Research Report

Global Picture, Local Lessons:
E-learning Policy and Accessibility

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INTRODUCTION An integrated pan-sector e-learning strategy is being developed by the New Zealand government through the Ministry of Education. An integral part of that strategy will be the development of a Tertiary E-learning Framework that focuses on enhancing accessibility, increasing relevance, and ensuring high-quality learning outcomes within the tertiary sector. In order to inform this strategy, the Ministry of Education is currently administering the second round of the Tertiary e-Learning Research Fund (TeLRF). The research fund was established to support and encourage rigorous research into tertiary e-learning in the New Zealand context. The Ministry of Education is funding e-learning research which will establish both the current context and future impact of e-learning in the tertiary sector.

To gain a thorough understanding of e-learning in the tertiary sector there is a need to look to other nations. Throughout the world, countries are at various stages of e-learning policy formation and implementation. Learning from the policy directions and processes of other countries will enhance the New Zealand experience. The Ministry of Education is interested in what other countries have done with regard to government policy and accessibility to e-learning, the policies that have been put in place, the outcomes that followed, and the lessons that can be learned from their experiences. They are also interested in government-funded infrastructure provided to support accessibility to learning in small and remote communities. This focus on policy and accessibility forms an integral part of the TeLRF project being undertaken by a research team at Massey University.

THE PROJECT The TeLRF project, *Global Picture, Local Lessons: E-learning Policy and Accessibility*, considers the e-learning policy experiences of a number of countries. These experiences are being used to identify consistent themes and tensions that run through the policy implementation process and to relate identifiable outcomes to policy measures.

This research provides an opportunity to advance knowledge of e-learning in the tertiary sector. An appreciation of policy initiatives in other contexts and the outcomes of those policies can lead to understanding of good practice

and provide a framework for the development of strategic vision at institutional and national levels.

The area of policy requires 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. The area of accessibility involves 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.

The focus in both areas of the project includes Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom; it also considers the experiences of some European Union states, federal and state policy in the United States, and the more developed Asian nations. The project looks towards national and state systems that have similarity to the New Zealand context, although the project team realise that experiences from different contexts can provide insights that might otherwise be overlooked.

PROCESS AND PROGRESS

The project had three distinct phases. The first phase involved the development and validation of a data extraction template for the policy aspect of the project. This was to ensure consistent retrieval of descriptive and contextual information across the research team. This template was then used to undertake documentary analysis of policy documents in the next phase.

This second phase involved a Web- and literature-based search for a range of national and supra-national policy and strategy documents, background and discussion papers, and evaluation reports relevant to e-learning in the tertiary education sector. For each policy document, one member of the research team analysed it using the prescribed template, a second team member conducted a peer review of that analysis, and where necessary a moderator was used to resolve disagreement. On the basis of the analysis of documents, a brief report was written for each of seven areas. Those areas are Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, United States, Japan and South Korea, the Scandinavian countries of Europe, and the European Union. The reports were then submitted to external consultants—internationally regarded e-learning researchers and practitioners—from each area, for review and validation.

The analysis focused strongly on two strands of the three identified by Jupp and Norris (1993). These strands focus respectively on: first, the overt and explicit aspects of documents, allowing the identification of themes or even specified phrases or words as a useful way of highlighting inclusions and omissions; and, second, the policy context through examination of a range of documents apart from the policy itself to include features that may not be explicit in the policy documents themselves. Analysis of policy outcomes will arise from the synthesis of extant official reports and statistical data and from published academic reports and evaluative studies.

The final phase of the research involved the development of a section of the report on accessibility to e-learning in small and remote communities. Analysis of official documents again played an important role in this aspect of the project.

However, that phase of the research also sought the experiences of at most three such communities to be written up as case studies to illustrate the outcomes of such government funding and to support the document analysis.

The findings of the phase-two documentary analysis were reported in the first milestone report to the Ministry of Education in December last year.

HIGHLIGHTS TO DATE From the first and second phases of the research a number of themes developed across the countries in the study. It appears there is a dichotomy in how e-learning is perceived and planned for across the nations. In some countries, policy focuses solely on e-learning, while other countries are trying to embed e-learning in overarching tertiary sector policies or pan-sector learning policies. An example of this is Canada, where there has been a failed pan-Canadian e-learning strategy, Saskatchewan has developed and implemented a Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) action plan, and Ontario and New Brunswick have returned to a focus on core features of education placing e-learning alongside other methods of learning.

There is a change in emphasis noted from "supply side" policy to "demand side." Previously governments were involved in developing policies that made e-learning accessible through the provision of infrastructure and support services. This was no guarantee that e-learning would be used by institutions. We are now seeing a move towards development of policies that are focused increasingly on learners rather than solely on infrastructure. For example, the United Kingdom's e-strategy for learning, Harnessing Technology, attempts to personalize education for learners through the use of digital and interactive technologies. The strategic objectives of the policy make these transformations evident. In British Columbia, the rollout of broadband with the Net Work BC project has been accompanied by the focus on increasing student enrolment in online courses through BCCampus.

The rapid pace of technological change was another theme that reoccurred across the countries in the study. This rapid change requires continual updating of policy, with some countries in the research even developing new policies on an annual basis. This rapid change also sees policies needing to be aligned and realigned with broader teaching and learning policy aims. The separate area reviews have also shown that tensions between various levels of governance can exist as institutions, nations, and supra-national organisations each attempt to pursue their own agendas for e-learning.

At a most basic level most countries lacked consistent terminology used across the documents reviewed, and there was often a lack of an agreed-upon definition for the terms that were used.

Work on phases two and three of this project, *Global Picture, Local Lessons: E-learning Policy and Accessibility*, continues until the middle of 2006.

REFERENCES

Jupp, V., & Norris, C. (1993). Traditions in documentary analysis. In M. Hammersley (Ed.), *Social research: Philosophy, politics, and practice.* London: Sage.

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College of Education. Prior to working in teacher education she was a primary teacher, a specialist ICT teacher, and an ICT consultant to schools. Murray now teaches in the area of Educational Technologies at the pre-service level. Her current research interests centre around teachers' work and how teachers perceive and use new technologies. She is part of the research team undertaking the TeLRF study on e-learning policy and accessibility.