



## **Distributed e-learning in Art, Design, Media: an investigation into current practice**

**Research commissioned by the Art Design Media Subject Centre – Higher Education Academy (ADM-HEA)**

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### 3. Research methods

The research was conducted between October 2005 and December 2006, with three phases of data collection involving the use of both quantitative and qualitative means. Different strategies were adopted in the three phases, with the diverse methods contributing characteristic forms of evidence; this was deliberate, as it was anticipated that it would enable triangulation of findings and contribute to establishing their validity.

The first stage of the study involved the design and implementation nationally of an electronic questionnaire which aimed to find out about existing practice in e-learning. The questionnaire was provided to all on the Subject Centre's existing database of practitioners in art, design and media education. A pilot phase was implemented in October 2005, with feedback from respondents enabling changes to be made that aided ease of response. The administration of the questionnaire was done electronically, but some respondents who contacted the research team were provided with paper copies to complete if they wished. In line with current legislation around data protection, implementation of the questionnaire was handled by subject centre staff rather than the research team; however, electronic responses came directly to the researchers involved. Approximately 1200 people on the database were provided with the questionnaire and a total of 249 responses were received, a good response rate that satisfied the needs of the study. Questions asked in this survey aimed to find out about demographic profiles of respondents; the range of technologies they were familiar with and used (including VLEs); the specialist applications that were most valued and current levels of daily ICT use. More specific questions relating to learning and teaching elicited information on knowledge management; views of learning and e-learning; how ICT was used to support learning and the learning environment. A fuller description of the survey questions will be found in Section 4.

The second phase of the research involved the sponsoring of major innovation projects in different higher education institutions. These involved in-depth case studies of a number of different learning activities and covered:

- Development and evaluation of a resource for online assessment in media production
- Development and evaluation of an online resource for learning in fashion and textiles

- A report outlining the impact of introducing specialist IT equipment into graphic design studio spaces
- An online contextual studies module for level 2 degree students, with a focus on the research skills needed to prepare them for dissertation work

The structured evaluation of these activities was conducted by those directly involved, guided by protocols and reporting mechanisms devised by the research team. Project leaders in the institutions involved were provided with a Guide to Case Study research (see Appendix 1) and they contributed structured proposals, conducted the research and provided full written reports to specified deadlines. Section 5 of this document provides edited summaries of the case studies, undertaken by the manager of the project who is the chief author of this report. A deliberate attempt was made to retain the different voices and perspectives of the individual case study authors; the views, opinions and values expressed are those of the individuals involved, testifying to the real-life nature of their experiences. It is intended that the collected case studies will be made available in full in a subsequent publication from the Subject Centre for Art, Design and Media.

The third phase of the research included a wider constituency of respondents, with seven higher education contexts involved in focus group research to examine the potential and benefits of e-learning. Focus groups were held between March and October 2006 and involved 47 participants across the seven institutions. Tutors, students, technicians and technician/lecturers took part, and it was particularly useful to secure the views of the twenty students who participated. A pre-planned route for focus group questions was adhered to, as recommended by methodology texts that consider the benefits and problems of this research method (Krueger, R.A & Casey, M. A., 2000; Morgan, D.L., 1997; Templeton, J. F., 1994). This 'route' was adapted to the informational needs of the research; please see Appendix 2 for details of the protocols and methods that the research team established.

It was difficult to control the sample of respondents in this phase of the project; despite pre-planning, participants attended mainly on grounds of their availability on the day of the meeting. Although the groups differed in size and structure, the established 'questioning route' was adhered to by all three facilitators involved and it was felt that a good range of opinion was offered. Data collection was aided by audio recording the meetings, taking field notes and writing up summaries that included verbatim quotations from respondents. A wide variety of art, design and media disciplines were represented in the discussions and despite this diversity there was frequently a shared focus. Overall, it was felt that key concerns appeared to be replicated across the sites studied, providing triangulation of findings and enabling the data to be assembled under the headings offered in Section 6 of this report.

It has been estimated that, with the inclusion of the tutors and students who took part in the case study activities for the innovation projects, the total number of respondents participating in the research was approximately 500. A great deal of evidence was generated in the course of the project, and electronic archives were maintained by the research team. A number of meetings were held for team discussion of evidence and findings, and these 'data days' were found to be very helpful in establishing joint analytical strategies and for debating emerging meanings.

### **Analysis, results and outcomes**

The data collected by the different means outlined above formed the project's research archive and their analysis forms the basis of this report. In the case of the four innovation projects, the project leaders provided their own evaluative comments as they reported on the activity. The statistical and other data collected by the online survey was analysed in two ways. Firstly, statistics and scaled responses were subjected to electronic analysis and the data displayed in the form of diagrams and charts; these are included in the report. Secondly, these data were reviewed to consider more general themes and issues in the light of the key research questions. The report's

main author has therefore supplied discursive comment that attempts to capture these emergent themes. This comment accompanies the 'raw' results obtained by the survey, and where possible opportunities have also been taken to reflect on what some of the wider meanings of these may be.

Compromises, subjectivities and negotiations are a feature of all research activity. Here, for example, the data protection laws meant that it was not feasible to conduct more purposive sampling of survey respondents across the Subject Centre database. Similarly, it was difficult to pre-determine the constitution of focus group participants; the genders, roles and subject specialisms of those involved were very much dependent on who was available to turn up at the time. Nonetheless, the evidence itself has proved reassuring in surfacing some consistent issues and themes across all data sources and respondent groups. Where it presents an inconclusive and even confusing picture this has been noted by the report authors and explicitly commented upon; no attempt has been made to 'smooth over' such inconsistencies. Overall, the findings will aim to provide a broad and reliable overview of the current state of e-learning in art, design and media education. It is intended that findings and conclusions will subsequently be reported in a number of different formats that focus on areas of relevance to different audiences - for example students, teachers and educational managers. This report summarizes all the data collected in the project, and is aimed at those with strategic, pedagogic and specialist professional interests in art, design and media. We hope that it will be of assistance in developing strategies and policies that are evidence-based and that support and enhance e-learning in the sector.