Chapter VII

Staff Perspectives on ILT: Findings from a National Evaluation of the Learning and Skills Sector

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Abstract

This chapter examines staff perceptions of information and learning technology (ILT) in the UK learning and skills sector. It is divided into two sections dealing in turn with pedagogical and cultural issues. The section on pedagogical issues explores the use of the VLE/intranet as an alternative teaching method, and asks why these modes of learning are comparatively rare in the learning and skills sector. This section is also concerned with perceptions of the impact of ILT on students’ retention and attainment and explores the concept of variable use and variable impact by level and subject area. The cultural and infrastructure issues explored in the second section relate to staff development and training opportunities (such as the number and type of courses offered), the additional help requested, and the barriers to further uptake.
Introduction

This chapter sets out some of the findings from a two year evaluation of the impact of ILT investment on the learning and skills sector colleges in the UK on behalf of the National Learning Network (NLN). The NLN evaluation final report The Developing Impact of ILT found that the majority of staff in further education and adult continuing education colleges were enthusiastic about the use of technology for teaching and learning, but that there was under-utilisation of the potential of technology. This chapter takes a broader and more contextualised look at some of the NLN data with the emphasis on the perspectives of teaching and support staff in the sector.

Background

The UK lifelong learning sector is quite diverse in nature, and includes: predominantly academic colleges (known as Sixth Form Colleges); general further education colleges offering a mix of academic and vocational qualifications and which can be either urban, multi-sited colleges of over 20,000 students, or small rural colleges; and colleges that are specifically vocationally inclined, such as land-based agricultural colleges. In addition, some FE colleges (FECs) and the adult and continuing education (ACE) colleges offer non-accredited short courses and leisure courses. There also are a number of specialist colleges for the education of disabled or visually impaired students, although none of these were included in this research.

When we look at the educational levels and age ranges that are generally taught in the sector, the picture is even more complex. Traditionally, the main business of this sector was to provide post-compulsory qualifications such as A levels for higher education or labour market entry, and higher national certificates and diplomas (HNCs and HNDs) and other vocational qualifications directly relevant to industry. FE is still involved with this provision, categorised as Level 3 (A levels) and Level 4 (HNCs and HNDs), although the majority of the studies undertaken in FE are at foundation and Levels 1 and 2. FE colleges also deliver approximately 13% of all higher education (Level 4) courses in England and Wales (Hyland & Merrill, 2003). Almost two-thirds (58.3%) of studies undertaken at FE colleges are at Levels 1 and 2, and only 21.7% of FE students are taking the A level route into higher education between the ages of 16 and 18 (although a high proportion undertake these at academic sixth form colleges). This is reflected by analysis of the age of students: Only 19.5% of students are 18 or below, while 72.3% are aged between 19 and 59 (Learning and Skills Council, 2003b).

The National Learning Network

The NLN was a de-facto funding agency established by the UK government in 1999 to disburse invested in ILT with the aim of bringing the infrastructure of learning and skills sector colleges (FECs and ACE colleges) into line with the traditionally better funded schools’ sector and higher education. The first phase of the NLN programme oversaw
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