

E-learning policy issues: Global trends, themes and tensions



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This paper provides an overview of experiences in the development of e-learning policy for the tertiary sector across a number of countries. It contrasts how different countries have responded to e-learning and proposes a discernible pattern to policy development. Consistent trends, themes and tensions run through the policy implementation process and these raise a number of questions about the way policies might define e-learning; address and acknowledge gaps in e-learning policy; align and differentiate levels of policy, and account for the national and global education context. The paper concludes with a brief consideration of issues and implications for local policy-makers as governments endeavour to embed and connect e-learning policy with other strategic social, economic and educational goals.

Key words: e-learning, policy, accessibility, emerging issues

Introduction

This study was commissioned by the New Zealand Ministry of Education to consider the e-learning policy experiences of a number of countries in order to identify consistent trends, themes and tensions running through the policy implementation process. Where possible the intention was to report and relate identifiable outcomes to specific policy measures. The project comprised three aspects:

1. Development of a database of templated summaries of international e-learning policy and strategy documents from 2000-2005;
2. Provision of a report on overall e-learning policy direction and implementation in selected regions and countries;
3. Provision of a report on policy initiatives that focus on accessibility to e-learning in small and remote communities.

This paper brings together these three aspects in a brief summary of the main findings. It reports a discernable pattern to e-learning policy development and some of the findings of specific initiatives for small and remote communities. We conclude with a number of issues for academics and local policy-makers alike to reflect on as governments continue to develop e-learning policy to advance wider strategic goals.

Main objective

The study had two objectives. It was developed in two broad areas – policy and accessibility. The area of ‘policy’ involved examination of existing national/federal and state/provincial policy in the area of e-learning, determination of the outcomes of the policy implementation, and consideration of subsequent and proposed amendments and the reasons for those. This aspect of the research drew largely on contemporary official documents but was supported by in-depth descriptions of three case studies of jurisdictions in which e-learning policy has been developed and implemented, monitored and evaluated. These case studies involved three provinces in Canada: Ontario, British Columbia and Saskatchewan.

The area of ‘accessibility’ involved determining the nature of government-funded infrastructural arrangements for e-learning, with a particular focus on the specific barriers and enablers faced by small and remote communities. Analysis of official documents again played an important role in this aspect of the project. However, this phase of the research also sought to document the experiences of those at the regional level and involved three local case studies to illustrate the outcomes of such government funding and to support the document and policy analysis.

Sample and methodology

The study involved developing a validated template to support a document analysis of e-learning policy between 2000 and 2005 across a number of countries and jurisdictions. The following sample of countries and international agencies were included in this study and all appeared in the database of templated summaries of e-learning policy and strategy documents.

Countries

Australia, Canada, Finland, Iceland, Korea, Japan, Sweden, United Kingdom, and United States of America.

States and provinces

California, Pennsylvania, Ontario, British Columbia, New Brunswick, Saskatchewan.

International agencies

APEC, COL, European Community, OECD, and UNESCO.

To add validity and depth to the findings, a number of experienced e-learning officials and well-known people in the field outside of New Zealand were invited to participate in the study. This technique helped to triangulate the outcomes of the document analysis. The validation process of using local experts added significantly to the value of the final report. The contextual understandings and complexities of policy of which we were made aware by all validators ensured a more comprehensive and nuanced collection of area reports. Validators were:

- UK – Sarah Porter, Head of Development, JISC
- US – Professor Lynn Schrum, George Mason University
- Canada – Professor Terry Anderson, Athabasca University
- Asia – Professor Insung Jung, International Christian University, Tokyo
- Europe (Scandinavia) – Professor Morten Paulsen, The NKI Internet College, Norway; Dr. Jyrki Pulkkinen, Adviser – Information Society for Development, Department for Development Policy, Finland; Dr Peter Bergström, Umeå Universitet, Sweden.
- Australia – Dr Peter Smith, Deakin University
- Supranational – Professor Betty Collis, University of Twente.

Pattern to development of e-learning policy

From our analysis, we identified a discernible pattern to the development of e-learning policy. The first stage occurs as governments act to make e-learning possible, the second as they work to integrate e-learning into the education system, effectively, to mainstream e-learning. In the third stage, a transformative role for e-learning is seen, with changes to views of learning and to the nature and operation of the tertiary institutions and the tertiary system.

First and second stage policy objectives are commonly seen together as policy-makers draw on the experience of early adopters of e-learning, or on their experience of previous adoption of technology use in education. Similarly, second and third stage policy objectives co-exist in policy documents as policy-makers continue to encourage the mainstreaming of e-learning and enhancement of its quality, while seeing the potential for sector efficiencies and the need for policy alignment. Following this pattern, policy initiatives include:

- Strategies to develop physical infrastructure
- Focusing on building and ensuring quality in e-learning
- Moves to create a system wide approach to e-learning
- Embedding e-learning and aiming for sector efficiencies

Strategies to develop physical infrastructure

All regions and countries had undertaken policy initiatives designed to provide access to the physical infrastructure supporting broadband access, which is considered essential for effective e-learning provision. Notably, the level of broadband uptake was often far less than policy-makers anticipated, suggesting that having built it, not all sectors of society have seen the need to expand their Internet use.

Focusing on building and ensuring quality in e-learning

Four groups of initiative were prominent in support of the objective of building and ensuring quality in e-learning. These were:

1. Provision of support, information and guidance for learners;
2. Professional development and support for tertiary teachers;
3. Leadership development;
4. Development of high quality e-learning content.

Moves to create a system wide approach to e-learning

Supporting the four major enablers identified above were several policy objectives that enabled a more systemic approach to e-learning. The move to a systemic approach signals a turn to the second phase of e-learning policy development. Major initiatives here involve:

1. Development of collaboration and cooperation between the institutions comprising the tertiary system
2. Attempts to ensure an awareness of the benefits of e-learning and to continue to build demand for e-learning services
3. Support for research initiatives and policy evaluation to ensure informed decision-making

Embedding e-learning and aiming for sector efficiencies

This stage of policy development is only recently noticeable. As the e-learning environment matures there are policy moves to embed e-learning by making it integral to broader strategies for teaching and learning. Thus policy alignment is a key issue at this stage. Sector efficiencies were sought through the integration of information systems and the development of synergies between institutional activities.

Small and remote communities

Documents identified through the first phase of this research were reviewed to locate those that identified specific mention of accessibility for small and remote communities. Five examples of specific policy initiatives were identified, three were studied in depth. The documents identified for review were:

- *Quality post-secondary opportunities. The quality learning agenda policy statement for post-secondary education and training.* New Brunswick, CA.
- *Technology enhanced learning. An action plan for post-secondary education and training in Saskatchewan. Phase2.* Saskatchewan, CA.
- *Review of the Technology Enhanced Learning Action Plan. Final Report.* Saskatchewan, CA.
- *Risk with responsibility. Policy for ICT in education, science and culture 2005-2008.* Iceland.
- *Australian Flexible Learning Framework Implementation Plan 2004.* Australia.

Case studies were then conducted of three specific project initiatives in three separate countries:

- *Network BC*, a Canadian project undertaken in British Columbia.
- *E-learning Creative Community Partnerships*, an Australia project initiated as part of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework 2004-2006
- *Connected Communities*, a Scottish project that was part of the Broadband for Scotland's Rural and Remote Areas Initiative. This case focuses on the Western Isles

The documents identified in this part of the study were few in number, indicating the relative dearth of policy focused specifically on enhancing accessibility to e-learning for small and remote communities. The major finding of our examination of the three in-depth cases was that the involvement of local communities played a major role in the successful uptake of broadband access, which in turn provides a means of access to e-learning. Critical also is a focus on provision of an array of government and non-governmental services for communities, necessitating a degree of liaison between different agencies.

Outcomes from policy

Only two distinct evaluations of policy initiatives were located: an evaluation of the *Saskatchewan Technology Enhanced Learning Action Plan* and an evaluation of the *Australian Flexible Learning Framework 2000-2004*. The main findings from these evaluations were:

1. Professional development for staff and the development of high quality digital content are central to the success of e-learning approaches to education
2. Inter-institutional collaboration is a key element of integrating e-learning across the tertiary sector
3. Policy alignment is essential to ensure a mature e-learning environment
4. The 'buy-in' by staff and institutions is slow and considerable investment in time and people is essential. Time is needed to realise the investments that have been made but at the same time, it is important to ensure that e-learning is sustainable and that e-learning policies include a strong accountability focus.

Issues emerging from policy initiatives

The paper concludes by identifying 14 issues emerging from the policy initiatives. These issues are general in nature, focusing on broader questions about e-learning policy and its development, not on specific policy issues. Questions are raised about the way policies might define e-learning; address and acknowledge gaps in e-learning policy; align and differentiate levels of policy, and account for the national and global education context.

Conceptions of e-learning

In the policy documents, there is no generally accepted definition of e-learning. This point is illustrated clearly by the many variations of spelling and the way e-learning, online learning and distance learning seem to be synonymous. Often the conception of e-learning is very broad and in many cases, no explicit definition was provided in policy documentation. The idea of blended learning also appears more recently in some policy texts but there is a danger of seeing this concept as largely business as usual. It is noteworthy, however, that poorly defined conceptions of e-learning are not entirely a bad thing as there is reason to suggest that in some countries this may have helped to avoid setting up a policy framework which does not align with other initiatives. In other words, the lack of an explicit definition may have encouraged the embedding of e-learning within existing policy texts.

Supply of and demand for e-learning

Throughout policy texts, the emphasis has been on providing supply by building infrastructure rather than focusing on why there would be demand in the first place. The assumption has been that if the right infrastructure is built, people will follow. The fact is that some groups have not made use of the infrastructure to access tertiary education and other services. There was little evidence of any attempt to find out what it is that disadvantaged groups and students studying at a distance actually want in support of their educational aspirations. This point also raises questions about some of the deeper structural barriers to promoting wider access to tertiary education that have largely been ignored by e-learning policy. The key point is that provision of access is a complex issue and in the current move to personalise learning, more attention is required on understanding the demand side of tertiary education.

Strategies for disadvantaged and under represented groups

A common feature of the policy texts was few specific strategies for disadvantaged and under represented groups. In a majority of policy documents, there was little or no reference to such groups and even fewer evaluations that specifically focused on disadvantaged groups. This is somewhat surprising given the acknowledged gender issues associated with the adoption of technology in society and the number of minority and indigenous cultures spread across the different countries involved in this study.

Current emphasis on e-learning is restrictive

When reflecting on the policy initiatives as a whole, there is a sense in which the current emphasis on e-learning is too narrow. Most of the isolated and remote e-learning initiatives took little advantage of the opportunities to widen access to basic government, financial and social services, which may have been lost or never available to these communities. To ensure uptake, arguably, e-learning needs to be embedded within a more comprehensive package of initiatives that allows access to a range of services and addresses issues of social exclusion and access for all. Thus, there is a sound argument for expanding the policy focus beyond e-learning to a wider strategy for e-development.

Engagement with research

Although policy initiatives support research, a notable feature of most e-learning policy is the disconnection with the rich and long tradition of distance education. With the notable exception of some

European countries and one or two Canadian provinces, open and distance education using new technology is presented as a completely new phenomenon. In the context of life-long learning, the European Open and Distance Learning Liaison Committee go so far as to state that it is as if the two movements have been kept separate deliberately. The disconnection with the traditional academic literature on e-learning and open and distance learning suggests a basic confusion and tension between the purpose and perceived value of e-learning within the policy discourse. The key point is that e-learning does not automatically serve the same purpose as distance education and this distinction has not been well articulated in most policy texts.

Maturity of the policy landscape

In comparison to the compulsory schooling sector, the provision of e-learning policy for tertiary education is relatively immature. A notable feature of initiatives in this area is the short shelf life of policy. This point is evidenced by the fact that most policies operate on a two or three-year cycle. While the 10-year timeframe of the latest pan-sector approach in the UK is an exception, it seems that a truncated policy cycle is an outcome of the need to be responsive to the rapid pace of technological change. This leads to a number of problems.

In terms of evaluation, there is reason to suggest that research has not always been acted on or used to inform the next iteration of policy, as the new policy cycle is often already underway by the time findings of any evaluation have been published. Another problem is that while there has been a shift away from infrastructure to a stronger focus on learning in a number of policy texts, infrastructure keeps changing and technological developments continue to shape the nature of e-learning.

Questions of what citizens truly want from e-learning are not addressed in such a short policy cycle. Largely the benefits of e-learning are taken-for-granted and few, if any, cases were found where governments engaged in wide ranging consultation to establish the type of society and education system people might want to create through the use of new digital technology.

Distinction between integrated and standalone policies

A clear distinction exists between integrated and standalone policy initiatives. In the US, the use of ICT is integrated generally in State's Higher Education Plans. In a similar vein, in Canada both Ontario and New Brunswick have consciously integrated e-learning within a wider policy framework. Finland simply has a National Strategy for Education, Research and Training in the Information Society.

The question remains whether the specific challenges and opportunities that e-learning presents will be adequately addressed in this integrated approach. The obvious danger is that e-learning is lost amongst a raft of other policy initiatives and the potential for greater access and quality of tertiary education goes unrealised.

In contrast, Australia and the UK have developed a number of standalone e-learning and flexible learning policies, which focus on quite specific aspects of tertiary education. The issue here is that this standalone focus may be at the expense of developing a comprehensive set of policy initiatives, which ready the tertiary education environment to fully realise the potential of e-learning. Hence, there is increasing recognition of the need to align these e-learning policies with other more general initiatives. Both integrated and standalone approaches offer advantages and disadvantages and it remains unclear whether specific e-learning policies lead to greater access and uptake of tertiary education.

Policy alignment

The lack of policy alignment remains a vexed issue. Where a specific e-learning policy exists there is often little reference to ICT in other policies targeted at the tertiary sector. This point is illustrated in Europe where at the supranational European Union level there have been a number of specific e-learning initiatives. The limited impact of these initiatives on policy at large is evident in the *Action Programme in the Field of Lifelong Learning 2007-2013*. The issue of alignment extends to the relationship between institutional policies in individual tertiary providers as well as foundational policies that define the very essence of the nation-state. This is particularly the case in Scandinavian countries where there is a strong emphasis on the concept of the Information Society. In the case of Norway, the overriding aim is to create an information society for all. Ultimately the whole issue of alignment is neatly encapsulated in the question of whether a country needs an e-learning policy or rather a policy for e-learning.

Distinction between centralised and decentralised policies

Another feature of the policy texts is the distinction between centralised and decentralised policy initiatives. In this respect, England and Scotland have taken different approaches with a far less centralised model of policy development in the latter.

In Australia, policy for the VET sector is quite centralised while universities have continued to operate independently. The Swedish government has established the Netuniversity portal, where 35 tertiary institutions collaborate to offer 2700 courses. Sweden has a long tradition of distance education and a strong commitment to the goal of creating an ‘information society for all’ which makes this initiative far less problematic. BCcampus operates similarly in British Columbia, in service of a more integrated approach to tertiary education, but is in competition with the online offerings of individual institutions. In the case of Asia, the adoption of a centralised approach to e-learning policy is partly reflection of the nature of the respective education systems and the scale of implementation required in some of these large developing nations. No clear advantage for either centralised or decentralised model is yet apparent.

Tension between state, national and supranational policy initiatives

While federal governments have seen the need to develop e-learning policy, a tension exists between central initiatives and those at the local state level, as well those operating across nation-state boundaries on a supranational basis. Canada provides an excellent example of a country where early federal initiatives to develop a pan-Canadian e-learning strategy were overtaken by local provincial government initiatives where responsibility for public education resides. As mentioned in the point above, Australia has a balance of responsibility between federal and state governments but this has not been without its own problems.

Beyond individual nation-states, there is considerable tension between a number of supranational policy initiatives and those that already exist within countries. The best example of this is evident in Europe where despite major e-learning policy initiatives at the European Union (EU) level over a sustained period, there is little or no requirement for individual member states to act on these in their own country.

Economic imperative underpinning e-learning policy

A strong economic imperative is common to many e-learning policy initiatives. As President George Bush states in The California Postsecondary Education Commission Federal Education Update (2004), ‘Education is America’s best tool in building an increasingly competitive global economy’. The economic rationale for investing in e-learning is particularly evident in Australia, Canada, United Kingdom and the European Union (and New Zealand) where the common goal is to create a competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy through the adoption of new digital technologies. While the goals of economic growth and developing a high quality tertiary education system are not mutually exclusive, the *European Open and Distance Learning Liaison Committee* is of the view that the economic discourse has been counterproductive to promoting the wider adoption of e-learning.

Greater emphasis on formal aspects of tertiary education

With some notable exceptions, such as Australia, the vast majority of policy texts appear to focus on formal academic tertiary education, as opposed to post-secondary vocational training and non-formal e-learning experiences. The *European Open and Distance Learning Liaison Committee* shares this view and identifies the focus on formal education as an important weakness of policy. This does not mean that e-learning is not happening in less formal learning contexts. There is evidence to suggest that private training organisations and large multi-national corporations use e-learning regardless of government policy. An emphasis on national e-learning policy may fail to recognise these kinds of private corporations and organisations with reasonably large initiatives in the area of e-learning.

A global education market

Many of the drivers for e-learning are linked to the forces of neo-liberalism and globalisation, and the move to create a global education market. This is illustrated by Ontario’s policy response to e-learning and tertiary education in general. Although Governments have policy choices, the ability of individual nation-states to establish local policies that protect cultural heritage, strengthen national identity, and build social cohesion is increasing problematic within a global policiescape. More discussion is required around the distinction between globalisation and the internationalisation of tertiary education.

Lack of debate and critical dialogue

Finally, the lack of debate and critical dialogue on the risks of the investment in e-learning is a consistent theme across the policy texts. The value of e-learning is rarely questioned and the discourse is removed from any deeper consideration of educational policy. The missing question in the policy discourse is: What kind of education do we want e-learning to help deliver? With notable Scandinavian exceptions, there is rarely any consideration of what type of widely accessible tertiary education system a country might want to create. Most of the policy texts do not explain 'why' an investment in e-learning will help to meet the commonly agreed goals of education—such as equity, fairness and social justice.

Conclusion

This paper has provided an overview of the findings of a policy analysis of seven areas of the world in which there have been varied approaches to the development and implementation of e-learning policy within the tertiary sector. A pattern to the policy development cycle was outlined along with lessons from specific e-learning initiatives which have targeted small and remote communities. The final section draws together some of the bigger picture issues for policy-makers and the wider e-learning academic and practitioner community to discuss as governments and institutions embark on further policy development.

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