

EUNIS E-Learning Snapshots 2008

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1. Background

The paper presents an analysis of the information obtained through the third EUNIS E-Learning Snapshots scheme. Around 50 member universities of EUNIS have contributed information on the way e-learning is organised and deployed at their universities along with their views on e-learning. The results of this survey present a picture of the deployment of e-learning in the universities represented in our sample. The Snapshots scheme is one of the activities of the EUNIS E-Learning Task Force, which met in Malta in February 2008.

1.2. Main findings

The survey revealed strong commitment to e-learning in the majority of universities in our sample. There was a consistent understanding of what is meant by e-learning and, from the respondents, a view that e-learning is becoming increasingly ubiquitous permeating more and more learning and teaching activities.

Universities show a range of approaches to support provision, usually a mixture of central and localized support arrangements. Also the extent of the uptake of e-learning, the numbers of students engaged, varies considerably from one university to another. So though there is a marked increase in use of e-learning, it is not yet fully integrated. The way in which e-learning is used is predominantly “blended” i.e. part of a mixture of face to face and online working.

Compared to Snapshot surveys carried out in earlier years, we see a significant increase in the number of universities using open source virtual learning environments. There is a major increase in the number of universities using Moodle and some decrease in those using Blackboard. Sakai use, though small, has increased.

For their view of developments in e-learning in the future, respondents mentioned the growing interest in and use of Web 2.0 systems, social networking and virtual worlds such as Second Life.

1.3. Going further

This paper provides more details of the findings mentioned together with a comprehensive overview of the results of the survey. In addition, EUNIS will make the detailed responses available to EUNIS members on its web site in The EUNIS E-Learning Task force will organize more surveys in future years and hopes to create a collection of e-learning case studies to supplement the survey approach. This is part of the EUNIS mission to help those working in European Universities to keep up to date with what others are doing and thinking.

2. INTRODUCTION

The EUNIS E-Learning Snapshots scheme is a survey that provides basic information about the implementation and current trends in e-learning in a number of European Universities. It also includes respondents' views and opinions about e-learning at university. The survey discussed in this paper was based on two previous Snapshots surveys administered in 2005 and 2006 [Rothery 2006; 2007].

The Snapshots 2008 survey consists of 23 questions which are a mixture of open and closed form responses. Following on the previous runs of this survey, it was felt that purely quantitative data does not fully reflect the aims, aspirations and practices which contribute to e-learning. Therefore much of the information sought through this survey is in the form of written statements.

Respondents, most of whom are members of the EUNIS community, completed the Snapshots online survey between November 2007 and April 2008. Apart from providing information on e-learning implementation and trends, the survey results are intended to serve as a starting point for possible collaboration between universities, keeping with the mission statement of EUNIS.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Fifty respondents, from 40 universities across 24 different European countries completed the Snapshots 2008 survey. Although this is not a sample that represents Europe as a whole, it is a good representation of the EUNIS member universities. The participants are all involved in the support and management of e-learning, some technically, others pedagogically and others at a management level.

3.1. Organisation

The survey results indicated that 22 universities have a central unit responsible for both the pedagogical and technical aspects of e-learning. Another 12 universities have a central IT department responsible for the technical aspects of e-learning. The remaining departments have decentralized systems.

The survey reveals that in almost 50% of the universities, both technical and pedagogical staff is responsible for the maintenance and management of e-learning systems. In the rest of the universities only technical staff is responsible for the maintenance and management of e-learning systems. The increased collaboration between technical and pedagogical staff on technical aspects of VLE management and maintenance minimises the perception of lecturers that e-learning is predominantly led by technology rather than pedagogy.

Participants indicated that most decisions about the "selection of software, hardware, security and integration" are taken at a central level. Though not explicitly set up as a survey question, it is clear from contextual remarks that pedagogical decisions tend to be taken at faculty and departmental levels. This is also reflected in the way e-learning is organised at universities.

3.2. Definition of e-learning

The participants were asked to define the term "e-learning". As for previous Snapshots surveys, definitions are reasonably consistent across the sample with one main variation amongst contributors. Some defined e-learning as a learning and teaching process which is supported through the use of any aspect of information and communications technology (ICT) - this could be a stand-alone computer system. Others define e-learning as the specific use of Internet and web based resources.

3.3. E-learning systems/VLEs

The Snapshots survey asks about the number of major e-learning systems at university. 50% of the participants indicated that their university has one institutional e-learning platform that is centrally supported by the IT department. Individual faculties or departments in these universities make use

of other e-learning systems on a smaller scale. The other participants (50%) indicated that there are 2 or more major e-learning platforms in use in different faculties or departments across university. These results could possibly indicate that faculties or departments continue to make use of the same e-learning platform that they had originally implemented before their university started supporting the central Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Having more than one major e-learning system provides flexibility, however this scenario tends to pose problems in terms of the learner experience (adapting to different platforms for different study-units), technical support and integration with other university information systems. There are economies in adopting a single centrally supported VLE. Comparing these results to the previous Snapshots surveys, the trend is for universities to maintain and support a centralised e-learning platform.

Universities are making use of commercial, open source and in house developed e-learning systems. Most universities participating in the survey are using open source VLEs with the majority using Moodle. Other universities are using commercial VLEs mostly Blackboard/WebCT. Some of the universities supporting commercial VLEs are also piloting open source systems. Comparing these results to the previous Snapshot surveys, there is a growing trend for universities to move to open source e-learning systems.

The majority of universities in our sample told us what VLEs were now in use, which were main systems, or joint main systems, and which were used additionally. 49% of universities use Moodle in some capacity, 38% use it as their main or joint main system. The other major system adopted is Blackboard (Blackboard and WebCT are now one company). 36% use Blackboard/WebCT, with 32% using it as their main or joint main system. So these two leading brands are taking an almost equal share of the market. This represents a substantial increase in the adoption of Moodle compared with earlier years.

Sakai use is small, around 12%, but this is an increase on earlier years. There are a dozen other systems in use too, found scattered around 28% of universities. These include Dokeos, Ilias, First Class, Sharepoint, Fronter, Pingpong, etc. Around 14% of universities use one of these less well used systems as their main or joint main VLE. Most of these systems are used in only one or two of the universities in our sample so their user base must be quite small.

The overwhelming majority of universities (70%) are using Blackboard/WebCT or Moodle as their principal or joint main system.

Analysis of results regarding the proportion of students supported by the university e-learning system shows that just over half the sample support under 50% of their students. These results give no indication about the actual number of students supported by e-learning systems. Comparing these results to the previous Snapshot surveys there is a slight increase in the proportion of students supported by e-learning.

3.4. Use of e-learning

The survey provided information on how and to which extent students and courses are supported by e-learning. The results showed that there is a spectrum ranging from blended to fully online courses, and from posting course material on VLEs, collaborative interactive activities, e-assessments to e-portfolios. The responses indicated that there is a growing trend towards introducing e-learning activities alongside traditional face to face lectures i.e. blended learning.

Participants posted interesting comments about the pedagogic improvements seen at their university since the implementation of the e-learning system. Most of these comments mentioned the shift from passive towards active learning. Some insightful comments were:

“Teachers that are involved in e-learning tend to think more about pedagogy and restructure and innovate their courses. We have seen teachers developing many creative practices being implemented in e-learning.”

“Greater opportunities for students to participate in online discussions and staff considering how they might try different activities and approaches to further engage students using new technologies. Staff have been willing to share their experience via case studies and seminars, helping others to gain confidence in trying new methods.”

“More engagement with students, improved students interaction with learning and enhanced students learning experience.”

4. Future perspectives

The Snapshots survey asked participants to anticipate future changes in e-learning activities. The majority of responses indicated that the trend towards more e-learning will continue in the future. There will be a shift towards more use of Web 2.0 technologies i.e. systems for user-created content and social networking e.g. blogs, wikis, Facebook, YouTube. Virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life), gaming and simulations will also enhance teaching and learning. The quality, variety and quantity of digital learning object repositories will also increase in the future. Improvement, in terms of integration between e-learning platforms and other university information systems to develop Managed Learning Environments (MLEs), was also mentioned. As for previous Snapshot survey, there is a strong expectation that e-learning will be ubiquitous: a natural, common and substantial part of every student’s expectation. One of the responses “e-learning will be learning! the “e” will be absolutely normal!” summarises this.

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