 20 of UK universities. It is research focused and has international recognition for its research and teaching. To this was added the appointments of Professor Salmon and Dr Christmas. It does help in the recognition of the e-learning programme to have an internationally recognised author who has written best selling books on the subject and who in 2006 was invited to deliver 56 keynote addresses to international conferences.

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

This is the wrong question. e-learning has made no difference to student records. It is a trivial task to scale up your servers to take the enrolments.

Economy

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

Cost-effectiveness has usually been studied from business models. Our outcomes from e-learning are not financially measurable. We are not driving for cost-effectiveness. We have our business model and our focus is on student outcomes.

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

This is again the wrong question. We have not added e-learning to our product lines. The question does not mean anything to us. E-learning has had a huge impact on the university. The University of Leicester is the top United Kingdom elearning university.

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

We felt the culture at Leicester was important. We do distance learning because it is highly cost effective and that is why we do it. We are one of the major United Kingdom universities, especially in the field of distance learning and especially in South East Asia. We are getting a lot more applicants, especially at post-graduate level.

You don't sell courses by e-learning but you do retain students by using it.

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

Roles for staff have changed. There are 18 new people in Professor Salmon's area. There are more Information Technology people.

Additional factors

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

The goal is integrating e-learning into what we already do. Professor Salmon came here as a high level, high profile academic. She has given 56 invited keynote speeches this year. It was a matter of driving e-learning and the credibility and reputation of Professor Salmon helped.

Thank you