

Introduction

BILL ANDERSON, MARY SIMPSON
MASSEY UNIVERSITY
PALMERSTON NORTH, NEW ZEALAND

Distance education has always had change as a central facet of its existence. In the past it has brought change to the lives of students who found they could access education while being remote from institutions of formal learning. It has brought change to the educative routines of many teachers who have found the process of course design has caused them to re-examine long-held beliefs and practices. Institutions, too, have found that involvement in distance education provides opportunities to reconsider matters such as student support, and other pedagogic, technical, and organisational practices necessary to cater for the needs of distance (in time or space) students. At a national level, policy makers are struggling to understand the complexity of the phenomenon, as learning at a distance is increasingly part of the experience of all students, on or off campus. Articles in this issue reflect and discuss some of these changes.

Bill Rosenberg, the author of the first article, originally presented his ideas at the 2006 DEANZ conference and set the scene for a stimulating discussion. His premise is that e-learning has yet to take off in the New Zealand tertiary sector and that further staff professional development is a key to assisting that takeoff. The emphasis on professional development is one that has struck a chord within the Ministry of Education. Two of the three projects in Round

Three of the Tertiary e-Learning Research Fund (TeLRF) focus on “articulation of a baseline for professional capability, and models to assist in achieving this baseline capability in TEOs” (Ministry of Education, 2007). But what do we currently know about the extent of uptake of e-learning in the tertiary system in New Zealand?

The Ministry of Education collects data about the mode of Internet study of extramural and internal students at the tertiary level. The data collected show both the number and the equivalent full-time (EFT) count of students engaged in the following forms of Internet-based study:

No access: Where no part of the paper or course is accessible online.

Web-supported: Where a paper or course provides students with access to limited online materials and resources.

Web-enhanced: Where a paper or course expects students to access online materials and resources.

Web-based: Where a paper or course requires students to access the accompanying online materials and resources.

We have some concern about these categories, arguing elsewhere against the

current three Web categories and for a set of three that would: amalgamate Web-supported and Web-enhanced as the first category; leave Web-based as the second category; and include a new category that is "fully online." However, the data we have relate to the Ministry categories. We report here 2005 EFTs-based data for the tertiary sector for enrolments in all formal courses above Certificate level, of a week or longer duration. What do they tell us?

Just over 48 percent of all EFTs are in "no access" courses. Only 2.6 percent of all EFTs are in "Web-based" courses. In other words, students representing only 2.6 percent of the tertiary study EFTs are *required* to access the Web for their courses. Of the total of just over 178,000 EFTs in formal, Diploma-level and above courses longer than a week, extramural enrolments contributed over 13,600 EFTs. The percentage of extramural EFTs in "no access" courses was 61.5; the percentage in "Web-based" courses was 7.4. Using Rosenberg's metaphor, we might ask, "Do these figures constitute taxiing, takeoff, or flight?"

At a system level these figures give us some idea of the impact of policy decisions and strategy implementation. It is right to expect to see evidence of e-learning development given the investment in the projects of the e-Learning Collaborative Development Fund and the Tertiary e-Learning Research Fund. Whether the basis of this evidence is comparison with previous years or comparison with overseas experience, the figures we present are interesting but, from another perspective, not sufficient. There is another aspect that interests us as well.

Metaphors are useful in helping to convey an image, but single metaphor discussions have their limitations. When it comes to answering the question we pose above, we want to avoid the thought, associated with a flight metaphor, that "What goes up, must" Instead we want to think in terms of the question, "What is the right mix of technologies for the context in which the teaching and learning is occurring?" What mix of Web content and interaction, print content and interaction, m-content and interaction, etc., is most advantageous for learning? What is right in the study of business communication may not be right for the study of chemistry. What is right for first-year tertiary students may not be right for those completing a postgraduate qualification. This question also makes us aware that what is right for today may not be right in five years' time. In asking this question we probe into the data, cutting beneath the overview that the broad statistics provide, cutting to decisions about e-learning implementation for particular groups of students studying in particular fields at the level of institutions and, possibly, individual teachers or teams of teachers.

To some extent we can see the decisions about e-learning implementation when we look at the different levels of engagement with e-learning that are indicated within the broad categories of the New Zealand Standard Classification of Education. Fewer than 30 percent of all EFTs in the natural and physical sciences (total EFTs just over 18,000) are in "no access" courses in comparison with over 70 percent in the creative arts (total EFTs just over 16,000). Lowest and highest percentages for "Web-based" courses are given by the 0.1 percent of all EFTs in the category of engineering

and related technologies (total EFTs nearly 8,800) and the 9.9 percent in the category of education (total EFTs over 16,800). Yet education has the fourth-highest “no access” figure, at 64.6 percent. The pattern of engagement with e-learning is not clear-cut.

We have two quite distinct yet related questions here. In a broad sense, at the system level it is important to know that the investment in e-learning is worthwhile; that strategies for e-learning are driving change; that implementation is occurring and having an impact on the learning of students. At an institutional level there is a need to understand engagement with e-learning and the reasons for that engagement. The tactics of institutions and their staff are played out within the strategic environment of national policy. An appreciation of both strategies and tactics will be important to our understanding of how to gain the greatest benefit from e-learning.

Gaining the greatest benefit from e-learning also means recognising how e-learning supports learning, teaching, and the activities that surround those core educational actions. Because e-learning supports the creation of collaborative, interactive, media-rich, personalised learning environments, it has a valuable role. But as educators we must understand the place of e-learning resources, practices, and processes alongside those associated with the use of other technologies and make choices about what works best in educational terms.

Our remaining two articles both report on changes at different levels. The second article comes from Uganda, via a New Zealand connection. It reports

on the outcome of a distance education training programme designed to address the knowledge and skill needs of staff required to deliver distance teacher training programmes throughout the country. While the technological context is very different from that faced by New Zealand educators, the message is the same. Teaching at a distance requires a particular set of knowledge and skills. Some aspects of that set are specific to particular technologies, but in large measure they are not. The national e-Learning Guidelines (see <http://elg.massey.ac.nz/>) demonstrate this fact.

Our final article comes from Mavis Haigh and Margaret Turnbull, who are writing about their first experience teaching a course involving some element of online engagement. They report on feedback from their students, the impact that feedback has had, and the ways they have questioned their initial approach to teaching online. They look at how they come to question their pedagogical approach without losing sight of the principles driving their teaching. Overall, we have returned to Bill Rosenberg’s argument. Professional development is central to the task of enlarging the pool of people who are capable distance educators. Bringing about changes in professional practice is key to enhancing learning for our students.

REFERENCES

Ministry of Education (2007). *Tertiary (e)learning research fund*. Retrieved May 7, 2007, from <http://cms.steo.govt.nz/eLearning/Projects/Tertiary+eLearning+Research+Fund.htm>