Chapter 22

Computer Mediated Communication in Universities and Further Education Establishments: A Comparison of Use and Utility

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INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates the use of computer mediated communication (CMC) in colleges of further and higher education in the UK. Analysis is carried out by institutional type as preliminary investigation shows there are considerable differences between universities and colleges in terms of email usage.

A total of 30 institutions replied to the survey: 14 Universities and 16 Colleges, some by email, others by post. This percentage is approximately 6.5% of all universities in the UK and 7% of all colleges. Whilst not a large percentage in total the results were so consistent across the sectors’ replies that they can be considered sufficiently representative of their sector. The study focuses on the use of email in support of the communication process and offers insights into the range of practice involved.
The study was undertaken as the result of a number of questions that arose from a practical experience of the differences in use of email in universities and colleges: this practical experience is detailed in Willis and Coakes (2000). The questions that the study described here set out to answer were

- Why do people use email?
- Is email used consistently, to the same degree of penetration, across the higher and further education sectors?
- Is email used by staff to hide from students or other members of staff?
- What is the level of confidence in email as a medium for secure exchange of information?
- Can the use of email be improved?

Survey results were analysed to discover similarities and differences between the two types of institutions, and this analysis of the data led to a series of “Best Practice Guidelines” designed to minimise the problems encountered by the different institutions.

A BRIEF DISCUSSION OF UK HIGHER AND FURTHER EDUCATION ESTABLISHMENTS

In the UK, tertiary education is divided into 2 major sectors—higher and further education. Generally speaking, higher education facilities are known as universities or higher education colleges. Further education is carried out only by specified further education colleges.

The situation is complicated, and this paper cannot hope to convey all the nuances of what constitutes higher and further education, but in general most universities concentrate on providing undergraduate degree-level education and above, as well as higher professional education that requires a degree for entrance purposes. Higher education colleges perform a mixture of educational tasks, but concentrate on post-age 18 education. Thus, some students will be studying at undergraduate degree and above, whilst most will be studying two-year vocational qualifications similar to the US associate degree. Further education colleges rarely have students studying at degree level but may do so under the auspices of a university who franchises or, more unusually, validates them to perform this work. Some students will be studying at post-age 18 level, but many will be completing their 16-18-year-old qualifications as an alternative to continuing at secondary school.

The universities and colleges are funded separately by different governmental bodies and have a different allocation of money per student. This obviously reflects on the facilities they can supply and the conditions under which they work. This difference may explain some of the replies to our survey.
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