QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST

e-Learning and Distance Learning Policy 2009-2012

1   Introduction

The University defines e-learning as "*learning facilitated and supported through the use of information and communication technologies".* This broad definition encompasses e-learning which supports learning through, for example, provision of resources and also on-line learning where the student is engaged in interactive learning activities.

The University does not support e-learning for its own sake, rather it sees e-learning as having the potential to enhance the learning and teaching which is its very raison d'etre. Thus e-learning largely occurs in the context of blended learning, that is, through the integration of e-learning with traditional media and methods according to course content, level and students. In line with the University Education Strategy (2008-2011), the key goal is that students should be active learners; this places a greater emphasis on staff facilitating learning through participative and interactive e-learning methods.

The University also recognises the importance of developing online distance learning and flexible programmes to meet the needs of national and international markets. Although online learning is a popular mode of distance learning delivery, the University recognises that distance learning can also be delivered by other means. The e-Learning Benchmark exercise identified that distance learning provision within Queen's is currently within niche markets, typically for international, professional development courses. This document proposes a separate approach to distance learning under section 4 and recommends a scoping study for distance learning, with a view to the development of separate distance learning policy if required.

This e-Learning Policy seeks to firmly embed e-learning as key element of learning and teaching. The policy is informed by the Education Strategy 2008-11 and has been shaped by the outcomes of the University's recent participation in the HE Academy/JISC e-Learning Benchmark exercise (UOB/P/08/163).

2   Realising the Vision: Setting the Objectives

2.1 Overview

While the Education Strategy lays the foundation for the embedding of e-learning, this document seeks to make more explicit the necessary developments required to embed e-learning. Each section below considers one of the three strands of the Vision (as outlined in the Education Strategy) and sets out how it will be realised.

2.2 Students

The Vision: *"students are stretched academically and personally so that they can fulfil their potential in a dynamic and uncertain world".*

The University is committed to ensuring that our students have the opportunity to participate in a rich and varied learning experience, learning and interacting with their peers and tutors independently of place or time. They will have access to high quality learning and information resources in a variety of formats and they will be adequately skilled in making effective use of the technologies provided. It is important that they are information literate i.e. that they can seek out, evaluate and engage with a wide range of information resources effectively and ethically when critically engaging with their discipline.

To achieve this, the University will:

(i) Provide students with an online personal learning space, which helps to meet their diverse learning needs.
(ii) Provide students with opportunities to access and be trained in the use of a range of technologies, developing e-skills enabling them to work and participate in a technology-rich society.
(iii) Empower students as learners in an e-learning environment, helping them to learn effectively with technology in order to develop their lifelong learning skills.

2.3 The Curriculum

The Vision: *"the content and delivery of the curriculum is challenging and inspirational, equipping students for life in a global society and work in a global economy"*.

The University will support more accessible, flexible and creative models of curriculum delivery through e-learning based on sound pedagogical principles. Innovation and best practice in use of e-learning will be embedded in our learning and teaching, assessment and feedback strategies to support student learning and success. Where appropriate, the University will expand its portfolio of flexible and distance learning programmes, particular to achieve the University's corporate targets for post-graduate and international students. Such provision can also help meet the government agenda to contribute to the quality of the local workforce, allowing the development of skills through participation in a wider range of flexible graduate and postgraduate programmes.

To achieve this, the University will:

(i) Promote wider use of technology to provide a more flexible, inclusive and accessible curriculum.
(ii) Support innovative use of technology to provide engaging, active and interactive learning activities.
(iii) Explore how greater use of electronic resources may be incorporated into the curriculum.
(iv) Advise upon and support the appropriate use of technologies for efficient and effective forms of both formative and summative assessments.
(v) Support the development of online flexible and distance learning programmes in identified niche markets.

(vi)   Ensure that e-learning is taken into account in programme and module planning when working with partner institutions in the development and/or delivery of the curriculum.

(vii)   Ensure feedback on e-learning provision is gathered so that e-learning embedding is informed by student and staff opinion.

2.4 The Drive for Excellence

The Vision: *"excellence in education is prized, recognised and rewarded".*

The University is committed to providing a robust and sustainable infrastructure to support the development of high quality digital content delivered by sound educational methods. Staff involved in designing active and interactive learning opportunities will have access to tools, suitable learning resources, different pedagogic approaches and delivery options including the use of e-learning.

The University will seek to ensure that staff have every opportunity to further develop their skills and that good practice in the use of e-learning is recognised and disseminated.   The use and support of e-learning will be reviewed annually to ensure it is fit for purpose.

To achieve this, the University will:

(i)   Develop an appropriate and sustainable model for the development and support of technology enhanced learning.

(ii)   Ensure the physical and virtual infrastructure blend to make best use of learning spaces and environments. (eg the use of wireless technology where appropriate).

(iii)   Support Schools to develop action plans for the embedding of e-learning within their curricula.

(iv)   Ensure the provision of support for teaching staff, including materials and systematic and targeted training.

(v)   Establish an ongoing 3 yearly e-learning benchmarking process against the sector.

3   Implementing the Policy

3.1 Overview

There are a number of areas that must be addressed to create an environment that supports and encourages a culture of excellence in e-learning.   These are summarised in this section.

3.2 Support for Students

The University will provide guides and materials effective for e-learning and the use of e-tools. These materials will be made available for embedding in curricula where relevant.

There will be ongoing review of student e-learning experiences to identify further support materials and services that should be developed for students. As part of a process of regular review, student feedback will be gathered on the learning platform to inform ongoing development.

3.3 Support for Schools

A significant aspect to achieving the embedding of e-learning across the University will be the support provided for Schools. This will include:

(i)   Awareness raising and dissemination of good practice at the level of Schools or of groupings of cognate areas in the form of "Roadshows", developed in consultation with DEs from relevant areas.
(ii)   Support for Directors of Education to develop a School based action plan for e-learning.
(iii)   Provision of exemplars which have relevance to the different cognate groupings within the University.
(iv)   Support for course teams reviewing and/or developing the curriculum.

3.4 Support for Staff

Achievement of the University's e-learning objectives will be contingent upon the incentives, opportunities and support that individual staff are given to incorporate e-learning in their teaching. This will include:

(i)   A comprehensive training programme of workshops which address both the pedagogical and technical skills required.
(ii)   The introduction of mechanisms to enable teaching staff to embed e-learning within the curriculum. Such mechanisms should include:

        (a) The provision of templates and examples of good practice in e-learning.
        (b) Funding for projects (similar to the current TQEF fund).
        (c) Release from teaching or other duties to allow time to develop e-learning.
        (d) Time allocated from an e-learning support officer.
        (e) Cognisance of the time required to facilitate e-learning in the allocation of work.

(iii)   Explicit recognition and reward of contributions to the development of e-learning.
(iv)   The development of an evidence base to guide e-learning embedding. This would include examples of best practice from within the institution and nationally.

There will be ongoing review of staff e-learning experiences to identify further support materials and services that should be developed for staff. As part of a process of regular review, staff feedback will be gathered on the learning platform to inform ongoing development.

3.5 Learning Platform

The University will provide a learning platform that has the potential to grow and evolve to meet the changing needs of staff and students. In order to meet these new challenges *Queen's Online* Virtual Learning Environment is being redeveloped, retaining the functionality currently provided, whilst extending it to include the following advantages:

(i)   Provision of personal learning space.
(ii)   Enhanced collaboration and communication tools.
(iii)   Support for Web 2.0 technologies such as Wikis and Blogs within a managed environment.
(iv)   Support for a wide range of learning resources.
(v)   Seamless integration with Microsoft's Office products.
(vi)   Creation of an 'Enterprise Portal', which will provide one point of access for all online services.

Module content from previous years will remain accessible via the Queen's Online II (QOLII) portal.

Phase I of the next generation *Queen's Online* platform will be released in Academic year 2009-10.

To support a wide range of assessment activities (formal examinations, formal/informal class tests, self assessment, class engagement with immediate feedback etc.) the University will develop the following assessment methods:

(i)   Fully computerised assessment where questions are presented and marked via computer.
(ii)   Automated 'marking' of paper based assessments.
(iii)   Support for student interaction through mass voting systems.

3.6 Templates and Tools

The University will identify and create a range of online learning templates and tools that can be used across the University subject areas to develop appropriate online learning resources, which will be held in a University e-learning repository. The tools and templates identified will address a range of learning activities and allow staff to build up banks of reusable learning objects (RLO). The templates will include facilities that will enhance blended learning opportunities for University courses allowing for internal and external online resources to be linked together into cohesive learning units.

3.7   Physical Infrastructure

Queen's physical infrastructure will evolve to meet the changing needs of our student base. The traditional concept of large rooms full of computers will be supplemented by a range of facilities to support student-centred mobile computing. Key targets will include:

(i)   Introduction of "transition zones" that blur the boundaries between social computing and traditional learning.

(ii)   Development of a new form of Student Computer Centre that will complement the provision of University computers with support for students using their own laptops.

(iii)   Development of the University's wireless provision to support students in central and school based locations.

(iv)   Development of flexible teaching areas that can support a range of teaching and learning styles.

(v)   Development of the new Library that will cater for a wide range of learning styles.

(vi)   Establishment of the level of need for a large "online assessment centre".

3.8 Off Campus Learning

The University will seek to ensure that students studying off campus will have necessary access to learning activities and resources and the support to use them. In order to meet this aim, these requirements must be taken into account when arranging collaborative programmes and placement provision.

3.9 Monitoring and Evaluation

A Policy Implementation Group will oversee the implementation of the e-Learning and Distance Learning Policy and will report to Education Committee and other relevant University groups. The Group will oversee the development of an evaluation plan to assess the impact of the policy. Central to this will be a commitment to include feedback from students and staff on all aspects of e-learning.

4   Distance Learning

Distance Learning can be defined as: a specially designed programme of learning and teaching in which the student is remote from the tutor. The programme and materials may be provided online or on CD-ROM with asynchronous or synchronous communication between student and tutor. Paper based manuals and materials with written correspondence between tutor and student may also be part of the model.

High quality distance learning programmes for students (who never visit the University campus but still participate in the "Queen's Experience") requires dedicated and appropriately skilled development, teaching and administrative support. The Distance Learning Unit in Pharmacy, which specialises in international continuing professional development, is recognised across the University as an example of such provision. This unit could serve as a model for continuing professional development by distance learning for other Schools within the University.

The University will seek to ensure there is a thorough understanding of the resource intensive nature of distance learning, both in its development and delivery. A sub-group of the e-Learning Policy Implementation Group will be set up to consider the University's position with regard to Distance Learning. A process of consultation with Schools will be established to identify appropriate areas for distance learning development. Once the scope for distance learning has been identified, a specific Distance Learning Policy or

statement may be produced and a business case for resources required to meet this need will be made. Such additional support would be required to:

(i) Develop and test models of distance learning with associated templates.
(ii) Redesign face to face programmes and modules to be delivered in a high quality distance learning environment.
(iii) Develop online resources.
(iv) Establish and implement a quality assurance process for distance learning programmes.

5   Action Plan

There are currently a number of excellent examples of the use of e-learning across a variety of programmes within the University. However, a substantial increase in the rate of e-learning development and embedding will be required if all students are to benefit from similar innovations in teaching practices. The proposed increase in e-learning is to be achieved through three key phases which may be summarised as follows:

Year 1 – Exploratory and Consultancy Phase
(i) Launch new learning platform (including training support and evaluation).
(ii) Explore advances in e-learning methods and tools through case studies.
(iii) Explore opportunities for distance learning.
(iv) Explore impact of e-assessment.
(v) Identify strategic distance learning courses.

Year 2 – Embedding Phase
(i) Enhance learning to support tools and templates from year 1.
(ii) Seek to embed new e-learning working practices in course across Queen's.
(iii) Seek to produce 1 new distance learning course, which demonstrates the cross-departmental distance learning teams.
(iv) Embed e-assessment into some courses across Queen's.
(v) Report on impact of the e-assessment.
(vi) Review and update e-learning policies to support Mainstream use of e-learning.

Year 3 – Main Streaming of Enhancements
(i) Introduce policies to encourage and support mainstream e-learning provision.
(ii) Introduce training and support activity to raise the base level of e-learning provision across all courses.
(iii) Mainstream use of e-assessment as a formative and summative evaluation instrument.
(iv) Introduce a business led Distance Learning Support initiative.

Critical to this approach is engagement and consultation with Schools to identify their future e-learning plans and needs. This analysis will shape future developments within the framework set for years 2 and 3. An interim report outlining needs, benefits and current gaps in provision will be produced at the end of year 1. It will set out a tangible vision for the focus of further developments during years 2 and 3 and outline their associated resource implications. This activity will take into account resources required for distance learning provision. A detailed action plan will be made available following this initial consultation phase.

e-Learning Glossary

Term	Definition
blended learning	Combination of online and in-person learning activities
blog	Abbreviation of "Web Log". Short messages that are posted onto a web site by an author. Blogs are typically informal and personal messages, almost like daily diary entries, the purpose of which is typically knowledge sharing.
broadband	A transmission channel able to simultaneously carry multiple signals.
distance education	Education delivery where students and instructors not in the same location.
distance learning	The outcome of distance education.
download	A file transfer from a remote computer to the students own.
e-facilitator	An instructor who assists, directs, and stimulates the learning during an online course.
e-learning advocate	A lecturer or member of School staff who has experience of e-learning and is recognised by the School as its champion.
e-skills	ICT user, practitioner and e-business skills.
e-tools	A computer or web based application designed to make a task easier. Including web 2.0.
electronic resources	Typically web-based resources, available in an electronic format.
interface	The means by which the user interacts with computer, the part of the software the user sees and interacts with.
Managed Learning Environment	A software system designed to manage and support teaching and learning in an educational setting.
multimedia	The combination of text, graphics, audio, colours to create used to present information in an engaging and dynamic way.
network	A group of computers and peripheral devices (like printers and modems) connected to allow users to communicate and share information and resources.
online	Connected to the Internet or another computer.
online learning	An umbrella term used to describe any education or training that occurs online.
Online personal learning space	An online personal learning space supports learning by providing tools for monitoring and assessing communicating and collaborating plus an individual area for the learner to store their work and personalise its layout to meet their learning needs.
podcast	As series of digital audio (or video) files distributed over the internet, available to download to portable media players and computers.
portal	Web site that is a major starting point or gateway to additional information available on the Internet.
sharepoint	MS Office software designed to facilitate collaboration, provide content management features, and supply access to essential information.
web-based	Accessed within a web browser over the internet.
Web-browser	Program used to access and view material over the internet.
wiki	A collaborative website tool.