

The National Learning Network

What we know about information and learning technology

The impact of the National Learning Network on teaching and learning
Executive Summary



Sheffield Hallam University



For three years our further education and sixth form colleges have benefited from the first phase of the National Learning Network (NLN). This is a major investment programme to improve colleges' information and learning technology (ILT).

Since 1999 we have invested £74 million to:

- give every college high speed access to the Internet;
- improve internal college networks and the availability of computers and other equipment;
- provide model computer-based learning materials;
- support a range of staff development schemes; and
- influence the development of learning environments.

At the same time we have been investigating the implications of ILT investment for our funding system. We only gave resources to colleges once they had an approved ILT strategy.

At the same time, colleges have been investing their own money in ILT. We estimate that this now adds up to around £100 million a year. Technology was high up on the agenda with our Distributed and Electronic Learning

Group (DELG) and the DfES e-Learning Strategic Task Group investigating and targeting change.

An evaluation team of staff from the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) and Sheffield Hallam University has tracked the impact of all this activity and produced a large amount of case study material. It has spent two years looking at the experiences of staff and students in over 40 colleges and running focus groups in nine of them.

And it has concluded that ILT is now part of the everyday life of colleges, for students and staff. As the next phase of the NLN begins (£84 million investment over two years), we are publishing a range of material based on the evaluation team's findings. This material will help colleges and others to think about how they use and invest in ILT.

The team's evaluation shows that '...cross-college awareness of ILT has increased since the implementation of the NLN'.

- There are references in almost every college report to key strands of the programme. These include:
 - college information and learning technology (ILT) strategies;
 - ILT champions in colleges;
 - setting up and using virtual and managed learning environments (V/MLEs); and
 - network connections to the Joint Academic Network (JANET).

These are not just passing references. They are used to show how these kinds of developments are changing the way colleges work.

- More and more colleges are steadily increasing their use of ILT in all areas of college life. – 'Learners felt that the length of time spent using IT was relational to their

understanding; the more time spent the more knowledge gained.'

- There is evidence to suggest that students only appreciate ILT if it is clearly linked to the curriculum. – 'If the curriculum does not specify a commitment to IT/ILT in terms of embedding it throughout the subject area, but simply as an 'add on', then those students will interpret this non focus as irrelevant'.
- 'Cheap gimmicks' put students off. But when ILT is used skilfully to liven up the curriculum, students learn faster.
- Students' views about what is effective about ILT can be limited and may reflect their own current uses and expectations of it. However, their opinion of how their teachers use it is much more sophisticated. – 'The success of activities is not easy to measure on an individual basis; there is very much an integrated approach which strengthens the use of ILT in the curriculum. Measuring expectations is as good a measure as any, as both staff

and students expect to use ILT resources to support learning and see non-availability as a barrier to learning as opposed to availability being an enhancement to learning.' The focus groups showed that students can be connoisseurs of ILT even if they are not users.

- The investment in schools' IT increases students' ability when they reach college. This raises issues about a consistent and integrated curriculum, as well as about dividing resources equally.
- We and the DfES are supporting further and deeper investigations as part of the next phase of the NLN. We expect this to reveal further important issues for teaching, learning and college management.

The colleges which were involved in the evaluation have asked to continue using the evaluation tools for their own benefit. And you can too.

We have published the evaluation team's final report and detailed statistical analysis

and supporting appendices (including the evaluation toolkit) at the same time as this summary. It is widely available in print – details of how to obtain copies are given on the back cover of this document – and as a PDF download from www.learningtechnologies.ac.uk and on the LSC website.

We are also publishing 'It worked here', a short booklet based on the experiences of the case-study colleges. In this booklet you will find:

- real-life examples of how ILT has been used in post-16 education;
- down to earth advice about making the most of ILT;
- ideas on how to assess your own ILT services;
- details of the help available to you and how to get it; and
- practical suggestions that you can act on right away to push on with your own ILT development.

You will find more information about the NLN at:

www.nln.ac.uk



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