Towards an Institutional Strategy for Learning and Teaching in a Digital Age

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Executive Summary

“Effective integration[of e-learning] can be provided where the Learning and Teaching Strategy addresses learning in the digital age directly, prioritises innovation in programme design, and establishes clear lines of action and responsibility to other strategies such as ICT, Quality, Employability, e-Learning, Learning Resources and devolved Faculty, Department and Service-level strategies.”

Changes represented in the 2010/2013 University Strategic Plan have encouraged a reconsideration of e-learning provision at London Metropolitan. The University is embarking on a process that requires increasing use of e-learning to support taught delivery both on- and off campus. The fact is that the achievement of strategic e-learning outcomes demands a collaborative, cross-disciplinary and integrated approach to e-learning, with responsibilities shared between Faculties and central services in a dialogue to be established and maintained about what services and standards of service are required, and how they might be provided and resourced. Another key reference point is the QAA Code of Practice Section 2 that regulates delivery, support and assessment of e-learning, with specific regard to flexible and distributed learning (formerly known as distance learning). Flexible and distributed learning encompass all forms of e-learning, including the online aspects of a blended learning approach.

The aim of the E-learning Strategy is to support the Learning and Teaching Strategy, the University Strategic Plan, and other related strategies by identifying the main organisational, staff and student support, infrastructural, teaching, staff and curriculum development implications that will have to be addressed to ensure the successful integration of e-learning at London Metropolitan. In order to sustain e-learning in the present climate of severe financial constraints, the University favours the Salmon Four Quadrant model to prioritise necessarily centralised support and resources for technology-enhanced learning as articulated in an iterative dialogue between central University and localised Faculty-determined learning and teaching requirements, strategies, policies and protocols. The intended outcomes of the strategy are as follows:

- **Outcome 1:** Students will have the skills and aptitudes to engage with e-learning as independent, responsible scholars, gaining employability assets and digital fluency.
- **Outcome 2:** Staff will routinely use e-learning resources, tools and approaches where necessary and appropriate to enrich and extend student learning.
- **Outcome 3:** Modules will have a WebLearn presence that uses the blended approach to optimise the best of face-to-face and e-learning methods.
- **Outcome 4:** The University will ensure that e-learning is incorporated explicitly within quality assurance and enhancement processes for learning and teaching.
- **Outcome 5:** The University will set up personalised, accessible and common support for learners on and off campus with seamless integration of learning and teaching, personal development, administrative and financial systems.
- **Outcome 6:** ISS Services will provide a supporting infrastructure to enable e-learning delivery that is seamless and transparent to the learning and teaching process.
- **Outcome 7:** Coordination and review processes will be implemented for promoting innovation, the adoption of appropriate standards and specifications, and support for the monitoring and evaluation of e-learning and the sharing of good practice.

A review of associated policies, and the protocols and operations that pertain to them, particularly in view of the constrained financial situation the HE sector faces is necessary in order to identify, remove and avoid duplication for the purposes of economy, sustainability, and efficiency.
1. Rationale for an E-learning Strategy

Changes represented in the 2010/2013 University Strategic Plan have encouraged a reconsideration of e-learning provision at London Metropolitan. Strategic Priority 5: Accelerating our Transformation through ICT points out that the "state of ICT at London Metropolitan University has held back the integration of the institution, since merger, and also limited the effectiveness of education, the sophistication of research, the accuracy of data and the targeting of support services. Transforming our interactions with students and the supporting business processes will be underpinned by structured investment in ICT."  

The University is therefore embarking on a process that requires increasing use of e-learning to support taught delivery both on- and off campus. Given the increasingly digitised, distributed and mobile nature of learning, teaching, assessment the University needs to commit to learning and teaching strategy that integrates best practice electronic learning delivery with best practice face-to-face teaching as a way of ensuring that it prepares students fully for citizenship in an increasingly digital world. This approach is underpinned by a focus on making effective pedagogical use of virtual learning environments (VLE) to support and enhance learning, assessment and teaching, and providing digital learning opportunities in a variety of settings:
• blended learning (combining virtual learning, both synchronous and asynchronous, with face-to-face learning approaches)
• distributed learning (geographically extended learning such as international partnerships or multi campus learning).
• mobile learning (accessing the same learning from different places using a variety of devices).

Another key reference point is the QAA Code of Practice Section 2 that regulates delivery, support and assessment of e-learning, with specific regard to flexible and distributed learning (formerly known as distance learning). Flexible and distributed learning encompasses all forms of e-learning; including the online aspects of a blended learning approach.  

An argument could be made that digital learning (e-learning) is best integrated within the Learning and Teaching Strategy, thus making a separate strategy for electronic learning and teaching unnecessary. However, the pedagogy and infrastructure of e-learning do need specific consideration because London Metropolitan, like many universities, is still in a state of transition in terms of institutional e-maturity (see Boys and Ford (2008, Ch.6) who describe the transitional phases towards e-learning maturity in the MIT 90s Model of Learning Technologies). The fact is that the achievement of strategic e-learning outcomes demands a collaborative, cross-disciplinary and integrated approach to e-learning, with responsibilities shared between Faculties and central services in a dialogue to be established and maintained about what services and standards of service are required, and how they might be provided and resourced. The process of supporting learners in a digital age necessitates comprehensive and integrated organisational change in terms of technical support and the underlying business, administrative and technical systems, as well as conscious curriculum development. Thus: "Effective integration of e-learning can be provided where the Learning and Teaching Strategy addresses learning in the digital age directly, prioritises innovation in programme design, and establishes clear lines of action and responsibility to other strategies such as ICT, Quality, Employability, e-Learning, Learning Resources and devolved Faculty, Department and Service-level strategies" (Eadie et al. (2005)).

The role of technology in the learning, teaching and assessment process is regarded by national policy-making bodies as pivotal but not deterministic. HEFCE, in conjunction with the HEA and JISC, supports use of innovative technologies that have learning and teaching as their core purpose. They say, however, that the challenge to their approach is that the term e-learning is used as shorthand to describe the array of technological developments and approaches throughout the sector and, therefore, the term can sometimes be too narrowly defined, with an over-emphasis on distance learning. In addition to the umbrella of technologies generally classified under e-learning, HEFCE promotes and supports developments, such as:

- the use of mobile devices to support portfolio development in work-based learning;
- developing and reusing educational content;
- learning space design;
- standardising course information for different purposes, and
- virtual research environments.

Such activities are classified under the term e-learning, although - while these developments are generally seen as being all about using technology to enhance teaching and learning - they tend to fall outside the" traditional, non-expert, perception of e-learning. The practice and use of electronic forms of learning has evolved rapidly and exponentially from programmed networked learning to include distributed forms of educational delivery based on next generation browser-based digital applications that offer Web 2.0 as an "an interactive, participatory experience... [that]... gives a whole new meaning to ‘community of scholars’ and a whole new dimension to ‘internationalisation’. "

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In order to sustain e-learning in the present climate of severe financial constraints, the University favours the Salmon Four Quadrant model to prioritise necessarily centralised support and resources for technology-enhanced learning, as articulated in an iterative dialogue between central University and localised Faculty determined learning and teaching requirements, strategies, policies and protocols. This model makes a distinction between core technology provision and peripheral technology provision for current and future students.

2. Definition of terms (adapted primarily from 9 & 10)

E-learning: The term e-learning is used in this document to mean the effective use of information and communications technologies (ICT) to support learning and teaching. "The Government e-learning strategy defines e-learning as any learning that uses ICT. In embedding this strategy we want to ensure that there is confident use of the full range of pedagogic opportunities provided by ICT. For HE this will encompass flexible learning as well as distance learning, and the use of ICT as a communications and delivery tool between individuals and groups, to support students and improve the management of learning". (HEFCE e-learning Strategy March 2005, p.5. See 5.) Online learning is a synonymous term for e-learning, but e-learning also includes the use of PowerPoint, data projectors, e-mail and the like for learning and teaching purposes.

Virtual Learning Environment (VLE): A VLE encompasses both a centrally maintained learning platform such as WebLearn (Blackboard), as well as Faculty and/or student maintained browser-based applications such as websites, virtual reality and social networking sites, e-portfolios, blogs, and the like, which can be integrated within the learning platform.

Blended Learning: Blended learning refers to learning contexts in which electronically delivered learning is blended with face-to-face learning methods. It is also called mixed mode or hybrid learning - or, colloquially, the "bricks and clicks" approach. Students on a blended learning programme are on campus for all or the majority of their learning time. Learning interactions include blended, electronic and digital forms of delivery.

Distributed Learning (formerly Distance Learning): this refers to those programmes where the student is away from the main teaching site for the majority of their learning hours. These students may occasionally visit the campus, occasionally have University staff visit them, may have local tutors or may have no face-to-face contact with the University at all. Distributed learning is a model in which the instructor, students and learning content can all be located in different, non-centralised locations, so learning can occur independently of place and time. (See the QAA Code of Practice Section 2 for clarity on flexible and distributed learning.)

Technology-Enhanced Learning: In the 2010 Survey of Technology Enhanced Learning by UCISA the term “technology enhanced learning” is defined as “any online facility or system that directly supports learning and teaching. This may include a formal VLE, e-assessment or e-portfolio software tool, or any Web2.0 tools. This includes any system that has been developed in-house, as well as commercial or open-source tools”.

Mobile Learning: Often called ‘m-learning’, mobile learning is any kind of learning delivered via a handheld mobile access device such as a handheld computer, MP3 players, or mobile phone.

WebLearn: WebLearn refers to the Blackboard learning management system (LMS) or learning platform used to integrate all forms of flexible and distributed learning at London Metropolitan. It includes a number of tools to facilitate access to module/course information, delivery of content,
module/course management, student collaboration, communication, discussion, assessment and student tracking.

3. Values and Epistemological Framework

This paper is premised on the following professional values as underlying principles of practice:

Teaching informed by

- An understanding of how people learn
- Scholarship, professionalism and ethical practice
- Working and developing learning communities
- Working effectively with diversity and promoting inclusivity
- Continuing reflection on professional practice
- Commitment to developing people and processes.

(See SEDA http://www.seda.ac.uk/home.html)

Educational practice is shaped by pedagogy which, in turn, rests on assumptions about epistemology. In terms of an epistemological and pedagogical framework, the hallmarks of effective technology-enhanced learning and teaching are considered as:

- providing multiple representations of reality;
- representing the natural complexity of the real world;
- focussing on knowledge construction, not reproduction;
- presenting authentic tasks (contextualising learning rather than abstracting instruction);
- providing real-world, case-based learning environments, rather than pre-determined instructional sequences;
- fostering reflective practice;
- enabling context-and content dependent knowledge construction; and
- supporting collaborative construction of knowledge through social negotiation.

(adapted from Jonassen, 1994 p.12)

4. Purpose of the E-Learning Strategy

The purpose of the E-learning Strategy is to support the Learning and Teaching Strategy, the University Strategy, and other related strategies by identifying the main organisational, staff and student support, infrastructural and curriculum development implications that will have to be addressed to ensure the successful integration of e-learning at London Metropolitan University in an ongoing and iterative dialogue with Faculty-determined blended learning requirements.

5. Institutional E-learning Outcomes (Adapted from 13)

In respect of the principles, aims and strategies expressed in the University Strategic Plan Strategic Priorities, and the Learning and Teaching Strategy Targets (L&TST), the following specific core learning outcomes are intended:
• Outcome 1: **Students** will have the skills and aptitudes to engage with e-learning as independent, responsible scholars, gaining employability assets and digital fluency.

  \[L&TST\ 5.3\ plus\ 1.2,\ 2.2,\ 3.1,\ 4.2\]

• Outcome 2: **Staff** will routinely use e-learning resources, tools and approaches *where necessary and appropriate* to enrich and extend student learning.

  \[L&TST\ 5.2\ plus\ 3.1,\ 3.2,\ 3.3\]

• Outcome 3: Modules will have a **WebLearn presence** that uses the blended approach to optimises the best of face-to-face and e-learning methods.

  \[L&TST\ 5.2\ plus\ 3.1,\ 3.2\]

• Outcome 4: The University will ensure that e-learning is incorporated explicitly within quality assurance and enhancement processes for learning and teaching.

  \[L&TST\ 5.2\ plus\ 3.1,\ 3.2,\ 3.3\]

• Outcome 5: The University will set up personalised, accessible and common support to learners on and off campus with seamless linking to PDP, ePortfolios and other university student systems.

  \[L&TST\ 5.1\ plus\ 3.1,\ 3.2,\ 3.3\]

• Outcome 6: ISS Services will provide a supporting infrastructure which enables e-learning delivery that is seamless and transparent to the learning and teaching process.

  \[L&TST\ 5.1\]

• Outcome 7: **Coordination and review** processes will be implemented for promoting innovation, the adoption of appropriate standards, and specifications and support for the monitoring and evaluation of e-learning and the sharing of good practice.

  \[L&TST5.2\ plus\ 3.1,\ 3.2,\ 3.3\]

### 6. Related University Policies and Protocols (Adapted from 14)

For the development of protocols and service level agreements pertaining to e-learning, additional University documentation should be consulted (and/or developed, aligned and ratified) in accordance with the University Strategic Plan in respect of:

- **QA frameworks**: policies which include academic development and review with regard to programme specifications, transcripts and quality standards.
- **Professional Development frameworks**: policies which include the necessary CPD support and opportunities for all staff supporting students’ learning
- **Learning Development frameworks**: policies which include the necessary support and opportunities for all students in the development of their learning.
• **Estates and ISS frameworks**: policies which ensure the necessary infrastructure and ICT facilities to deliver learning teaching and assessment effectively and timeously.

• **Library Services frameworks**: policies which include the necessary support and opportunities to all students in their learning.

• **Human Resources frameworks**: policies which reward and recognize the value and importance of teaching.

• **Widening Participation frameworks**: policies which support fair access.

• **Equality and Diversity frameworks**: policies which inform accessibility and equal opportunities provision.

This work is also informed all relevant documentation, particularly:

1. Current London Met IT resources available to academic staff & student users (December 2009)
2. Towards a Digital Literacy Policy - draft policy framework

7. **Provision for the Delivery of E-learning**

Centrally supported online and digital learning, teaching and assessment for student learning and engagement is characterised by the provision of suitable technology, Internet access and software applications. The basic ICT infrastructure necessary to facilitate online learning is involves considerations of, *inter alia*:

- processing,
- bandwidth,
- storage and software for learning communities,
- accreditation,
- copyright,
- ownership, and the
- economics of online learning.

Adequate provision for e-learning at London Metropolitan would be characterised at a basic minimum as follows:

- Learning Access Devices for Staff and Students (laptops and smart phones)
- Internet Access - both WiFi and networked
- Personalised Student and Staff Portals
- A Learning Platform - to integrate with Library, LDU, Student Services etc., i.e. WebLearn
- Integrated Learning Platform Applications: e.g.
  - Lecture Capture and Content Development
  - Digital Portfolio/Personal Learning Space
- Mobile Learning Apps
- Real-time Learning Support and Development
- Personal Learning Spaces, Collaborative and Social Learning (integrated with learning platform)
- E-Assessment, Online Submission and Feedback Applications
A review of associated policies, and the protocols and operations that pertain to them, particularly in view of the constrained financial situation the HE sector faces is necessary in order to identify, remove and avoid duplication for the purposes of economy, sustainability and efficiency. (See APPENDIX 5: Requirements for E-learning to Evolve at London Metropolitan University)

8. Techno-pedagogical Induction, Support, Training & Development for Staff

Provision should be made for staff in teaching and learning support roles to gain or develop the required basic skills that underpin digital forms of scholarship and learning, these being:

- digital fluency
- information literacy
- computer literacy and
- presentation skills

This will require a multi-pronged approach involving Faculties, CAPD/TLTC, Library Services, the Staff Development Unit, ISS and other specialised areas.

Contemporary teaching and learning requires the capacity to create rapidly prototyped digital learning design that requires digital fluency and capability. **Digital fluency** may be seen as the ability to create and manipulate:

- digital text
- digital images
- digital audio
- digital video

Training, development and support for the techno-pedagogical use is undertaken by the Teaching and Learning Technology Centre (TLTC) under the aegis of the Centre for Academic and Professional Development (CAPD) and by direction from the Teaching Assessment and Learning/Technology Enhanced Learning (TALTEL) Committee which is chaired by the Director of Academic Development and Review.

Faculty-based techno-pedagogical support and development is carried by Faculty nominated Blended Learning Consultants in consultation with Faculty L&T Facilitators, and Academic managers are assisted by CAPD and TLTC. The Faculty nominated Blended Learning Consultants (BLCs) in each Faculty assist academic staff in the use of WebLearn. The lead BLC in a Faculty is often the Learning and Teaching Facilitator for the Faculty. BLCs are coordinated by the CAPD Blended Learning Coordinator under the aegis of the Director of Academic Development and Review.

In time, a fully realised, appropriate and centrally supported provision in a “hub and spoke” provision model should serve the e-learning and e-teaching needs of current and future London Metropolitan students and staff more adequately. Each Faculty should have dedicated multimedia developers, learning technologists and specialist Blended Learning Facilitators reporting to TLTC, all working to assist the BLCs. The induction, support, training and development of Hourly Paid Lecturers needs review as they constitute a significant proportion of the London Metropolitan teaching staff.
9. Student Induction, Support, Training and Development

Students will also require induction, training and development in the digital aspects of scholarship and learning. This should be planned, designed, implemented and evaluated in the first instance by module leaders and tutors in accordance with Faculty structures and Learning and Teaching strategies, as well as University regulations, policies and protocols.

10. Conclusion

Whether initiated by e-Learning champions in a more or less ad hoc fashion or in the form of centrally supported projects and services, the benefits, costs and impact of electronic delivery of teaching, learning and assessment are considerable. Learning by digital means has significant resource, infrastructure and cost implications, impacting as it does on central services such as ISS, Library Services and student-facing support and development units (LDU and CETLs), and the continuing academic and support staff development units (CAPD, TLTC and the Staff Development Unit).

An institutional strategy for e-learning (including digital) learning and teaching that informs the development of the policies and protocols is required to support learning and teaching at London Metropolitan University. The purpose of such a strategy is to assure and enhance the quality of electronically delivered learning on all courses offered both on and off-campus. As such it addresses provision and resourcing for e-learning and e-teaching at London Metropolitan so that the sustainability of e-learning is assured, wastage and duplication of efforts and resources are addressed, and learning, teaching and assessment delivery is transformed to meet the needs of learners in a digital age.

References

1. London Metropolitan University Strategy 2010/2013


7. Vice Chancellor Brenda Gourley of the Open University, in a report submitted to the Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills in October 2008 by Sir Ron Cooke, Chair of the JISC


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