

## Heads of e-Learning (HeLF) Response to the JISC Study of Environments to Support e-Learning in UK Further and Higher Education

This response has been compiled by a subgroup of the Heads of E-Learning on behalf of HeLF.

### General Questions

In responding to this group of questions please do so from the perspective of the professional organisation that you represent.

<b>G1. How useful is this survey to you and your organisation?</b>
In principle this kind of survey should be useful and of benefit to HeLF and its members. However some of the questions do not always give useful answers. We appreciate that it is hard to write questions that produce non-controversial results or results that are not open to different interpretations even within the same institution. We do think studies of this nature are of value and could potentially be useful for HeLF members to illustrate the development of e-learning at a national level to senior management.
<b>G2. Would you like to see future similar surveys?</b>
Yes, the fact that this is a longitudinal study is useful and important as trends can be spotted and inconsistencies in answers can be reduced over time. These surveys are of benefit to HeLF members. However, we are concerned that changing the questions between years can affect the validity of the longitudinal study, although we appreciate that if questions are found to not be valid they should be changed and new developments may occur, such as e-portfolios. Some brief notes around what kind of information the question is trying to extract would be helpful to avoid misunderstandings.
<b>G3. Is the survey:</b> <b>G3.1 Too long or too short?</b>
We don't think that the survey is too long, however, we noted that the response rate was much lower for both HE and FE institutions in 2005. It could be that the survey was not sent to the right people – see below in our response to question G3.4. Were institutions followed up and encouraged to respond in 2005 as they were in 2003? We would suggest that more effort is devoted to encouraging response, such as follow-up telephone calls, and potentially hand-holding people through answering the questions so that interpretations are consistent. This would also ensure the right person is answering the questionnaire. Institutions should be encouraged to return the questionnaire even if they have not been able to complete the whole questionnaire.
<b>G3.2 How could it be improved?</b>
We are concerned that institutional responses this time were lower in 2005 than in 2003. We think that splitting the survey into pedagogic aspects and management/administration aspects would potentially increase the uptake. Also there were complexities about having a key which was sent out on paper in order to complete the online version. This may have prevented people completing the form.
<b>G3.3 Are the questions appropriate?</b>
There is some evidence that some of the questions have been interpreted inconsistently across and within institutions. We do think that generally the questions are appropriate and do cover a variety of issues. However, this issue of interpretation of results has affected the data for example the responses to 4.9 and 4.10. The answers to 4.10 do not tie up to the responses to 4.9. This seems to be due to an issue of interpretation both in terms of the question and the presentation of results. The questions need to be short and simple and not full of subtleties that could be open to interpretation. In addition, responses to question 4.10 do not indicate scale; there is no indication whether all these activities take place within one course or across the institution. This does not give any feel for the real proportional use.
<b>G3.4 Who should complete the survey within an institution?</b>

The Head of e-Learning or equivalent in HE. The survey should be directed to the Head of e-Learning in the first instance. We think that a more consistent response will be received from HeLF members and HeLF members could support the completion of the survey by encouraging members of respond. In FE, JISC would need to find equivalent roles that could complete the survey. There could have been issues about who the questionnaire was sent to in terms of encouraging response rates. Was the questionnaire sent to the 'right' person and if not did it get to the person who knew what was going on? Some of the answers imply that people with less understanding of their institution's e-learning provision actually answered the questions in a rather aspirational or hopeful manner rather than an accurate response. A table of who completed the survey would be extremely beneficial.

**G3.5 What is the most useful aspect of the survey and why?**

The fact that the survey is longitudinal enabling us to get a picture of how the situation is developing and changing over time.

**G3.6 What is the least useful aspect of the survey and why?**

There are not any major criticisms, other than those mentioned, however, the way the data is presented in this document needs better instructions on interpretation. We found it very confusing to use when we were trying to compile this response. It would be helpful if these questions could relate clearly back to sections or questions in the report.

**G4. Is the manner in which the data is presented helpful?**

- We recommend that the full question is presented in the results otherwise it is not clear on which basis respondents were answering the question and how they were interpretation it. For example, the way that the results are presented for question 4.9 are confusing and unhelpful.
- There is no executive summary which would be extremely helpful in presenting this data to senior management. We would recommend that an executive summary and commentary on the results are given.
- The tables do not always present data in the same format and the notes are not clear. Notes on how the tables present the information should be written in clear English without using jargon. In its current format the tables are difficult to understand.
- The responses in section 2 are not numbered – we need to be able to cross reference all the questions and tables. Full questions should be included in the report for all questions rather than requiring the reader to refer to the appendices.
- The word document and pdf have different page numbers which makes it very confusing to reference, this needs to be rectified.
- Student numbers need to be given for question 4.10 in order to give meaningful results.

**G5. In a number of areas the survey reveals a significant gap between reality and aspiration – what should be done to address this situation?**

There is a problem with this question (G5) as some questions in the survey in section 2 directly require respondents to cite their aspirations and provide more 'hopeful' answers. However, this does indicate a difference between section 2 and other sections. Ensuring that the HeLF member or equivalent answer the questionnaire or are responsible for co-ordinating a response should ensure that the answers are more consistent across the piece.

**G6. What, if anything, concerns you about the findings in the report?**

We are not convinced that the answers to 3.4 are accurate, particularly the responses around the impact of professional bodies. The answers to 3.1 around strategies and lack of them are also an area of concern.

**G7. Are there any specific areas that should be included in future surveys?**

- In terms of structure, if you are encouraged to respond to aspirational questions first, then you get into an aspirational mindset and the temptation is to make the responses to further questions on the current situation less realistic. We would recommend that the aspirational questions are moved to the end of the survey in a separate section and not ask respondents to compare reality with aspiration in the same section.
- We would recommend that the sections are divided more clearly into pedagogic, management, infrastructure, administration areas which would assist with responses and ensure the correct people respond to the questionnaire.
- Including the option for respondents to give examples of how they use e-learning in particular ways, for example in 4.10, would be extremely helpful and could provide data for future case studies etc. This would be more useful than knowing the percentages.
- There should be a question on whether or not people have an institutional, centrally supported VLE, rather than just finding out which VLEs are being used in 4.2.
- The inclusion of questions relating to e-learning policy, or changing the questions on strategy to include policy related issues would be important.

### Specific Questions

<b>Section 1: E-learning development</b>
<b>S1.1 There appears to be a move towards functional centralisation models within institutions, for example IT services, and pedagogic support. Is this a sign of development in the use of e-learning?</b>
We are not clear what this question (S1.1) means by 'centralisation models within institutions'. We are presuming this question (S1.1) is based on the responses to 1.1. In this case, we do not agree that the opinion cited in this question (S1.1) is supported. The evidence does not appear to support this view.
<b>S1.2 In post 92 institutions is there a move towards a public/private ownership model?</b>
We think that public/private refers to central/local support in relation to the responses detailed in the table for question 1.1. We think there appears to be a shift to central control with local enrolment in post '92 institutions but we cannot comment on whether this as a trend or why it might be the case and it would depend on who completed the survey
<b>S1.3 The availability of funding appears to be most significant driver overall – would you agree with this statement in general?</b>
We do not agree with this statement, the availability of funding seems to be around the second or third supporting factor but there is no evidence that it is a driver. The key driver is enhancing student learning.
<b>S1.4 More students appear to be being consulted about e-learning developments – is this true from your experience? What lessons are institutions learning from these student consultations?</b>
We are assuming that this question (S1.4) is based on 1.7. Consultation should not be confused with course monitoring and evaluation. The latter has certainly become a more important factor but student consultation, although taking place more often, is not often the primary focus. It is true that we evaluate the student experience but we do not agree that students are massively consulted.
<b>S1.5 Some respondents indicated that they had plans for inter-institutional collaboration. Are institutions more willing to collaborate and have the JISC and funding council initiatives had any bearing on this change?</b>

We assume that this question is based on the response to 1.11. If the JISC and other organisations are offering money for collaboration then yes institutions will collaborate. Collaboration highlights problems with institutional processes which are then often dealt with internally; however, institutions do not generally collaborate to overcome barriers. We have some problems with the assumptions stated in this question 1.11. We think that the situation has moved on since this question was first written.

## **Section 2: E-learning environments – current and future developments**

S2. The following trends have been drawn from the responses. How would you rank these priority areas for now and in the future? What would you say are realistic timescales for achieving them across say 80% of the sector?

With the exception of questions around pdps and accessibility which are legislative requirements the prioritisation and development will depend on the strategy of the institution which will vary vastly. We cannot comment on this across the sector. We also think that this section is primarily concerned with administration and it should be noted that the trends that have been pulled out are all concerned with e-administration.

- **Online enrolment** continues to grow

\*\*\*We would agree with this trend

- Institutions aspire to have a **single sign-on** to access resources

\*\*\*The question has not been phrased to specifically ask about single sign-on; the phrasing of the question actually refers to common sign-on. We refute this trend in the way it is presented in the survey results. However, based on our own anecdotal evidence we would agree that this is a trend.

- Increasing move towards **personalised access** to resources

\*\*\*We would agree with this trend

- Continuing desire to make **course descriptions** available from a single entry point

\*\*\*We would agree with this trend

- Many HE institutions aspire to have **module selection** online

\*\*\*We would agree with this trend but we suspect that the question has been misinterpreted.

- Overall trend to provide more **integrated student access to library and learning resources** with online support

\*\*\*We would agree with this trend

- HE institutions aspire to **students updating personal administrative data** online

\*\*\*We would agree with this trend

- Currently **fee paying** is predominately manual

\*\*\*We would agree with this trend

- It has become more usual for some **systems to support a wide range of access needs** and aspirations in this area remain modest

\*\*\*We would agree with this trend however we are rather concerned about the apparent lack of compliance in this area.

- Staff access to **course administration** appears to be decreasing

\*\*\*\*We do not accept this trend and think that this statement is misleading.

- Largely FE interest in **student tracking** with some increase in online data collection

\*\*\*\*This is not an issue. As we understand it FE colleges have to track student data to receive

funding. HEIs track students in different ways and have different requirements.

- **Computer aided assessment** is available but not integrated with other systems

\*\*\*We would agree with this trend

- Institutions are generally aiming to have **assessment results** updated automatically

\*\*\*We would agree with this trend

- The responses to **staff access to institutional management information** appear to indicate a decline in aspirations for full data access and more modest access to some information

\*\*\*We think that this is because the wording of the questions have changed and note that the change of wording is inaccurately referenced in the report on page 35. The originally question refers to 'institutional papers'.

- **PDP, e-portfolios and transcripts** are increasingly significant areas of development for institutions

\*\*\*Yes, of course this is true, due to HEFCE requirements.

- Many respondents aim to provide online updating and discussion facilities to support the **curriculum development process**

\*\*\*\*We refute this trend and would like to make an observation that there is a perception that the right hand column in the questionnaire is seen as the 'right' answer and therefore respondents automatically chose this. This makes the aspiration column of limited value. The answers to this question seem to indicate that this is the case.

- Currently nearly half of all respondents have viewable **online schedules** and have modest aspirations to move to online personal diaries

\*\*\*The results do not give enough information about the question – the results do not show the full information about the question. The way the results are presented are problematic because timetables/schedules/calendars are not all the same and potentially different from personal diaries. We have some problems with the question and 'trend' here.

### ***Section 3: Future development of processes to support e-learning***

#### **S3.1 Is the apparent increase in strategies to support e-learning a reflection of funding body requirements or something else?**

No, it is not currently a funding body requirement to develop e-learning strategies. It is 'something else', probably learning and teaching strategies.

#### **S3.2 Is the implementation of a VLE in an institution managed differently from the implementation of e-learning?**

We do not think this is a valid question. E-learning encompasses VLEs but VLEs are not the only use of e-learning.

#### **S3.3 There is some reported increase in the number of institutions who use an e-learning strategy to support the development of processes for e-learning but there appears to be a much higher increase in those who use a teaching and learning strategy and/or a library/learning resources strategy. Does this reflect embedding of e-learning within institutional strategies, the change in the survey question or something else?**

This reflects the embedding of learning and teaching strategies in institutions which has been the result of funding requirements and although e-learning maybe embedded in strategies it does not imply embedding in practice.

#### **S3.4 Strategies from professional bodies or agencies appear to be the most significant source of external information used to support institutional e-learning development. What comments do you have, particularly in relation to the reported use of national**

<b>strategies?</b>
We are assuming that 'agencies' does not mean JISC and DfES, as these are identified separately in the survey. We are puzzled by the results here as we do not know which professional bodies stipulate the production of e-learning strategies or developments. We think that these results may be due to a problem with respondents interpreting the question incorrectly and reading 'professional bodies/agencies' to mean JISC and DfES.
<b>S3.5 In terms of barriers to development in support of e-learning, lack of time scored most highly and institutional culture was in the top six. How might the latter be addressed?</b>
You need to change institutional policies and processes in cohort with appropriate staff development in order to enable cultural change to stick. Each institution, though, will have different solutions to manage change although this will be dependent on changing policies and procedures. We think that all these barriers to development are extremely important, with the exception of a 'lack of academic staff development' which we think is not true as the majority of institutions we think are promoting staff development in the area of e-learning.
<b>Section 4: Virtual Learning Environments</b>
<b>S4.1 In this section, are there any particularly noteworthy trends or changes for the FE sector?</b>
As HeLF does not have FE members we do not feel qualified to answer this question. However, we do think that joined up support is needed between FE and HE in the area of foundation degrees.
<b>S4.2 In-house VLE and intranet developments appear to be the most common type of VLE in use. Does this indicate a desire within institutions for greater control and flexibility of VLEs compared with what is available from commercial vendors?</b>
We would refute this statement from the results presented. WebCT and Blackboard are the most prevalent VLEs. The real import of the figures in this question is obscured by the fact that the question did not ask if there was an institutional 'lead' VLE. There is not the evidence here to respond to this interpretation relating to the desire of institutions stated in S4.2 above.
<b>S4.3 Although there appears to be some increase in the number of staff and students using VLEs, the figures reported are quite low. However, the results also show that two thirds of modules of study being web supplemented which would seem to indicate that the 'stuff your notes into your VLE' model is prevalent and increasing. Does this apparent contradiction highlight that there is not a shared understanding of 'e-learning'?</b>
We are not convinced that the figures indicate that the numbers of staff and student usage are quite low, we would like to know why this conclusion has been drawn. We think that the interpretation is not valid from the data given. We would need to know the size of the institutions to ascertain whether this figure was low. In terms of the second statement about the 'stuff[ing] your notes into your VLE' model we think that it is probably unhelpful to use a pejorative term here. We would actually like to know more about interaction and whether this model is used as a threshold to encourage staff and students to engage with e-learning as part of a plan to increase more interaction and engagement in the future. In some senses there is not any problem with the 'stuff your notes into your VLE' model if it serves a specific purpose for students and staff. It can be valid to use the VLE in this manner as long as an institution is clear about what it is doing and it meets the learning outcomes. Finally, yes we would agree that there is not a shared understanding of 'e-learning'.
<b>S4.4 The needs of off campus/distant learners have been shown to be different from blended learners. However, the low numbers in the survey responses indicate a lack of awareness in institutions for these groups. What comments do you have?</b>
The needs of the learners are the same but how you satisfy them is different. We think that this is a more positive approach to this issue. We think that there may have been variance in the way that people interpreted this question and how they answered it. The responses here

may indicate a problem but this involves further investigation. The question does not indicate what to do if you do not have any distance learners, for example how would FE institutions respond to this question in the survey? From the way the question is phrased in the survey and the responses given, the conclusion that there is a lack of awareness in institutions of these groups cannot be drawn. To be more valid this survey question should look at the whole range of support issues offered to these groups of students not just VLE support.

**S4.5 The use of mobile technologies to connect to a VLE appears quite high in post '92 institutions. What significance, if any, does this have?**

We think that purely the issue of connectivity is of limited interest, it is what people do when they connect and how they are supported. We are also rather concerned about the responses here as there is no scale indicated so there is not any sense of whether this is occurring across the institution. The results could be influenced by library usage too. We conclude that the results are of limited use here as we do not know the scope or nature of the activity.

**Section 5: Portals**

**S5. There appears to be a significant decrease in the involvement of library/learning resource centres in the development of an institutional portal. Why is this?**

We think that the inclusion of 'e-learning team' as one of the options to select this may account for the reductions of library involvement although in many institutions e-learning is part of the library.

**Are there any other comments you would like to make?**

Overall we think that facilitating this survey is a good thing. We would like JISC to continue to do this. Could the new set of questions be carefully constructed and build on the experiences of this survey? We have only had time to go through this with the questions that this consultation has asked but there may be other issues we have missed. The consultation documentation appears to have been rushed and contains misinterpretations of the questions and the results, as well as inappropriate use of some of the terminology. It needs to be cross-referenced fully with the document so that these questions can be related back to the responses.

**Some general recommendations:**

1. We would recommend that JISC continues to sponsor longitudinal studies
2. We would like to see more follow-up and chasing of institutions to respond to such studies so they are of greater value. HeLF could play a role here in encouraging members to respond. However, JISC should provide support for individuals in completing and interpreting the questionnaire.
3. Brief notes and definitions about the context of the sections and questions would be helpful to assist a consistent response.
4. We would strongly recommend that the questionnaire is sent directly to the Head of e-Learning or equivalent in each HEI.
5. We have concerns about the validity of the aspirational responses and the way that these questions have been structured. Any review of the questionnaire overall should consider this.
6. We suggest that although the questions are kept similar in each iteration of the survey that JISC revise the current questions in the light of this consultation exercise
7. The consultation document needs improvement, particularly in relation to cross-referencing. We only had time to look at certain questions and further consultation

could be valuable on the remaining questions.

8. The data needs to be consistently presented, with an executive summary and with the full questions presented in the report text. The Word and PDF versions need to be standardised to enable easy reference.
9. Understanding who has completed the questionnaire, the size of the student and staff body and other institutional information would be helpful in interpreting the results.
10. Including the opportunity for examples to be entered in text format could provide a useful source of case study and other data.
11. The questionnaire should be divided into sections on pedagogy; e-administration; management and so on.
12. Questions on which VLEs are used in institutions should indicate whether institutions have a central VLE and what percentage of the institution uses this.
13. We would strongly recommend that the next longitudinal study is run jointly between UCISA and JISC