THE E-UNIVERSITY COMPENDIUM

VOLUME ONE

Cases, Issues and Themes in Higher Education Distance e-Learning

Edited by Paul Bacsich (with Sara Frank Bristow)

THE HIGHER EDUCATION ACADEMY
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Foreword

I have pleasure in introducing this compendium of reports. At a time when HEFCE is consulting on and finalising the revised e-learning strategy for higher education, with a final document due in autumn 2004, it is vital that the community draw upon all sources of information.

The documents that comprise the majority of this compendium were commissioned by HEFCE in the period 2000–01 to inform the planning of the proposed UK e-University. At that time a wide range of business, organisational, pedagogic and technological models for the e-University were being proposed and discussed, so that the papers took a wide view of higher education distance e-learning exemplars and systems, both in the four home nations of the UK and around the world.

It was always the intention of HEFCE to publish these papers “in due course”, but it was felt appropriate in spring 2002 that the fledgling UKeU should have first and sole access to the material in order to assist its planning and start-up. It was envisaged that UKeU would edit and publish the material at an appropriate time, as part of its wider research mission. After that, a number of difficulties set in with the UKeU (leading to its eventual closure in July 2004) that served to delay the publication process, so that HEFCE decided to reassert direct control.

A number of our authors are part of the JISC and HE e-learning community, and we assume that some information will have found its way into the wider HE community. No doubt a few copies of some of the actual reports have found their way out to a few people, but this is the first time that the material has been officially published in its entirety.

The editors have worked hard to edit the papers into a coherent style, without, I must stress, changing the authors’ original underlying material or intentions.

Obviously many things have changed since these papers were written (the most important of which the editors have reported in footnotes); but I think readers will find much of the material both fresh and in many cases relevant to the e-learning challenges that the sector faces today. As well as this, the material is of interest to those who wish to take a longer-term perspective on the changes that e-learning brings about and that are needed to bring about e-learning. The sector may no longer feel, as many commentators did only a few years ago, that one complete generation is needed to bring about change in universities, but it is increasingly now agreed that it is a longer-term process than many technophiles once imagined. Thus “historical” perspectives may become increasingly relevant.
We shall be keeping a close eye on the interest in and usage of this material by the community and hope to release more material from the e-University studies in the not-too-distant future if there is sufficient interest in this first volume.

Liz Beaty
Director of Teaching and Learning
HEFCE
Editor’s Preface

Some of our original authors, and not only the academics among them, sensed that their work might one day find a wider audience; in fact, one or two even noted this in their reports and wrote their material with that wider audience in mind. But it is fair to say that it was not until a series of reports was completed in early 2001, by a larger number of academics than had previously been involved, that the idea of publishing became much talked about – and even then, it was the subject of informal conversations, not planning.

Around January 2003, I had a conversation with Alice Frost when we were both in Thailand (as part of a UK delegation to meet with Thai universities to discuss collaboration in e-learning), which led to earlier informal ideas beginning to take on a more operational reality. In the months after that, the publishing project was written into the plan for the e-Learning Research Centre, which finally was launched in October 2003. But that was the end of the beginning, not the beginning of the end of the project, due in part to the various issues that began to affect UKeU.

There were times when we despaired that this work would ever see the light of day.

There were times when we felt that we had woefully underestimated the amount of work to do. (We had.)

There were times when we had apparently irreconcilable issues – such as, is there a spelling mistake in the following sentence?

The Siren Center is one of a number of centres [centers?] active in the area.

(Yes, editors worry about such things. For those who wish to read about how we have resolved such matters, see “A Note on House Style” in the compendium’s supplementary material.)

But we made it – and now you, the reader, must be the judge.

You, the Reader

Our target reader we think of as somebody who is familiar with the UK higher education system, with an interest in e-learning. However, we are aware (or we hope it is the case) that a number of people from other countries will be interested in reading this material; consequently we have explained a number of “English-isms” that one would not normally have to explain to our target reader.

Mummy, what is the QAA?
We take greater care in explaining the US, Australian or other country HE systems; we apologise to readers from these countries – please bear with us. We also do not assume any deep technical knowledge from our target reader (apologies to IT specialists and computer scientists among our readers), so readers will find brief “pen-picture” descriptions of a number of computing and telecommunications technologies.

If I hear another definition of WiFi, I shall scream and scream and scream until I am sick!

Our Chapters

The compendium is not a book, to be read in sequence – although there is a book-like structure to it, and some readers may well print out all the chapters and other sections – we facilitate that, with the files in PDF as well as in Microsoft Word format. The one non-book thing we do is to number the pages in each chapter from 1. Each chapter is designed as far as possible to be stand-alone. Thus the reader will find a certain amount of repetition, including in footnotes (described below). Readers should recall that the original material was never envisaged as a uniform corpus to be drawn on by future researchers and analysts.

On Contextualisation

Since the reports were written for HEFCE two or – in some cases – three years ago, many things have changed in the world, and in the world of e-learning. HEFCE wished the material to be published “as is”, for the record (apart from necessary changes necessitated by house style and clarity); yet at the same time the editors felt that not to draw attention to obviously outdated material would in fact detract from the value of the material and inhibit readers from drawing lessons relevant to the current day. Thus the editors evolved and agreed with HEFCE a structure of a “gloss” upon the material, using only footnotes (thus no changes within the text) to provide updates (any existing footnotes in the text were transformed into endnotes), coupled with an initial overview by an editor and/or the author, setting the piece in the modern context. This is what we call contextualisation. It is a delicate art to insert footnotes so as to add to the value of the material and yet not detract from the flow of the arguments; we have done our best. Different chapters needed different approaches – and on occasion we have added some information on our approach to a particular chapter.

Our experience from this process (with which we have lived for many months) is that on the whole, the contextualisation works best at the “micro” level (companies gone bankrupt or taken over; updated student numbers or financial data; famous names with new jobs; etc.) and at the “macro” level (major changes in the law or politics), but less well at the “meso” level – reorganisations of the agencies charged to deliver services, or subtler shifts in policies (or perceptions of them). Consequently those who wish to rely on the reports as current policy guidelines – rather than to inform research, development or future policy – are advised to consult the current agencies for up-to-date guidance, using this material as background, and indications are given in the contextualisations as to which these are.

A particular issue arises with money, given the variability of exchange rates and the disappearance of many European currencies into the euro. We translate all money fig-
ures into pounds sterling. Our translation uses the exchange rates for 2 January 2001 – this date was chosen as being about halfway through the time period when these reports were generated.

**On UKeU and Terminology**

As editors, we use the phrase *e-university* to describe a university making “substantial” use of the Internet to teach students at a distance. (A more precise definition is given in chapter 1 and the Gazetteer annex)

We use the phrase *e-University* to mean the particular version of an e-university announced by HEFCE in February 2000, which rapidly became a study project for which these reports, and others, were commissioned, from teams of consultants including but not restricted to PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC). Despite the best endeavours of HEFCE, this name e-University was often shortened by the consultants and others to the cryptic phrase *e-U*, pronounced the same as EU. (The phrase *e-Uni* was also heard in some circles but seriously deprecated.)

During 2001 this study project began to solidify into an actual organisation, and after an interim or “virtual” phase, one might date the formation of the “real” organisation to February 2002 when John Beaumont was appointed as chief executive of a company from then on called *UK eUniversities Worldwide Limited*. However, that name was quite long, and very rapidly the company name in informal discourse became *UKeU*, on which phrase the logo and the company Web site were built. The editors have tried to maintain the distinction. The authors of the early reports (in 2000 and early 2001) could not have known the name UK eUniversities Worldwide Limited, but the authors of the later reports (in mid-to-late 2001) might well have heard of it. It was occasionally shortened to the mid-length name *eUniversities* but this was generally regarded, including by UKeU staff, as rather pedantic.

**On Lessons from History**

A full timeline of the organisational evolution from the origin of the e-University (in February 2000) to the close-down of UKeU (in July 2004) is contained in the Chronology in the supplementary material.

As editors we did not feel it within the current brief to comment on whether and in what way the management of UKeU in its operational phase from February 2002 did or did not follow any of the advice in these reports, and indeed there are very few references to UKeU as such even in the footnotes. As noted above, the text of the reports comes primarily from the era before UKeU could have been said to have started.

More generally we have tried to take a fairly detached view of e-learning developments – from a middle-of-the-road view on pedagogy and technology – and avoided making value judgements on events.

Professor Paul Bacsich
August 2004
Acknowledgements

First, to Alice Frost and Liz Beaty, and their colleagues at HEFCE for their funding and support of this project through a long and difficult period.

Second, to the HE Academy, and Lawrence Hamburg in particular, for overall project advice and ensuring the hosting of the Web site.

Third, to Terence Karran for critical reading of a number of key chapters.

Fourth, to a number of our authors who contributed updated or in some cases brand new material – in particular Michelle Selinger and William Buller of Cisco, Yoni Ryan from Australia, and Christopher Dean of PeakDean Interactive Ltd.

Fifth, to all our authors, who have been patient with the editors over many months as they reviewed the edited versions. No fees were paid to authors to comment on their material, but most took the opportunity to be involved. As a small note of thanks, all their biographies are in the Contributors section of the compendium.

Sixth, to all the other non-author helpers of this work, in ways large and small. It is always invidious to have lists, but particular thanks for their advice and support for this project over the last 12 months would go to Susan d’Antoni, Tony Bates, Svava Bjarnason, Trevor Bolton, Angela Castro, Professor Tom Carey, Sal Cooke and Lawrie Phipps, Joanne Curry, Yanlai (Cathy) Deng (our RA from China), Stephen Ehrmann, Anne Forster, Stephen Healy, Elizabeth Heaps, Terry Hilsberg, Wim Jansen, Professor Fred Litto, David Murphy, Juha Pohjonen and Kari Salkunen, Megan Quentin-Baxter, Helen Spencer-Oatey, Rebecca Stromeyer and Sally Reynolds, Annette Taylor, Lucio Teles, Helen Wainwright and Thais Waisman.

Seventh, but maybe first, to our long-suffering spouses, who may have felt that they would never get access to the home computer (and more importantly, to the vital broadband connection) ever again. (We had no spare time then to install wireless LANs – too much editing.) To Lynda and Alan.

Paul Bacsich and Sara Frank Bristow
Sheffield and Toronto
August 2004