

Developing policy to support a new generation of e-learning

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Now that ICT methods for teaching have evolved into a stable technological environment, we are able to identify the successful strategies for creating a culture of e-learning development within the tertiary system. Familiarity with the digital medium through staff training has proven to be an important step towards fostering mainstream engagement with e-learning. Another important contribution has been the local availability of technical expertise to guide and inform academics. Time release for academics to undertake e-learning development has long since been considered an important factor, but also forms part of a larger picture involving the funding and resources required to facilitate e-learning (Noacco, 1995).

In recognition of the importance of e-learning growth, various initiatives and policies have been implemented both within individual institutions and at a government level. Within institutions, staff training programs have been established that are available to academics. Local technical support units for e-learning now operate within many institutions (The University of New South Wales, 2004). Various internal funding initiatives have been implemented and inducements have been offered in the form of career advancement and financial return through commercialisation. At a government level, schemes have been implemented such as the establishment of the Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching (CAUT) (Schofield & Olsen, 2000).

Unfortunately, today's climate reveals shortcomings in the current policies as evidenced by the recent decline in new e-learning projects. Within institutions, there has been a general shift towards the funding of infrastructure such as learning management systems (Burford & Cooper, 2000) rather than academic content. The inducement of career advancement also seems to be ineffective. At a government level, the focus has shifted towards assisting the commercialisation of research and forming linkages between education and industry (Australian Federal Government, 2001). The Department of Education Science and Training (DEST) does not currently recognise e-learning as an awardable scholarly activity in its own right. These shortcomings have formed a culture of discouragement and must be addressed.

Without funds either at an institutional or government level, without either academic recognition or financial consideration for academics engaged in this form of scholarship, no academic activity can succeed. Clearly, new institutional and government policies regarding e-learning must be developed and successful past ones revisited. DEST recognition of e-learning as an awardable scholarly activity seems a pivotal issue. This recognition would give institutions a stronger incentive to foster e-learning and would justify the establishment of sustainable funding either at an institutional or at a government level, to seed new projects. E-learning must embrace both infrastructure and content. While the requirements of infrastructure are currently being addressed, new policies regarding academic recognition and funding would complete the picture required to advance the next generation of e-learning.

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