

Republic of Ireland

Brian Mulligan

Institute of Technology Sligo, Ireland

There is a major contrast in the Republic of Ireland between e-learning content production and the actual use of e-learning technologies. Per head of population, Ireland has one of the highest participation rates in e-learning content production in the world. CBT Systems was set up in Ireland in the mid-80s, and subsequently evolved into SmartForce and later SkillSoft. The original founders of CBT Systems later went on to set up other e-learning ventures such as Riverdeep. In addition to these well-known companies, there are many smaller content-development ventures that either trade under their own names or contract to larger e-learning content providers. There has been some investment in content-development operations by overseas companies. NETg recently closed a major operation in Ireland as part of a restructuring process after their acquisition by Thomson. However, several international corporations have located internal e-learning content development in Ireland. Indeed, Ireland's industrial development agencies have identified e-learning content development as a growth opportunity, listing availability of software and pedagogy skills as well as excellent international broadband connections as competitive advantages for such investment (<http://www.enterprise-ireland.com/> or <http://www.idaireland.com/>).

In contrast, the use of e-learning in both private and public education and training is not so well developed. The recent survey of Irish industry carried out by the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development in Ireland (<http://www.cipd.ie>) has shown both the use of, and satisfaction with, e-learning to be low. Further and higher education,

which is almost exclusively publicly funded, has had no significant investment in the improvement of teaching and learning through the use of e-learning technologies. One exception to this may be the national training authority (<http://www.fas.ie>), which has used CBL technologies since the mid-80s and now has a number of online offerings (<http://www.fasnet.ie>). Apart from this, many institutions have made excellent use of research funding available through existing European Union initiatives for research projects that have had a direct impact on teaching and learning.

At the compulsory education levels (primary and secondary, K-12), some investment has been made in the National Centre for Technology in Education (<http://www.ntce.ie>) as a central coordinating centre. However, there has been limited investment in IT hardware and software in schools, and universal broadband access has only been recently announced (June 2004).

Ireland could be described as moderately ready for e-learning. It has a relatively young and well-educated population that is well disposed toward technology. However, Internet penetration is relatively low, by the standards of the developed economies, and broadband access is only beginning to take off due to price cuts and competition (mid-2004).

The main forum for the interaction between individuals interested in the application of information technology to teaching and learning in Ireland is the Irish Learning Technology Association. This association hosts an annual users' conference, which also acts as a forum for researchers (<http://www.ilta.net>).

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