



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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1. Executive summary

Context of the Research

This report describes the outcomes of a national inquiry into distributed e-learning in Art, Design and Media higher education. The research aimed to provide a picture of the current use of virtual learning environments and other learning and teaching technologies in these subject areas. The findings of the project were reviewed in the light of current literature, and the report provides development-oriented advice that aims to benefit stakeholders in these specialist subject areas.

Findings

Three kinds of findings contributed to the project. Detailed survey evidence describes current and extensive use of learning technologies and levels of user satisfaction; case studies provide in-depth accounts of practical and pedagogical issues involved in introducing e-learning into course programmes; and focus group findings give rich, qualitative accounts of real-life learning and teaching, including the student experience. The project's evidence provides a picture of the diverse and innovative use currently being made of e-learning across art, design and media disciplines.

Conclusions and recommendations

These relate to three main themes:

Change potential: e-learning has the potential to change key processes, understandings and activities associated with art, design and media disciplines. This may lead to new definitions of intelligent practice and to the loss of traditional areas of competence. One issue of concern is the potential for the downgrading of the kind of learning that comes through making and an alteration of focus from 'process' to 'product'. However, new ways of deploying specialist capabilities are emerging, and we are beginning to identify the new sets of skills that are required.

Specialist needs and opportunities: many traditional art, design and media activities are now being pursued in a digital forum; however, the 'matching' of new technologies to subject-specific needs is

uneven, with some disciplines better served than others and further development required. Core learning technologies are increasingly integrated into established teaching areas, although at times technological incompatibilities still provide barriers to e-learning. Contact with professional contexts is a key use of ICT, improving student employability.

Training and professional development of staff: institutions need to define the professional competences that staff supporting e-learning should aim to meet. These should cover both ICT 'training' and more complex learning issues, and there is a role for national organizations such as the Higher Education Academy (HEA) to contribute to a coherent set of principles for e-pedagogy. Linking e-learning to strategic institutional aims and structures appears to provide more equitable access to appropriate training and core technologies for staff. It will be particularly important to include part-time staff in these opportunities as they are a significant, and sometimes neglected, part of the sector workforce.