

**STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE**  
**A College of The Queen's University of Belfast**

**E-LEARNING STRATEGY**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Stranmillis University College Strategy for e-Learning is a developing strategy which has been constructed through the articulation with learning and teaching. It is set within the Learning and Teaching Strategy of the University College which identifies e-learning, ICT skills and transferable skills as priority areas, and aspires to support the development of learning and teaching within the University College. Although e-learning is a relatively new tool, the University College believes that the appropriate use of e-learning can enhance the learning and teaching activities in which the University College already engages. With this in mind the University College recognises that now is an appropriate time to develop a distinct e-learning Strategy which ensures that e-learning, within the University College, is developed with a clear vision and purpose, and is sustainable. This is important because it can then contribute to the College's objectives and specifically to – raising standards; improving quality; removing barriers to learning and participation in learning; preparing for employment; continuing professional development; and ultimately, ensuring that every student achieves their full potential while existing in an environment that generates excitement about learning and a desire to learn more.

## 2. DEFINITION

In broad terms e-learning generally encompasses all learning undertaken, whether formal or informal, through electronic delivery. Current literature defines e-learning in a number of ways. However, for the purpose of this Strategy, e-learning will be defined as ***“teaching and learning enhanced by information and communication technologies (ICT)”*** .

### 3. CONTEXT

#### 3.1 The regional context

It is widely acknowledged that the role of e-learning in education in general, and in classrooms in particular, will grow substantially in the next decade. There is increasing demand from learners who want more flexible forms of study and learning programmes better tailored to their needs. Within Northern Ireland e-learning is increasingly meeting this need across all sectors of education as the various educational institutions are now turning to e-learning to meet the demands and priorities of both educators and students. The Schools sector has benefitted from the introduction of the C2k (Classroom 2000) ICT managed service which emanated from the **Education Technology Strategy**. Developments within C2k, are beginning to transform the technological landscape for learning and the capacity of teachers to begin to address the embedding of e-learning in their classroom practice. In support of this, the Northern Ireland E-learning (NIeL) Partnership, set up in 2002, is coordinating developments in e-learning for the schools service in Northern Ireland.

#### 3.2 Stranmillis University College

The University College's vision is captured in its mission statement:

*'to sustain a critical community of educational excellence, in teaching and research in a shared learning environment where diversity is welcomed, in order to meet the professional needs of society in Northern Ireland and beyond'.*

The University College aims to ensure a high quality educational experience that is accessible, and prepares students for productive lives, through the effective, efficient and appropriate integration of e-learning. This integration, in the initial stages of development, will include already – published content (notes, resources, course guides etc) being adopted and adapted into e-learning programmes.

Since the academic year 2003/2004, increasing numbers of staff and students have been engaging in e-learning within the University College. In 2004, over 100 staff were registered with the Queen's University's Virtual Learning Environment, *Queen's Online*, for Learning

and Teaching (QOL), and over 1000 students now have the opportunity to access the system on a daily basis. The University College supports the uptake of e-learning through:

- the use of Queen's University's virtual learning environment (*Queen's Online*);
- the use of C2k's virtual learning environment (*Blackboard* – soon to become *Learning NI*);
- the provision of an ICT/Library infrastructure to support the delivery of e-learning;
- access to ejournals and databases through the Library's online catalogue (*StranCat*);
- the development of a rolling staff development programme aimed at enhancing ICT skills;
- the use of the Queen's University's specialist support unit within Information Services (the Educational Technology Unit) which provides training and support to staff wishing to use or develop e-learning capabilities within the curriculum;
- collaboration with outside agencies such as CCEA, RSCni, RTU, ELBs and schools.

The University College accepts that e-learning is considered to form only part of a wider repertoire of learning and teaching approaches. Irrespective of the learning tool, good teaching and effective classroom practice are still the most important elements of a successful learning experience and the University College proposes that e-learning will largely occur in the context of **blended learning** through the development of appropriate approaches to module and course design, growing out of classroom pedagogy, and taking account of the impact of technology on a range of learning styles. Consequently, the choice is not between conventional and e-learning delivery methods, but a choice between the use of these different methods in appropriate contexts to raise the standards of teaching and learning, and improve the quality of provision within the College context. It also needs to be recognised that e-learning has an obvious role to play in widening access to higher education within Northern Ireland i.e. regional based e-learning as well as sustaining elements of present courses through international e-learning. Within the University College this will benefit those engaging in undergraduate programmes and continuing professional development. The learning experiences of students on work placements will be enhanced through e-learning and for teaching staff and students engaged in international outreach and exchange activities, new opportunities for collaboration will be made possible. Regional based e-learning may also be required for the delivery of courses to students required, for professional reasons, to study off-campus (e.g. the part-time Master of Teaching).

## **4. GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR THE STRATEGY**

The overarching principle of the e-learning Strategy is that it exists to support the University College's vision for learning and teaching which is - *'of a vibrant University College providing a selective range of professionally related, high quality academic programmes, informed by relevant research and scholarship in a shared learning environment'*. If this vision for learning and teaching is to be implemented and realised then there are a number of factors which need to be addressed:

### **4.1 Teaching Staff**

The University College teaching staff are beginning to benefit from the learning context of Queen's Online where teaching materials and resources are being made available for the learning process. However, the challenge for the College, through a rolling staff development programme, is to encourage teaching staff to make enhanced use of the technology itself and therefore become more innovative so that inter-active e-learning becomes integral to the learning and teaching environments created for our students, and enhances the experiences which they gain across all academic and professional areas. Innovation in learning and teaching should also provide opportunities for research and dissemination of effective practice within higher education.

### **4.2 Students**

The University College aims to offer its students high - quality education, to equip them with intellectual and professional skills, and to provide appropriate facilities which enable this to be achieved. It is recognised that e-learning has the potential to deliver this high quality education, and can offer a more complete and personalised learning experience throughout the learning process. The challenge of this to the College partly relates to the "widening participation" agenda and the argument of "learning anytime, anywhere" which will, sooner or later, cause a significant rethink in the way in which students are supported. This experience can also extend to students who have particular learning disabilities, and the College recognises that, with an increasing number of such students making successful applications for entry to courses, e-learning can be a very successful and powerful catalyst for

successful inclusion into the learning community, largely because e-learning can be much more easily adapted to support such learners' needs.

#### 4.3 Collaborative Partnerships

Recognition needs to be given to the view that the development of e-learning will require a mix of leadership and management skills and that the successful implementation of e-learning within the College should not be viewed as being achievable in isolation, and will depend on its ability to develop and sustain partnerships with relevant and supportive outside agencies.

These will include the following:

- Schools with which the College has particular partnership arrangements;
- Curriculum Council for Examinations and Assessment (CCEA);
- Queen's University, Belfast;
- Regional Support Centre Northern Ireland (RSCni);
- Sectors (Health and Leisure etc.) with which the College has particular partnership arrangements.

#### 4.4 Support Staff – Library, ICT Services and LSS Services

In addition to training, it is important to consider the processes and supporting structures required to enable teaching staff in the use of new hardware and software to develop e-learning capability.

Library and ICT Services and LSS staff have for some time been engaged in developing, implementing and sustaining e-learning. It will be important to ensure that these staff continue to have access to developmental activities so they are in the best position to continue in this role. Opportunities for sharing experiences and disseminating effective practice should also be considered. Further, the development of effective e-learning resources requires specialist skills, for example, technical skills, knowledge of appropriate pedagogical models and understanding of copyright and plagiarism issues. Many of these skills already exist among these staff but this will require regular updating.

In addition, the adoption of successful e-learning initiatives beyond an initial pilot requires time and resources. The Library, ICT Services and the LSS will require continuing resourcing to support uptake across the University College.

#### **4.4.1 E-learning Infrastructure**

E-learning activity is not currently making unique demands on the University College IT infrastructure. E-learning requires reliable PC hardware, efficient networking/intranet access, appropriate server based services, data storage retrieval and backup. From a software perspective the core tools are a web browser's link to the MLE (QUB Online) and the Microsoft Office Suite of personal productivity software. These same services also need to be delivered wherever possible, via the Internet, to students and staff off-campus. The maintenance and development of this core infrastructure underpins every aspect of the University College's operation, and continues to be the primary function of the IT Services Unit.

The future development of e-learning however, may create new requirements for application levels in areas such as digital photography, digital audio, videoconferencing technologies and the use of mobile IT devices. On the software side the desire to author interactive multimedia teaching materials may lead to a need for appropriate software to be acquired, coupled with the development of a new capacity within IT support services to service this application area. The resource implications here, particularly those relating to staffing, are significant.

Probably the most important and specific aspect of the e-learning infrastructure is the MLE itself. As part of the Queens University of Belfast we use QUB Online which is maintained and developed by QUB staff. The development of this system is not under our control. However, we have already influenced its design and development by means of constructive feedback to the QUB Online support team. We should continue to do this, aspiring to apply our educational expertise to make the University College a co-developer of the system rather than just an end user. Our work within the teacher education sphere will also require us to engage increasingly with the integrated schools MLE system, Learning NI, and we should aspire to a developmental partnership role here also.

## **5. IMPLEMENTATION, REPORTING, MONITORING AND REVIEWING FRAMEWORK**

The E-learning Strategy relates directly to the Learning and Teaching Strategy which provides the overarching direction for learning and teaching within the University College. The E-learning Strategy will be monitored through the University College's E-learning Committee, and ultimately through the Learning and Teaching Committee. Sub-committees of this committee may also be involved. However, at this stage, an immediate action is suggested, namely, that a sub-committee of the E-learning Working Group be established to oversee the implementation of the Strategy for the period 2004 – 05. This sub-committee, following further development of the Strategy, should also bring forward recommendations on how the E-learning Strategy will be reviewed, and how new objectives and tasks may be determined and agreed. The sub-committee should report to the E-learning Committee in the first instance.

## **6. STRATEGIC AIMS**

The aims that follow, while distinct, are interdependent and are discussed under the following headings:

- Learners
- Teaching Staff
- Support Staff

<b>Aims</b>	<b>Consultation/Priority Areas</b>	<b>Outcome/s</b>
<p><b><u>Learners</u></b></p> <p>To personalise the learning experience which will empower learners to be more proactive in their learning and take more responsibility for what and how they learn, achieving their personal goals as self-directed lifelong learners.</p>	<p>Establish the principle that the College has a joint responsibility to contribute to a student's learning capability.</p> <p>Focus on the evaluation of the learning experience to inform and guide future development.</p>	<p>To transform teaching and learning through the use of e-learning.</p> <p>Support innovation in teaching and learning.</p> <p>A more responsive and creative education system which will adapt to the needs of all learners, wherever and however they need to learn.</p>
<p><b><u>Teaching Staff</u></b></p> <p>To encourage and develop teaching staff so that they are able to innovate and take the lead in pedagogical developments, using, creating and sharing e-learning resources to offer additional active and creative ways of learning in their respective areas of academic and professional expertise.</p>	<p>To develop and expand on existing aspects of the staff development programme to enable the enhancement of teaching staff skills in the use and evaluation of appropriate pedagogical models and techniques of e-learning.</p>	<p>Leadership of sustainable e-learning.</p>
<p><b><u>Support Staff</u></b></p> <p>To identify additional services and skills which may be required to support e-learning activities.</p>	<p>To work with the relevant support resource managers to development appropriate, enhanced services and infrastructure.</p>	<p>Enhanced support for teaching staff and student e-learning capabilities.</p>

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### *External*

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3. Queen's University Belfast (February 2004), **E-Learning Strategy**
4. JISC Strategy (2004-2006)
5. Towards a Unified e-Learning Strategy (July 2003) Department for Education and Skills - Consultation Document

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

<b>Blended Learning</b>	A mix of face-to-face and online teaching and learning
<b>CCEA</b>	Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment
<b>Classroom (C2k)</b>	<b>2000</b> C2k is a 10 year government programme for major investment in delivering high quality, sustainable ICT services to all schools, teachers and pupils in Northern Ireland.
<b>ELBs</b>	Education & Library Boards.
<b>E-learning</b>	Teaching and learning enhanced by information and communication technologies (ICT)... (delivered ‘anywhere, any place, any time’ using communication tools, content and resources which can be accessed online).
<b>JISC</b>	Joint Information Services Committee. An advisory body which works with further and higher education by providing strategic guidance, advice and opportunities to use ICT to support teaching, learning, research and administration.
<b>ICT</b>	Information and Communication Technologies.
<b>MLE</b>	The term <b>Managed Learning Environment (MLE)</b> is used to include the whole range of information systems and processes of a university (including its VLE if it has one) that contribute directly, or indirectly, to learning and the management of that learning.
<b>NiEL</b>	Northern Ireland e-Learning Partnership.
<b>Online</b>	Use of the computer while connected to the network. Online learning is a synonym for e-learning.
<b>QOL</b>	Queen’s Online.
<b>RSCni</b>	Regional Support Centre Northern Ireland.
<b>RTU</b>	Regional Training Unit.
<b>VLE</b>	The term <b>Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)</b> is used to refer to the components in which learners and tutors participate in “online” interactions of various kinds, including online learning.