

Achieving academic engagement? The landscape for educational technology support in two UK institutions

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Drawing on results from a Universities and Colleges Information Systems Association (UCISA) 2008 survey of technology enhanced learning use in UK universities, this paper highlights support issues that impact on achieving academic engagement. It will cross-reference factors that were identified by respondents to the survey as encouraging development or that act as barriers with how TEL is supported. These sector wide findings will then be reflected upon with reference to two UK universities that represent the traditional binary divide in type of university in the UK. Lack of time is identified as a primary barrier with staff development as the primary remedy.

Keywords: educational technology support; academic engagement, strategies

Introduction

In 2008 a survey into Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL), within UK universities, was conducted by the Universities and Colleges Information Systems Association (UCISA). 'Lack of time' was overwhelmingly identified as the most significant barrier inhibiting academic engagement. This survey is the fourth such snapshot conducted since 2001 and on each occasion the same barrier has been highlighted (Armitage, *et al*, 2001; Jenkins & Browne, 2003; Jenkins, *et al*, 2005, Browne *et al*, 2008). Yet is the identification of time a direct indication of the pressures that academic staff experience or is it really a metaphor for a much more substantial issue, i.e. a failure to engage academic staff as to the potential of new technologies in their learning and teaching?

Using data from the latest UCISA survey into TEL this paper will consider the issues influencing academic engagement with new technologies. This data will be enhanced by reference to the circumstances pertaining at two UK universities, drawing on reflections from the Higher Education Academy (HEA) e-learning Benchmarking initiative (Mayes and Morrison, 2008). One university is research focused, 'old' University, (i.e. Pre-92) and the other a 'new' university (i.e. Post-92) with a teaching and learning focus. 1992 was the year that the binary divide between universities and polytechnics was removed in the UK. The UCISA surveys have identified substantial distinctions between Pre-92 and Post-92 with respect to TEL.

TEL surveys

The UCISA Surveys were initiated in 2001 in response to the support implications surrounding the widespread implementation of Learning Management System (LMS) within UK universities. It was then repeated in 2003, 2005 (see Browne, *et al*, 2006) and now in 2008. The rationale, first articulated in 2001 and given below, has remained constant:

UCISA is aware that a number of issues relating to TEL are having a significant impact on Computing/Information services. They also represent cultural challenges for both academic staff and students in how they engage with their learning and teaching. Issues relate to choosing TEL, its implementation, technical support and a whole range of support, training and pedagogic issues relating to its use. (Browne, *et al*, 2008)

The 2008 survey was publicised through email lists to senior support staff in order to encourage a high level of ‘buy-in’ and the survey itself was sent to Pro-Vice Chancellors to ensure that we received institutional responses. The response rate was 45%. It was heartening to receive anecdotal feedback on how some institutions had organised cross-institutional meetings to complete the survey, thus promoting communication and encouraging a developmental process.

TEL use within UK universities

The surveys have shown that while institutions might have structures in place to support TEL development, this has not always been consistently supported strategically. Nor has it been transferred into significant embedding of the use of technology. Whilst all four surveys show that the use of technologies in UK universities is high, the majority of this use remains supplementary, as illustrated in Figure-1.

Web supplemented practice (Category A) remains the leading activity, with fully online courses in a minority. However, the data indicates that the proportion of web supplemented activity is decreasing over time (from 54% in 2005 to 48% in 2008), with a rise in web dependent courses, most noticeably for Category B(i) - interaction with content. The data also revealed that Post-92 institutions were most prominent in this respect.

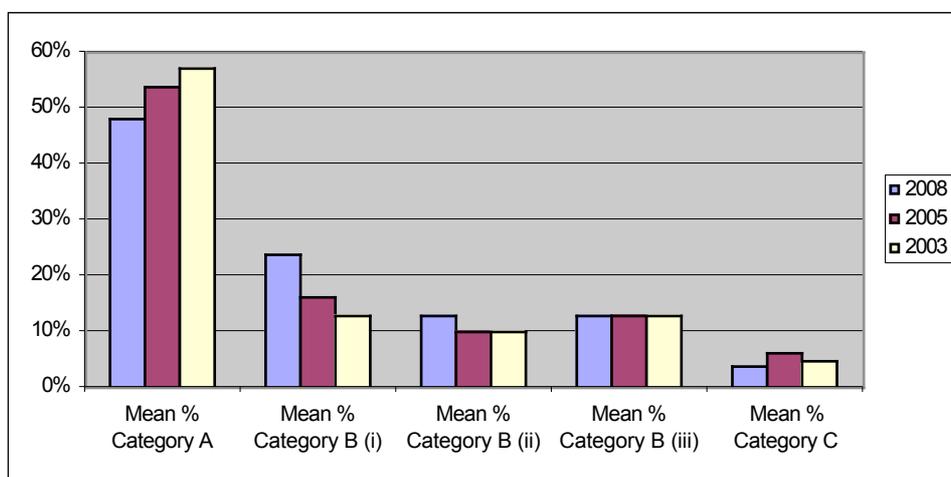


Figure 1: Proportion of all modules or units of study in the TEL environment in use
Category A – web supplemented, in which online participation is optional. *Category B* – web dependent, requiring participation by the student for an online component of a face-to face course, measured against 3 subcategories of participation: (i) interaction with content; (ii) communication with staff / students; (iii) interaction with content and communication. *Category C* – fully online courses. (Bell *et al.*, 2002)

Engaging staff with TEL

Respondents were asked to identify what factors encourage the use of TEL (Table-1) and what factors act as barriers (Table-2). Table-1 shows ‘Committed local champions’ was identified as the highest ranked factor to encourage use. The top five factors identified have remained consistently so throughout the four surveys, albeit with some minor variation in rankings.

Table 1: Mean values and Ranks for factors that encourage the development of TEL

Rank08	Factor	HE Sector	Pre-92		Post-92	
			Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank
1	Committed local champions	3.54	3.49	1	3.58	1
2	Availability of internal funding	3.41	3.44	2	3.46	2
3	Technological changes/developments	3.11	3.21	3	2.85	4
4	Availability of external funding	3.07	3.10	4	3.08	3
5	Availability of relevant standards	2.12	2.13	5	1.92	5

‘Lack of time’ was identified as the highest ranked barrier (Table 2) and it has a much greater score than the second ranked barrier. Only the top eight barriers are listed. A similar observation regarding ‘time’

has been made by White (2007) based upon a sample of six UK universities. Of note is how both ‘lack of academic staff knowledge’ and ‘institutional culture’ have increased in significance since the 2005 survey (moving up from 7th and 8th in the rankings respectively). Linked with other findings in the UCISA Survey these reinforce the view that the perceived dynamic nature of TEL developments, with for example Web 2.0 technologies are creating significant challenges to staff skills.

Table 2: Top ranked barriers to any (further) development of processes to promote or support TEL tools

Rank 08		HE Sector	Pre-92	Pre-92 Rank	Post-92	Post-92 Rank
1	Lack of time	3.22	3.28	1	3.04	1
2	Lack of academic staff knowledge	2.68	2.69	3	2.54	3
3	Lack of money	2.66	3.03	2	2.12	8
4	Institutional culture	2.55	2.67	4	2.15	7
5	Lack of support staff	2.50	2.64	5	2.23	5=
6	Lack of recognition for career development	2.46	2.38	7	2.73	2
7	Lack of academic staff development	2.38	2.36	8	2.23	5=
8	Lack of incentives	2.35	2.44	6	2.35	4

Table 2 reveals Post 92 institutions as having a lower mean score, which might suggest that TEL is more embedded within these institutions. The notable exception to this trend is for ‘lack of recognition for career development’. Respondents representing Pre-92 institutions identified organisational factors more as potential barriers. Of the top ranked factors, ‘lack of money’ and ‘institutional culture’ are above the sector average. Pre-92 institutions also had a mean score greater than 2.00 for ‘organisational structure’ and ‘strategy and leadership’ as barriers.

The major remedy to overcoming the barriers was identified as appropriately targeted staff development. This was thought to overcome much resistance for which ‘lack of time’ is sometimes used as a cover for other concerns.

Support for TEL

Given the identification of the barriers as outlined above, it is relevant to explore the nature of the support structures available in UK universities. Table-3 shows that support is provided from different types of unit, with over 80% having more than two 2 different units providing support for TEL. While there is some differentiation of activity between units, Table-4 shows that for pedagogic support, staffing levels are low. Therefore meeting the needs of staff who claim to be time poor, to enable them to engage with TEL such that they are exploiting its benefits will be a significant challenge.

Table 3: Support units for TEL

Support Unit	No	Total	Pre-92	Post-92
IT	59	80%	77%	85%
LTSU	47	64%	64%	65%
EDU	41	56%	49%	69%
Other	39	47%	49%	42%
Outsourced support	3	4%	5%	4%

LTSU= Learning Technology Support Unit
EDU= Educational Development Unit

Table 4: Mean number of staff working in each unit

Mean number of:	IT-SU	LTSU	EDU	Other
learning technology staff	0.6	5.8	1.5	2.9
IT support staff	13.8	1.3	0.2	1.3
learning administrative staff	0.6	0.3	1.0	2.1
learning academic staff	0.1	0.4	3.0	1.9
other staff	3.5	0.2	1.0	11.7

LTSU= Learning Technology Support Unit
EDU= Educational Development Unit

Staff development

'Targeted staff development' is easily said, less easily effectively implemented, despite the literature being awash with recorded initiatives. With the advent of Web 2.0 the problems are becoming exacerbated, with Gill (2008) noting the increasing mismatch between the technologies students have embraced and those used by academic staff, a concern foreshadowed in a suite of studies in which the views of many UK students was obtained (JISC, 2007). It has long been recognised that the full potential of technologies have yet to be exploited (Conole & Oliver, 2007) but recognition that 'institutional culture' (Luckin *et al*, 2006;) acts as a barrier to such exploitation was reinforced by a recent survey conducted on behalf of the JISC, which concluded that '*universities are not currently perceived to be leading the way in developing new ways people can learn*' (Ipsos/MORI, 2008: 42).

Chism (2004) notes an oft-quoted axiom that faculty development is the primary factor in influencing the adoption of TEL in higher education and emphasises that such development must be sensitive to institutional and cultural settings. The following outlines two such contexts, with particular reference to the stimulus provided by the HEA e-learning benchmarking initiative, which enabled participating institutions to evaluate collaboratively their relationship with TEL.

Experiences at two UK universities

University A, a stereotypically a 'Pre-92' research-intensive UK university located in the South-West of England, engaged in the HEA initiative to address the problem that though it had strategies and there was much organic, enthusiastic-led activity, these bottom-up and top-down approaches were not communicating with each other. With the imperative to excel in the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and with students currently expressing high satisfaction with their university experience (as demonstrated by e.g. the UK National Student Survey) the risks and benefits of TEL had to be clearly defined. Nevertheless, the University does have relevant strategies, but they lacked an underpinning vision. This vacuum created several systemic weaknesses, not least the unpredictability of support-staff funding levels. In turn, it contributed to insufficient academic engagement, with a widely held perception that the time implications of TEL had not been considered when determining staff workloads.

The University now has a clearly articulated vision regarding what 'research-like' learning and teaching should look like and the key role that TEL can play. There has been considerable technical, physical and human investment and a new organisational structure where key support agencies cohabit and share the same agenda. In the new Education Strategy, positioned post-RAE, it clearly articulates rewards, including a promotional route for excellent teachers, plus a nationally accredited staff development programme. However, the latter is still somewhat thin regarding TEL development but this is now being addressed by a range of initiatives, increasingly engaging senior staff within departments, given their potential influence, and through engaging students more directly as partners in designing and delivering the curriculum.

University B is a small teaching focused university based in the West of England. Support for TEL is provided through a small Learning Enhancement and Support Unit with five staff (just under the sector mean) plus some learning technology provision in Schools, though the latter support has a more technical focus. Engagement in the recent HEA benchmarking initiative showed the University to have widespread use of institutional tools such as the LMS but with use in line with that shown in Figure 1. The University encourages innovative teaching and learning, but with a focus on active learning approaches, rather than specifically TEL; this does not therefore act as a significant driver for TEL implementation.

It also means that there is variation in support within Schools with lack of time seen as a significant issue. The University will be focusing the implementation of its Teaching, Learning and Assessment (TLA) Strategy on embedding development and understanding of staff development within the validation and review processes. Institutional understanding of TEL and its potential is focused within the institution on central learning and teaching support units and school based champions. This also includes an understanding of the cost issues related to the use of TEL. These units will play an important role in the implementation of the TLA Strategy. It still remains the case that it takes two to tango!

Conclusions

This paper has drawn upon the results of a survey into TEL across UK universities. It serves as a reminder that while TEL continually evolves and presents new challenges to the sector there is still an important need to reflect on how well these technologies are being embedded within practice. Linking

some of the findings from this survey to the experiences of two UK universities highlights how, whilst long term, key perceived barriers appear to remain constant the challenges that institutions face are continually renewed as technology changes. Indeed Laurillard (2008: 144) has identified the continually changing nature of TEL as part of the problem for its introduction; the lack of constancy making it difficult to learn, appear complex and potentially disruptive. Central to this challenge is engaging academic staff, which means addressing the common cry of 'lack of time' and the creation of a supportive, developmental environment.

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