Benchmarking e-learning is now seen in the UK as a key enabler of change in universities.

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) is leading a Benchmarking of e-Learning Exercise in collaboration with the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC). The Benchmarking Exercise was developed in response to feedback from institutions about the need to understand more about their own, and the sector’s, progress in e-learning. Five approaches to benchmarking were chosen and each participating institution was required to adopt one of these. At MMU we chose the ‘Embedding Learning Technologies Institutionally’ (ELTI) methodology. (See [http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/programme_jos/project_elti.aspx](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/programme_jos/project_elti.aspx))

Benchmarking has two primary purposes. First, it is intended to help institutions discover how well they are exploiting and embedding learning technologies in their institutional processes and practices. Second, it should enable institutions to start drawing some comparison between themselves and other similarly profiled institutions. So benchmarking can enable them to tell the institutional e-learning story both in the form of metrics and narrative descriptors. (http://elearning.heacademy.ac.uk/weblogs/benchmarking/?p=18#more-18)

The MMU e-Quality Working Group saw the e-Benchmarking Exercise as an important opportunity to work with HEA consultants in a review of what we have achieved to date; what has been ‘good practice’ and should be reinforced and encouraged, and what has been ‘problematic practice’ and should be improved. We saw the exercise as focused on quality improvement and developmental engagements by the institution. The e-Benchmarking exercise brought together key individuals across the University to identify the current status and impact of e-learning in the institution, as well as the challenges and drivers. Led by Dr Bill Johnston, Senior Learning and Teaching Fellow, the 22-strong team of academics has drawn up a set of draft strategic goals to integrate e-learning into learning and teaching at MMU with a special focus on pedagogic and curriculum issues.

We welcomed the opportunity that the exercise afforded to work with colleagues across the sector to compare notes and exchange good practices. We are convinced that such cooperation will promote e-learning - as well as learning and teaching in higher education overall.

It is clear that there are some positive impacts on the development of e-learning as a direct result of engagement in the process (the process of measuring is having a positive effect on what is measured) and as a direct result of this, additional members of staff are being added to the MMU HEA Pathfinder team to explore new directions.

There is evidence of increasing institutional engagement with e-learning at a strategic level through involvement with the e-Benchmarking Exercise and the process has facilitated cross-fertilisation between strategic committees and development groups that would otherwise not have happened. In particular the new institutional Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy will be informed by the findings of the e-Benchmarking Exercise and within which our e-benchmarking findings will act as a road map for future institutional development and evaluation in support of e-learning.

It has become apparent to us that the real value of e-benchmarking lies less in the adoption of the ELTI methodology and the detailed responses to the ELTI criteria and more in the emerging issues and open debates that have been raised through the process of refining the criteria and gathering evidence. The benchmarking process is providing a focus for engaging staff in wider discussions about learning and teaching and is pointing to a clear need - explicitly addressed in the MMU Pathfinder bid* – to open up opportunities for staff to collaborate and to share resources across the institution.

The reflection and analysis afforded us by the e-Benchmarking Exercise has identified areas of significant concern to the University resulting in part from the size of the institution and also in part from the historical development of the Faculties of which it is comprised - resulting in cross-Faculty links at MMU being almost equivalent to inter-institutional links. These concerns relate to the difficulties and discontinuities of academic collaboration and the sharing of resources across Departmental and Faculty boundaries. The number of pan-University initiatives in the area of teaching and learning is small and the success rate of pan-University Special Interest Groups has been limited.

The e-Benchmarking Exercise has provided us not only with an excellent mechanism to establish where we are with e-learning as an institution but, equally important, has also provided us with a mechanism to begin creating important cross-Faculty links.

The results of this benchmarking exercise will be incorporated into future thinking about a sustainable e-Learning strategy for MMU. Particularly salient is the importance of continuing collaboration between academic...
departments and central units; the commitment to a robust technological and administrative infrastructure; the key role of the Centre for Learning and Teaching; making good use of existing information systems, and auditing and developing staff skills.

Our successful funding bid to the Higher Education Academy Pathfinder Programme* will build upon MMU’s e-Benchmarking Exercise. The focus of our Pathfinder Programme leads directly out of our experiences with the e-Benchmarking Exercise and will centre on the design, planning, implementation, and evaluation of transformation processes and activities which are intended to lead to long term enhancement of the learning and teaching provision and processes of the entire institution. It will achieve this by creating affordances in academic collaboration - understood as intra-institutional and extra-institutional activities and processes delivering our programmes in a range of contexts and using a variety of delivery mechanisms.

Summary of Benchmarking Results at MMU

MMU is in the early stages of implementing an MLE with the first phase involving the roll-out of a VLE. In order to decide upon the criteria for evaluation of the project, a full stakeholder analysis was undertaken. This allowed the criteria perceived as important to stakeholders of the project, to form the basis of the evaluations to be undertaken institution-wide.

MMU is committed to e-learning, with an MLE that will provide a sound e-learning structure. The VLE is currently being used by more than 80% of the staff and 79% of the students who took part in the surveys.

There are good examples of strategically aligned policies and practices that facilitate e-learning at MMU; with a wide variety of available learning technologies (e.g. computerised assessment, multimedia resource production, e-moderating skills and e-curriculum design).

There is potential for collaboration between academic and central units to place MMU at the forefront of e-learning.

Most staff have core ICT skills. Of staff who completed the survey, 70% report that e-learning is incorporated into curriculum planning. There are significant gaps in the higher level skills necessary to take advantage of current and emerging learning technologies. The support for learning technologies, other than the VLE, is more mixed both locally and centrally. There are substantial staff development opportunities.

There is significant variability in the ways Departments and their staff approach e-learning in terms of both the VLE and of other Learning Technologies.

According to the staff survey, over 80% of students make routine use of ICT in their studies. There is significant variability in how much e-learning enhances the student experience.

The vast majority (95.7%) of the student respondents reported they had off-campus access to the Internet (of which 91.3% was broadband) and 62.6% reported that they possessed an MP3/4 player and 37.4% an iPod.

In answer to the question, ‘What do you enjoy about learning online?’ 90% said, ‘Being able to study at a time and place convenient to me’; 74.5% said, ‘Being able to work at my own pace’, and 76% said, ‘Being able to look back over course content if I am unsure of anything’.

Other Outcomes from Staff Surveys and Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Indicator Key</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HS</td>
<td>HoDs survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AS</td>
<td>Academic Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SS</td>
<td>Student Survey</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a) e-Learning and Departments

Most HoDs claimed that the Departmental mission includes a strong focus on L&T excellence. (HS)

Departmental L&T strategies need to include clear aims, targets and resource plans for e-learning. (AS)

Belief that there is no ICT budget for the Department which includes e-learning. (AS)

Most HoDs claimed that Departmental learning spaces do have networked computers with data projection where appropriate. (HS)

Many Departmental learning spaces do not have networked computers with data projection where appropriate. (AS)

Most staff felt that e-learning use is not a major feature of the Department’s external profile (e.g. in marketing to potential student). (AS)

A majority of staff believe that external examiners are not fully informed of the way that e-learning is integrated into Departmental programmes. (AS)

b) e-Learning and Accessibility

Accessibility legislation is not prioritized in most departmental decisions about e-learning tools and ICT facilities. (AS)

A majority of staff feel that there are no accessibility measures nor support in place enabling the use of e-learning by special needs academics and students. (AS)
c) e-Learning and Support

i) students

A majority of staff feel that there is no Departmental support for students using e-learning tools (e.g. training, web tutorials, personal advice and help). (AS)

Approximately one third (32.1%) of student respondents claimed that one of the barriers to learning online was lack of support from tutors whilst 88% reported no barriers to learning online from the Information Systems Helpdesk. Most (73.9%) reported no barriers to learning online due to the performance of the University network or Internet access. (SS)

Staff generally felt that student ICT skills are not audited at entry; that students are not expected to achieve baseline competence in ICT skills; nor are encouraged to update their skills regularly, although most felt that students make routine use of ICT in their programmes. (AS)

Most staff felt that difficulties arise in using ICT in courses because of the different levels of computer skills of the students. (AS)

Around a third (29.9%) of student respondents claimed that they received support in developing study skills to help them to learn online (e.g. time management, evaluating electronic resources, reading skills, communications skills, academic writing) but another 49.5% said they would like to but didn’t. (SS)

ii) staff

Many staff feel that IT support staff do not support and advise on e-learning tools in use in their Department. (AS)

Most HoDs claimed that teaching staff have access to a wide and appropriate range of e-learning tools to use with students and that there is at least one person in the Department to support staff use of e-learning tools. (HS)

A majority of staff feel that there is no support within the Department to evaluate and select appropriate e-learning materials nor support for staff to develop their own materials. (AS)

Most staff felt that more needs to be done to provide regular Departmental staff development activities addressing pedagogical skills/learning contexts of ICT, as well as technical skills. (AS)

Most HoDs claimed that there are Departmental experienced e-learning champions who are used as mentors and advisors. (HS)

Most staff believed that there were not opportunities to share ideas and experiences in e-learning (e.g. lunchtime workshops, e-mail discussion forum). (AS)

Most staff believed that there are no established internal networks to disseminate e-learning related information. (AS)

d) e-Learning and the Individual Academic

A majority of staff felt that academics do not regularly update their ICT skills. (AS)

A majority of staff believe that not all academics use the VLE. (AS)

Few staff believe that academics engage in regular staff development and training opportunities whether provided centrally or locally (although the majority of respondents claimed that they themselves did so). (AS)

Other Outcomes

Benchmarking has prompted internal discussion and exchange of ideas on a number of areas including process issues (measurement tools, data collection) but also on the desired outcomes of the exercise (internal and external).

One specific tool developed during the benchmarking process is a ‘Departmental 4-Ps Analysis For E-Learning’ template designed by Eddie Higgins for development of the HoDs survey tool into a 4-Ps analysis for development of actions to develop enhancement of e-learning.

The Learning and Teaching Unit is intending to use this as a reflective process for MLE Stage 1 projects and also when working with Stage 2 departments and programme teams. It may also have relevance as part of standard quality processes – perhaps when QIPS are being prepared.

There is a perceived internal benefit for the institution in the principles and basic processes of engaging with benchmarking. The key objective is the development of an aggregate picture and added value that will improve e-learning provision in general across the institution. In this context, engagement with the HE Academy benchmarking exercise should not be viewed as an end in itself. There needs to be an intention at institutional level to continue to evaluate the institutional context and approaches to e-learning development after this exercise.

The process has helped to focus on the potential role of internal expertise in facilitating organisational learning. MMU has recognised experts in e-learning but do not necessarily capture or exploit this research leadership internally.

The full report of the MMU e-Benchmarking Exercise can be found on the Learning and Teaching web site at: www.mmu.ac.uk/ltu/ebenchmarking/documents/eB_report.pdf

Appendices at: www.mmu.ac.uk/ltu/ebenchmarking/documents/eB_report_Appendices.doc

Further details about the MMU Pathfinder Project can be obtained from Bill Johnston (b.johnston@mmu.ac.uk)