

UK Higher Education Institutions: How Flexible, How Virtual, How Soon?

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Introduction

Using The Open University and Sheffield Hallam University as benchmarks, this paper will describe the current status of Flexible and Virtual Universities within the United Kingdom. The discussion will draw upon the results of a sector-wide survey conducted by the authors in 1999. This assessed the present extent of Networked Learning in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and was followed up by seven case studies. (We use the phrase Networked Learning to describe any learning taking place via computer.)

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The paper will demonstrate the move away from paper-based distance learning and, slowly, from traditional campus-based learning, to an online mode of learning available to students both on-campus and off-campus.

A survey was undertaken by the authors in early 1999, under the auspices of JISC, the Joint Information Systems Committee of the UK Higher Education and Research Funding Councils. 173 UK Higher Education Institutions (all those receiving Funding Council grants) were sent a detailed questionnaire: 60% replied, giving details of the extent of, and their approach to, Networked Learning. This survey was enhanced by using information (UCISA 1999) gained from a survey of Directors of Computing carried out by UCISA.

This material formed the foundation of the study. More detail was obtained from case studies of seven Institutions, interviewed by the authors in April 1999. One of these was Sheffield Hallam University. The seven Institutions were chosen to reflect the geographic and organisational diversity of the sector. The Open University was added to the analysis, using one author's long familiarity with that Institution.

In order to ensure that students' views were taken into account, a survey of students at Sheffield Hallam University was carried out and correlated with national information (NUS 1999). The initial findings from our work were reviewed with experts during April/May 1999, and further refined via informal feedback over the following few months. As a sweep-up exercise, a trawl of UK University teaching and learning Web sites was done across the sector in Autumn 1999 to determine the current extent of development of Virtual Campus and related initiatives in the UK.

The Management of Change

In UK Higher Education Institutions, Networked Learning is generally instigated and delivered by a small number of enthusiastic academic staff in each Institution. Although some Institutions

have a clear strategic path and in a few there is some degree of centralised management of innovation, on the whole work in this area is limited to small pockets of innovation - though rapidly growing and coalescing. Our research found that the main reason for moving towards Networked Learning was to improve the quality of, and access to, education without increasing the costs to the Institution.

Using Force Field Analysis (Lewin 1951) we were able to derive the driving and restraining forces acting on the development of Networked Learning.

Driving forces were: individual members of academic staff; dynamism from top management (in some Institutions); project champions (seen as an essential hallmark of successful innovations); and above all the need to increase student numbers with ever-decreasing budgets.

Restraining forces included: lack of training in using the technology to develop and manage learning materials; lack of time for development once the skills have been acquired; lack of transparent tools to aid ease of use; lack of overwhelming pedagogical evidence to support a move towards Networked Learning; the opportunity cost of time spent on developing in-house materials or evaluating off-the-shelf courses; lack of a "waterproof" computing service; concerns about the quality of materials; and the lack of standards for measuring quality.

In terms of the move towards Flexible and Virtual Universities, Institutions feel that this is an uncharted area; they are unsure about the structure and status of such activities; and they have suffered from confused initiatives which in the worst cases do little more than fuel the "soap box" speeches of both believers and non-believers. There has not been an accepted uniform methodology to explain how a move towards Networked Learning could benefit Institutions in both the long and short term.

The Provision of Greater Access

Our research shows that 31% of Institutions operate a 24-hour opening policy Monday to Friday and 27% continue this during the weekend. 51% of Institutions open between 12-23 hours on weekdays - this indicates that the extension to 24-hour opening would be relatively unproblematic at many sites. Longer opening hours enable greater student access to computing facilities without the need to increase the scale of hardware provision. Students most often use their personal computers at end of day and during afternoons on weekends, and would like access to campus-based computers through the weekday evenings and before lectures start - but not too early in the morning!

A number of Institutions are increasing access by providing laptop plug-in points in library and open access computing areas. However, they are not experiencing much take up as students do not tend to carry laptops around due to problems of theft and weight - students with laptops use them in residences mainly because they take up less space than a desktop.

Academic staff appear now to have one-to-one access to computers, while the average student:computer ratio is now 9 students per computer. In 1997, the Dearing report (NICHE 1997) gave the average as 15:1. Dearing proposed an average ratio of 5:1 by academic year 2001/02. Staff interviewed by us stated that they felt under half of students had access to a computer outside of the Institution. However, we found that 75% of students responding at Sheffield Hallam University had access to a personal computer - most of these were connected to a printer but less than half had access to the Internet.

Some Institutions encouraged students to use a recommended academic Internet Service Provider for Internet access; others made their own arrangements and charged students a semesterly rate; others recommended a local ISP. 43% offered networking facilities from Halls of Residences although this was always charged back to the students.

The student perspective on Networked Learning

Many students commented on why they thought student ownership of PCs was necessary. Reasons included: "I felt I had to in order to pass the course"; "University IT is unreliable and too much in demand"; "My tutors wanted two copies of my work word-processed, so I had to buy a PC"; "We have to keep up with a lot of information, the Internet is the best way to do this so I had to buy a computer". Our survey found that the average student spend per year on consumables is £81 (140 euros). Most students paid between £1000-£1500 for their computers and where applicable spent £20-£40 per month on the phone bill.

68% of students surveyed think that the costs of education are rising. Another interesting finding is that students are working much more than many people think in order to supplement their income - 20% of students work between 17-32 hours and 30% work over 33 hours per week. Undoubtedly these students have their reasons but one must question the effect this has on their education within a traditional university paradigm.

Students stated that Networked Learning is increasing the cost of their education - but this is offset by a general view that it is also enhancing their experiences, making learning more enjoyable and profitable. Networked Learning was said to be more flexible - units could be revisited due to their asynchronous nature and students felt they were more in control of their own learning.

Conclusions

We have found there has been considerable though in most cases somewhat invisible movement from a conventional (i.e. lecture-based) education system in the UK Higher Education sector towards a more on-line approach. This approach will most definitely be flexible and learner-centred but not necessarily virtual in the strict sense of the word e.g. as understood by some new US online universities.

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