Review of the Wales Higher Education Strategy for Enhancing Learning and Teaching through Technology

Report for HEFCW: Executive Summary
March 2018

Executive summary

The Wales Higher Education Strategy for Enhancing Learning and Teaching through Technology ran from 2007/2008 to 2016/2017. It was developed by HEFCW in consultation with the higher education sector. The sum of £1m was allocated by HEFCW to universities in order to kick-start the Strategy with the intention that by the end of the ten-year period its objectives would be mainstreamed.

This review provides the results of evidence-gathering, both from data sources and from discussions with institutions and sector bodies, and concludes that:

- The aims of the Strategy have been met successfully: there is positive evidence for all indicators of success

- All universities have continued to move forward in the direction anticipated by the Strategy

- Enhancing learning and teaching through technology (ELTT) has been mainstreamed and processes are in place to facilitate continued mainstreaming by all institutions

- Higher education institutions in Wales are engaging with sector-leading innovation

- Value continues to be placed on collaboration and shared endeavour to progress with ELTT, as encouraged by the Strategy

The impact of the £1m investment over the 10 year period may be summarised as follows:

- It gave a vision of where people wanted to go and focussed thinking at institutional and national level.

- It laid the groundwork for institutions to scale up activity which had previously existed in small pockets. Recommendations made to institutions during the Gwella enhancement programme following benchmarking encouraged the setting up of central support units such as centres of excellence in learning and teaching which today are established vehicles for learning and teaching enhancement, in partnership with academics and professional services

- The Gwella programme included regular pan-Wales meetings of senior managers and practitioners. Building on that basis, the series national conferences organised by HEFCW, the Jisc Regional Support Centre Wales and the Higher Education Academy built foundations for ongoing digital collaboration and innovation. Together they fostered a culture of dialogue between institutions which has found continued expression through the participation of all universities in the continued work of the Higher Education Academy and as members of Jisc.

- The Strategy served to validate ELTT in the academic community and amongst senior management. One of the most lasting influences has been in the relationships between different departments and professional roles within institutions

- Another important benefit of the £1m investment was the impetus it gave to the organisation of institutions' own technology-enhanced learning conferences. These provided a forum for sharing widely

the achievements and lessons learned, not only from the Gwella enhancement programme but also other programmes and projects.

- The Strategy helped to build a community and began conversations which continue today. It offered a space and a common language for people to talk together who in all likelihood would not have done so otherwise. University staff found ways to express the benefits of digital tools and techniques in pedagogical, academic and/or senior management terms rather than simply in terms of technological innovation for its own sake. Senior academic staff in turn gained new insights into the role of the learning technologists.

- Innovation projects stimulated by the Strategy as a result of benchmarking and the Gwella enhancement programme continue to bear fruit as their results have become transmitted further to new academic contexts and achieves new application and recognition e.g. through the work of National Teaching Fellows

The long term, open-ended view taken by the Strategy was ambitious and may be regarded as one of its strengths. By allowing institutions a ten-year period to move in the required direction, it minimised the risk of creating a situation whereby a 'big bang' would boost the early adopters whilst leaving others further behind. The more incremental approach established during the Gwella programme allowed the sector considerable space for reflection and culture change. It enabled the formation of relationships which have been sustained.

At the same time it sought to maintain relevance and focus through regular review and refresh in consultation with the sector. It consciously set objectives which were deemed realistic, so that by the end of its lifespan it could be seen to reflect practice which in many respects had become the norm for the sector. In the face of rapid and widespread change in the surrounding environment over its ten-year duration, the Strategy proved remarkably resilient.

Summary of recommendations

The following recommendations are made to assist institutions in continuing to mainstream, by digital means, practice and processes which impact on learning, teaching, assessment and the student experience. They do not aim to offer a comprehensive list of all potential actions institutions need to take to maintain and develop excellence, but may be used to inform the ongoing work of institutions and of HEFCW.

Sharing good practice across Wales

1. Institutions should continue to maximise ways to exchange innovative thinking and practice within Wales both through cross-sector initiatives such as Wise Wales and HE-specific communities such as WHELF and HEWIT. Whilst UK-wide networks such as ALT provide a means for Welsh universities to stay abreast of UK and international developments, Wales-specific special interest groups like ALT-Wales can provide a focus closer to home for peer support and a shared understanding of issues particular to Wales. There is scope for further experimentation with synchronous online communication (e.g. webconferences) to enable peers to share practice as a complement to face to face meetings.

Staff conferences including a digital thread

2. Institutions should continue to embed regular internal conferences on learning, teaching, and assessment and student experience into their enhancement activity, incorporating a digital thread and involving appropriate professional services as well as academic staff. This will build on recognised excellent practice in this area and, where resources from these events are shared publicly, may serve to make more visible examples of good practice to other institutions both in Wales and beyond.

Interprofessional working and staff-student partnership

3. An excellent student experience involves not only academic staff but also professional services teams such as learning technologists, library and information professionals and IT staff. We encourage universities to recognise and enable, at strategic level, the role of inter-professional teams working in partnership with academics and students to enhance the student experience. Cross-cutting strategic themes such as student-led change and next-generation learning spaces may be further explored as a vehicle for working across traditional academic and professional boundaries.

Stimulating and evidencing innovation

4. Universities should continue to stimulate innovation in learning, teaching and assessment through creative use of relatively small sums of project funding. During this process, many collect case studies and stories of good practice on institutional websites for internal (and in some cases, external) access. At the same time, there are some concerns in the sector that it can be challenging to demonstrate impact from such project work, with the result that innovation can risk being confined to pockets of enthusiasm. Universities are therefore recommended to explore further ways to demonstrate impact of investment in technology-enhanced learning projects. In particular, where universities are creating examples of good practice or case studies, they are recommended to showcase them as openly as possible so that others recognise their value and communicate their success. The value of more informal methods such as social media and engaging multimedia clips should be considered where appropriate, in addition to more formal channels such as academic case studies, conference papers and peer-reviewed journals. Communication via more open channels may help to serve wider purposes such as TEF submissions and HEA fellowship.

Digital capability and confidence

5. The digital capability of students and staff is likely to remain a common area of challenge in future, as digital literacies become fully recognised across sectors as an essential aspect of student employability. Universities should continue efforts to ensure that all students and staff are able to become equipped with a degree of digital confidence appropriate to their current role and future work. They are encouraged to continue drawing on resources and support provided in this area, for example through participation in the growing community of practice created by the Jisc building digital capability project.

Technology to enhance flexibility and accessibility

6. All institutions are impacted by recent changes to the Disabled Students' Allowance which have seen, among other things, withdrawal of support in the form of note-takers for students. Institutions should seek opportunities to share effective practice in implementation of technologies which have potential to mitigate against the effects of this withdrawal of support. Examples of areas of practice which it would be fruitful to consider are lecture capture (including policies and staff digital capability) and accessible e-books. Such solutions should be explored for their potential to enhance flexibility and accessibility for all students and staff, whether or not they declare a disability.

Data-informed decision-making

7. Institutions are recommended to work towards adoption of learning analytics at the earliest opportunity, as a means to inform reflection and decision-making as well as to address specific challenge areas such as student retention. While it is recognised that several universities in Wales are already making advances in this area, discussions with institutions have shown that they recognise a number of significant constraints and challenges in the analytics field, for example concerning ethics and systems interoperability. For Wales to keep pace in the field, it is recommended that key staff should continue to engage with the Jisc learning analytics network. Further, it is recommended that any analytics initiative is led at strategic level and brings together decision-makers from relevant departments including IT, library and information services, registry, learning and teaching, and student support.

Welsh language provision

8. Institutions should continue to work closely with the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol to share digital resources and digital methods in the area of Welsh language provision. They should also make continued use of other available sources of Welsh language expertise, such as Canolfan Bedwyr and the National Centre for Learning Welsh.

The Welsh language standards: software challenges

9. The Welsh language standards regulations are due to come into force in higher education institutions in early 2018. Institutions are recommended to renew efforts to influence software providers to make available Welsh language versions, harnessing support from relevant national bodies. This has been noted as particularly pressing with regard to Turnitin, given the degree to which it has been embedded into all universities' assessment practice, but is likely to apply to other software as becomes further embedded, including new VLEs and lecture capture/recording software.

Network capacity, security and compliance

10. Universities should ensure that their network capacity remains secure, resilient and capable of keeping pace with growing demand. This includes consideration of cybersecurity and GDPR.

Strategic engagement with sector bodies

11. The Strategy represents in many ways a story of successful collaboration in many directions, including at strategic level. Institutions are therefore recommended to continue to seek ways to collaborate with each other and with wider organisations as appropriate to enable excellent student experience.

   Whilst collaboration with a wide range of organisations is both desirable and necessary, institutions should continue to engage strategically with both the following so that their students and staff may derive maximum advantage from services and projects, and so that institutions, and the sector as a whole, further strengthen its digital capability:

   a. The Higher Education Academy (HEA) has been a significant ingredient in the fulfilment of the Strategy. Universities should work closely with Advance HE as it brings together the HEA, the Equality Challenge Unit and the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education as a result of merger. This is likely to need to include, among other possibilities, the continued development of pathways for accreditation and recognition of eligible staff through fellowships and training programmes mapped to the UKPSF. This should include further embedding of digital capabilities.

   b. Universities should continue to work closely with Jisc, using opportunities available through their membership to enhance student digital experience, achieve efficiencies and maximise competitiveness. In particular, attention may be drawn to opportunities to participate and share in learning from Jisc R&D co-design projects and new services as they emerge through the pipeline. These may include, for example, the student digital experience tracker and learning analytics.

The value of Strategy documentation

12. HEFCW is recommended to ensure the long-term availability and discoverability of appropriate public documentation relating to the Strategy, including case studies and published reports, in view of their potential value for academic researchers and policymakers of the future.