

The OLTF therefore invites comments about the issues discussed in this paper, including examples of successful strategies for developing online learning (whether for use on campus or at distance).

The University of Oxford welcomes the early work of the Task Force. In light of the issues discussed in the update we are happy to share our views and experience of online learning. We believe that a proper evaluation of online learning in which the sector can have faith takes effort, and we are willing to sign up to that effort. We appreciate that a proper understanding of online learning involves the evaluation of a broad range of factors and input from a range of institutions across the HE sector. We do not underestimate the challenges associated with the task.

Oxford recognises the importance of online learning. The University's Education Committee offers guidance and policy to its departments, divisions and colleges on flexible and distributed learning (FDL), which at Oxford largely covers programmes delivered using a large component of distance learning and/or online learning. It draws on the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*. This guidance has been drawn up in consultation with the Technology-Assisted Lifelong Learning group (TALL) in the Department for Continuing Education, the Learning Technologies Group (LTG) in Oxford University Computing Services and the Disability Office.

The majority of programmes awarded by Oxford are still predominantly taught and/or supervised face to face at the University by academic staff. Online learning is used to enhance that face-to-face provision; thus, the institutional VLE – WebLearn – and other virtual learning platforms such as college and departmental websites and iTunesU are now an important feature of our residential undergraduate and postgraduate courses. In this way flexible electronic provision of learning is provided and developed to support the traditional Oxford teaching model.

The University has a longstanding commitment to informal and lifelong learning. The Department for Continuing Education is the main provider of courses that contain a significant e-learning and/or distance learning element. These include award-bearing courses at postgraduate level, as well as a growing number of short online courses at level 4. As a pioneer of the university extension movement, the University of Oxford continues to develop high-quality and high-value open educational materials, freely available podcasts and open-source educational tools, and is one of the largest providers of short and part-time courses in the UK. As with other providers of similar courses, we have been subject to cuts following the withdrawal of HEFCE ELQ funding.

What are the motivators behind your strategy and what are barriers and enablers that the OLTF should understand and try to address?

The provision of online and distance learning presents potential risks for students and the University because part of the learning takes place away from the home institution, and may involve an external partner. The University's guidance aims to help manage these risks so that Oxford may widen learning opportunities in line with its academic strategy, but without prejudice either to the academic standard of its awards or to the quality of provision to students. The University of Oxford has an established and globally recognised brand of quality and our pedagogical approach to online and distance learning is designed to support that brand, drawing heavily on models for small-group, personalised learning experiences with low student:tutor ratios and opportunities for students to

enquire, explore and research within a rich set of materials. Academic colleagues involved in the tutoring of distance courses in the Department for Continuing Education are offered tailored support and training by that department. Colleagues who use online tools as part of their on-site and blended provision are supported by central staff development and learning technologies groups. Reward and recognition structures for good pedagogy and the design of learning in new modes exist within the institution, but further development of these, in line with improved metrics to measure and monitor teaching, may follow in the future.

The University's museums and libraries offer free online access to parts of their collections, and academic colleagues use popular informal learning platforms (e.g. iTunesU and YouTube) to disseminate their work. The University increasingly engages with new audiences of informal learners through the internet and new media. It has entered into mutually beneficial collaborations with other globally recognised private sector organisations, including Apple and Google, for high-profile digitisation and open access projects. The increased 'reach' offered by these collaborations has been clearly seen. For example, Oxford's iTunesU site attracted more than two million downloads within its first year. This number increases steadily, and new materials are added every day. This provides evidence both that Oxford's online learning represents a known entity of known quality within the rich range of distance learning provision available to international learners from institutions across the UK, and that it plays an important role in maintaining the UK HE brand. To date, our online courses have included participants from more than 70 countries, reflecting the international profile of the institution and the diversity of our students and staff.

What organisational structures and collaborations do you see as most successful in facilitating the successful development and delivery of online learning?

The University of Oxford partners with similar and peer institutions for certain aspects of the delivery and development of online learning. Institutional innovation and infrastructure projects funded by JISC enable us to develop our technical capacity, with the Department for Continuing Education, Learning Technologies Group and university libraries making extensive use of JISC's advisory and support services. Collaboration with international partners in the Sakai Foundation ensures that we have flexible and standards-compliant e-learning tools for research-based teaching. As an institution we are pleased to have been invited to contribute to national initiatives for the creation of digital and open materials. We would welcome the opportunity to provide further feedback to JISC. We find that support and co-ordination of activities and advice at national level is valued and is successful in facilitating work in this area.

How can universities and colleges create and develop appropriate cultures to ensure that online learning thrives within an institution?

Activities that align the use of technology to the institutional mission and culture have been seen to be successful in gaining support from academic colleagues at Oxford. The nature of knowledge creation and dissemination work at this research-led institution ensures that use of the full range of media channels is part of our teaching and publication processes.

We believe it is important to recognise that open, blended, flexible, distance and face-to-face provision can all include aspects of online learning, and that the skills and knowledge required for effective pedagogy in these modes are increasingly part of academic practice. We look forward to contributing to the development of professional accreditation and support programmes within institutions that recognise this. Equally, pockets of excellence in specialist complex areas such as the design and delivery of high-quality distance-learning courses should be recognised and supported.

While we believe that the UK needs a strong online distance-learning presence with critical mass across a number of HEIs, we are firmly of the view that diversity within the UK sector is one of its distinguishing features. Where distinctive cultures and missions exist within distinct institutions, they should be respected and celebrated as part of the rich tapestry of UK HE. We also believe that it is important that the character of the UK HE sector is properly represented online to maintain our high standing globally. As part of this the provision of courses/OER that are not necessarily directly tied to a specific vocation or professional practice should continue to be supported.

How does online learning fit into the strategic vision of your organisation over the next five to 10 years?

The University is distinctive in the high level of engagement of senior research-active academics both in the tutorial teaching of undergraduates and in the teaching and supervision of graduates. The tutorial system has given Oxford its worldwide reputation for teaching at undergraduate level and is strongly valued by students and teachers alike. The University stresses the individual character of this education. We value our highly interactive tutored online courses, online communities, informal online learning and international programmes. In describing the environment that the collegiate University seeks to provide for its students, the emphasis is on a flexible framework within which each student is enabled – to varying degrees and always under guidance – ‘to plot their own individual learning route.’ This includes the appropriate use of online learning and support for work, study and research online as an enhancement to face-to-face delivery across all parts of the University.

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