

The Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE)

Response to the consultation document from the DfES:

Towards a Unified e-Learning Strategy

The Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) welcomes this consultation document and its emphasis on the opportunities that e-learning offers. While the document appropriately embraces learning at all stages and levels, we confine our comments primarily to issues relevant to the interface between universities, colleges and businesses. The document rightly stresses the demand-pull rather than technology push and the need for joined-up thinking and action. It should appeal to everyone interested in realising and raising the capabilities of all learners and learning organisations.

At the same time, the document is rather learning and teacher oriented. It might usefully have emphasised the role of learning in all its forms in helping to improve the overall productivity of the UK and close the skills gap on our competitors. E-learning has a particular role to play since it can help learners of all ages and all backgrounds access high quality learning at times and places that suit the learner. Hence it has the potential to offer greater effectiveness and efficiency over other forms of learning. The process of e-learning itself can therefore support the wider productivity aims of all organisations. Equally, accessing international learning excellence via e-learning can help raise the quality of the learning experience, the capabilities of learners and their organisations and hence the international competitiveness of the UK. Finally, as the document notes, e-learning is an important medium through which participation can be widened. (Though we caution against excessive hype as e-learning has not yet decisively proved its potential).

However, to achieve these wider aims, certain conditions need to be met:

- first, learning should be capable of being built via bite-sized chunks into coherent blocks (though this is not the only way to deliver vocationally relevant learning); this requires a national system of learning credits within a framework of awards that links the so-called vocational with the academic; progress is being made in Scotland and Wales, but there has been little progress in England; the Government is making sympathetic noises in its Skills Strategy, but urgent action is now needed if an e-learning strategy is to be realised;
- secondly, work based learning can be a critical component of e-learning; for this to be effective, more general progress has to be made on a number of fronts; there needs to be agreement on the role that employers should play in the assessment of such learning; academic assessment (eg. via reflective essays) will not necessarily capture the ability of someone to actually carry out a work-based task effectively; progress also has to be made on developing assessment in the context of personal development plans and team working. We note that the Open University already has relevant experience (eg. in programmes for pre-registered nursing and ITT) including with agreement on assessment. We would also like to draw attention to the work Ufi has done in helping individuals assess their needs and bringing employers together with higher education institutions through its *learning through work* scheme. The scheme

is based on the design and completion of an online contract enabling learners to address their development needs in the context of their work. There are currently almost 1000 learners engaged in *learning through work* (more than half of them are cohort learners from businesses);

- thirdly, (and related to work-based learning) more effort is needed on systems for accrediting prior learning including experiential learning; unless employers and individuals have an adequate appreciation of the learning that has already been acquired, they will not be able to move up the escalator of learning and maximise the opportunities that e-learning offers; the OU policy of open entry coupled with outcomes based assessment offers another approach to APEL;
- fourthly, corporate learning revolves around team working and problem solving; while learning content is important, the learning process is perhaps even more important; this requires the better development of appropriate collaborative tools and groupware including mediated learning; this will be particularly important for smaller companies; better networking through e-learning can itself achieve a wider objective of advancing the cause of networking and the development of business clusters as recommended by Professor Porter in his report on UK competitiveness for the DTI.

All of the above will place greater demands on higher and further education institutions to continue to be demand rather than supply driven. Delivering more of the same would be to miss the great opportunities that e-learning offers. Fora are needed, perhaps on a sectoral basis with the emerging Sector Skills Councils in the lead, to help HE and FE institutions work in partnership both to raise awareness on the opportunities and to deliver what more enlightened customers require. Such fora could help everyone involved develop more truly learner centred views of the opportunities. It was a shame that the Lambert Review had so little to recommend in the area of people and skills development.

Many higher and further education institutions are undertaking structural change to raise the quality of the student experience and help all their customers, clients and partners access high quality learning wherever it may be. E-learning is important in supporting this process. It offers the means through which networked institutions can achieve a capability change. Accessing excellence wherever it exists via e-learning can reinforce and help realise the underlying quality and learning aims of institutional partnerships and networks. It can link the learner and learning institutions with others in an efficient manner. Sub-regional clusters of institutions linked through e-learning with each other could access and distribute a wider range of quality courses than if each worked in isolation. The expertise in COVEs, for example, could be networked throughout the partnership and new courses could be developed by appropriate centres of excellence for distribution to new customers. This in turn would grow the market for quality learning.

E-learning can offer the potential to develop “learning spines” along which quality learning in subjects for which there is limited demand can be delivered. The OU is already helping to sustain vulnerable subjects such as physics and chemistry. Equally, many institutions are concerned that they cannot sustain their language courses, for example. E-learning can be the way to maintain a capability in such subjects. Some

courses may be desirable to meet local needs but are not economic to provide. Again, e-learning may help, with support from other appropriate forms of provision, sustain such a capability.

Finally, e-learning has an important role to play in helping learners of all ages access better quality and impartial advice and guidance on learning and career opportunities. Self-assessment can be done on-line, personal records of achievement can be kept and interrogated so experiences can be reflected upon and then articulated into CVs and for interviews. Information on higher and further education and on business sectors and opportunities can be interrogated and all learners can better appreciate what employers are looking for as well as what jobs entail. E-learning can be a great leveller; it can overcome the different amount of resources and gaps in information that exist across the country. The DfES Aim Higher site shows what can be offered and how potential learners from all backgrounds can be helped to aspire and realise their potential.

These challenges and opportunities will require a more flexible approach to institutional and student funding. It may mean breaking some of the existing artificial divides between full-time and part-time learning, between higher and further education, between learning in institutions of learning and learning in the work place. It may mean making a reality of life-long learning. If developing a coherent e-learning strategy helps achieve these wider aims, then it will have served an even greater purpose.

CIHE
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