Miller
R E S E A R C H

**E-Training in
North Wales**

Final Report to

ELWa

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Report From

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Executive Summary

Background

- This research was commissioned by ELWa to explore the feasibility of establishing a formalised e-training consortium of Post-16 providers in North Wales – in the context of the existing e-Training Network of FEIs and HEI[1]s.

- The report aims to explore the extent of support amongst providers and stakeholders for an extended e-learning consortium, to investigate resource issues and to put forward a number of alternative models for the possible development of the Partnership.

Context

- The Wales e-Learning strategy[2] defines e-learning as:

'The use of electronic technology to support, enhance or deliver learning'.

- Its objectives include:

  - Creating a national integrated e-learning network

  - Providing a high quality delivery infrastructure

  - Enabling the local construction, or national procurement of, high quality e-learning programmes

- Approaches in both England and Scotland favour the development of blended learning as the most effective approach to the implementation of e-learning – supporting traditional teaching methods rather than transforming current colleges or universities into exclusively on-line institutions.

- The majority of existing projects involve collaboration in the distribution of information and there are currently relatively few examples of collaboration on content and curriculum.

- The existing North Wales E-Training Network (NWETN), was formed in July 2003, funded through the Knowledge Exploitation Fund (KEF). In October 2003, the NWETN submitted a bid for further KEF support to further develop activities. However, delays in processing the KEF application resulted in a loss of momentum for the Partnership.

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[1] Further and Higher Education Institutions
[2] Cymru Arlein: based on ICT Strategy for Wales.

Findings from Fieldwork

- The fieldwork consisted of qualitative interviews with providers and stakeholders in the region.

   Perceptions of Current Policy

- Stakeholders support the concept of provider networks, but they and providers were divided over whether these should be geographic or thematic. There was a view that ELWa would need to adopt a strong leadership approach to any Wales-wide thematic approach.

- The use of KEF to fund networks has implications as ELWa no longer controls KEF and so may lack influence. Also, KEF could not be used to 'fund' schools or 'private companies', including WBL providers.

   Current Technology / Skills of Providers

- Providers vary in the extent to which they use e-learning at present, but accept that it will become increasingly important, especially for blended learning.

- All providers enjoyed broadband connection of some sort and most colleges had installed Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs).

The NWETN Perspective

- Members (FEIs and HEIs) generally felt that the KEF funded NWETN had reached a point where it could start to deliver tangible outputs, primarily in terms of materials, tutor support and staff training. It was, therefore a source of regret that:

    - Momentum had been lost over the delay in the award of KEF monies.

    - This had been compounded by the loss of the Network's Project Manager.

- It was acknowledged that some 'partners' had been more proactive in the NWETN than others

- Several contributors argued for a Welsh rather than a regional/NWETN repository, to provide a single access point to an array of materials.

Views on an Expanded NWETN

- NWETN members had doubts about a wider partnership, mainly because of issues of manageability, differences in funding methodologies, not wishing to compromise work carried out to date and a reticence to share materials until they were clear of

the benefits that a wider partnership could offer them. Having said that, most members indicated that they would be prepared to be involved if a wider network became established.

- Particular issue regarding schools joining the Network included:

  - The prospect of a large, unwieldy partnership

  - Differences in technology and stages of development

  - Different financial frameworks and eligibility for KEF, for example

  - Issues of competition between schools and colleges

- However:

  - Schools would be keen to have access to colleges' ILT resources

  - There would be opportunities for cost saving, exchange of expertise and for developing improved transition from school to college

- Existing members of the NWETN were more sceptical about the prospect of WBL providers joining an extended network. Issues raised included:

  - Different geographical areas employed by WBL providers

  - A lack of trust and a perception of WBL providers as profit driven

  - A perceived lack of technical and pedagogical expertise

  - Frustration at the prospect of having to go over old ground

  - An inability to access funds to invest in technology in the same way as the statutory sector

- However, members did generally recognise some benefits to WBL providers' involvement:

  - Their ability to penetrate businesses better than colleges and to bring in additional learners

  - Their involvement could ratchet up the quality of WBL provision and could lead to the purchase of a joint VLE for WBL providers

- It was clear that most FEIs would prefer to see WBL providers admitted into the NWETN as second-tier members, with control vested in existing partners.

- Schools and LEAs could see the benefits of a wider partnership in terms of avoiding duplication, sharing expertise and extending the curriculum. It was recognised that schools' capacity to contribute to an e-learning partnership would be limited in terms of technical expertise.

- WBL providers were a little hesitant about joining a wider e-learning partnership, needing to be clear about the benefits that they would derive

- All providers were clear that a regional e-learning partnership would need skilful management and was not a realistic proposition without 'significant' resources being made available, be that through KEF or other sources.

Possible Models for an Extended Network

- Five potential models for a wider NWETN are put forward:

  - Regional Model 1. An equal consortium of providers, contributing according to ability and sharing outputs equally.

  - Regional Model 2. Schools and WBL providers admitted as second-tier members, primarily enjoying access to materials.

  - Regional Model 3. The existing NWETN builds a commercial relationship with other providers, based around geographies / specialism.

  - National Model. A national thematic or sectoral model, based upon providers developing materials according to their areas of expertise.

  - Combined Model. All-Wales thematic groupings of 'expert' providers to develop materials with a regional forum of 'techies' to facilitate the exchange of information and to provide mutual support.

Recommendations

- Funding needs to be resolved before further discussion surrounding the extension of the e-learning Network takes place. At present, ELWa has no budgetary provision to support regional or national e-learning partnerships and there is a risk of raising providers' expectations without prospect of fulfilment.

- Funding aside, our preference is for the development of a model on the combination template, as we feel that this offers considerable advantages, especially in terms of materials development.

- Failing this, there would be merit in adopting a combination of regional models 2 and 3, with schools / WBL providers as tier 2 members of the Network in terms of delivery and support and specialist thematic partners for materials development.

- A further permutation would be for schools to become second tier members of the Network, with WBL providers retaining a more commercial, customer relationship with the Network.

- Providers need to be clear about what partnerships can achieve and ELWa has an important role in providing realistic leadership / brokerage for an extended Network.

- Priority should be given to developing materials which:

    - Will be used by the greatest number of learners, avoiding duplication of materials that are already available

    - Add value to traditional teaching/training rather than remote access e-learning materials.

- FEIs are probably best-placed to act as a bridge between various types of provider

- ELWa should allow some room for providers to learn from experimentation and accept that **not** all e-learning materials developed will be effective

- The partnership/consortium should encourage collective training or local mutual support arrangements between providers

- Finally, ELWa needs to ensure that there is both the awareness and the desire amongst providers to participate in a wider NWETN. In the absence of strong support, there may not be a case for investment.

1   Context for the Study

Introduction

1.1 Miller Research (UK) Ltd, in association with Dateb, was commissioned by ELWa to explore the feasibility of establishing a formalised e-training consortium of post-16 providers in North Wales. The study was also intended to investigate the most appropriate form that such a partnership might take and how this might be implemented.

1.2 Implicit to the brief was that the existing North Wales E-Training Network[3] (membership of which is confined to the region's Further and Higher Education Institutions) could provide a foundation upon which a wider partnership could be built.

Rationale for the Research

1.3 The rationale for the research is underpinned by a number of factors from ELWa's perspective:

- ELWa has expressed a commitment to the use of e-learning as one of a range of delivery channels and as part of its aim of developing a learner-focused approach.

- It has identified that collaboration and the development of effective partnerships offer the most potential for the development and delivery of new and innovative approaches to learning.

- E-learning is perceived to offer a range of potential advantages to learners and providers. However, high material and delivery development costs can create substantial barriers to implementation.

1.4 Hence, e-learning is seen to offer significant potential for collaboration between providers, subject to suitable partnerships being created. These would offer a shared cost base and synergistic benefits in terms of pooled skills and access to and for learners.

1.5 The project brief highlights some of the potential advantages of establishing an effective range of e-learning opportunities in North Wales. These include:

- Greater freedom of choice for the learner, removing barriers of both location and timing of classes

- Improved access for those with mobility problems

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[3] Formerly the North Wales e-Training Partnership

- An alternative channel for those who may not wish to attend schools or colleges

- The potential for developing high quality multimedia and interactive materials to add value to traditional teaching techniques

- A relatively low marginal cost of delivery once course materials are developed

- Scope for developing the "internal market" for learning, through wider collaboration between providers and shared provision of learning - using interactive whiteboards, virtual classrooms and other technological innovation

1.6 It is also identified that, once established, a regional partnership would have the potential to develop its external market by accessing a wider geographical catchment for high quality learning materials.

1.7 There are, however, some significant barriers to the development of a comprehensive e-learning network in the region:

- The relatively high cost of producing high-quality course materials, especially in a bi-lingual environment

- The comparatively slow uptake of e-learning opportunities to date

- The quality of internet access in some parts of the North Wales region and especially in the rural areas

Aims and Objectives of the Study

1.8 This research aims to assess the feasibility of establishing a comprehensive partnership of e-training providers in North Wales, taking account of the factors outlined above and providing suggestions for maximising the value added by such a partnership.

1.9 The objectives of the study are:

- To explore the extent to which post-16 learning providers would support an e-learning consortium

- To investigate the level, the nature of involvement and commitment of resources that partners could offer

- To identify best practice from elsewhere in the UK and abroad

- To determine the potential benefits that could accrue through the formation of a consortium

- To identify potential risks connected with the approach

- To make recommendations and draw up an action plan for development of an e-learning consortium

Value and Scope of this Study

1.10 It is anticipated that this study will:

- Inform the development of ELWa's e-learning policy

- Inform the development of ELWa's learning networks strategy

- Inform discussions between stakeholders about the future of KEF

1.11 However, it should be noted that, with the transfer of responsibility for KEF from ELWa to the WDA, this study does not seek to comment on the design or viability of the KEF-funded partnership (now known as the North Wales e-Training Network). Rather, the work focuses on:

- The existing and potential relationships between existing members of the NWETN and the wider network of post-16 providers across the North Wales region.

- Potential means of engaging learners in the region through the medium of e-learning, in line with the Wales e-Learning Strategy objective of working towards the creation of a national integrated e-learning network, based on a 'one to many' principle.

2   Methodology

Introduction

2.1 In this section, we describe the work undertaken to address the project objectives. The particular circumstance surrounding the NWETN, however, and the status of the KEF funding bid in particular, impacted on the approach during the course of the work and necessitated some changes to the detail of the methodology.

2.2 The original intention was to approach the project as follows:

- Background research to:
  - Document the background to the project
  - Develop the context for e-training partnerships
  - Inform the development of the topic guide for provider and stakeholder interviews

- Provider Interviews to:
  - Understand the current levels of development in relation to e-learning within provider organisations
  - Audit the technology in use and the extent of compatibility / communality between providers
  - Develop an understanding of the political, technological, funding and geographic issues impacting on the development of the e-training partnership

- Develop a draft model for the Partnership covering:
  - Organisational issues, including identification of a lead body
  - Possible approaches to IP issues
  - Potential models for a technical framework
  - Draft plan for rolling out partnership to encompass all post-16 providers

- Stakeholder Interviews to:
  - Test and refine the model in the context of external policy and existing partnerships
  - Identify external risk factors or potential benefits to the Partnership
  - Develop stakeholder ownership of the concept

- Provider Workshop to:
  - Present the issues identified in the previous elements of the research
  - Finalise the draft model by achieving consensus amongst providers
  - Begin the process of Partnership development

▪ Reporting, to summarise the research and to provide a strategy for development of the North Wales e-Training Network.

2.3 In practice, the initial meeting with the Project Steering Group shifted the emphasis of the research away from technical issues such as delivery platforms towards "softer" issues of extending partnerships and linking into existing, more traditional, delivery infrastructure across the post-16 sector in North Wales.

3   The Context for E-Learning in North Wales

Definition of E-Learning

3.1 The European Union definition of e-learning is: *The use of new multimedia technologies and the internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services, as well as remote exchanges and collaboration.*

3.2 The Wales e-Learning strategy[4] defines e-learning more simply as:

'The use of electronic technology to support, enhance or deliver learning'.

3.3 In practice, this will fall into a number of broad categories of learning, including:

- Electronic support for traditional teaching through, for example, multimedia presentations / PowerPoint, or supplementary materials from the institutional intranet / Internet.

- Electronic dissemination of traditional teaching materials through web / intranet channels, for access within and outside taught class sessions - both on and off institutional premises.

- Specifically designed, multimedia, learning materials aimed primarily at off-site or distributed use, with or without tutor support.

- The use of intranets and internal networks to store and distribute resources and facilitate communication.

- E-learning will also include media such as CD-ROM, DVD and digital TV.

3.4 For the purposes of the study, the terms e-training and e-learning are used interchangeably. However, the adoption of North Wales e-Training Network as a name for the partnership perhaps reflects the predominately supply-side focus of the collaboration to date.

Policy Background

Policy in Wales

3.5 The Wales e-Learning Strategy provides the main policy strand relating to e-learning provision. The document came about as a result of discussions amongst an expert group, convened in 2002.

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[4] Cymru Arlein: based on ICT Strategy for Wales.

3.6 The strategy puts forward as a national e-learning policy: *To demonstrate excellence in Connectivity, Content, Confidence and Competence in application of technology to learning.*

3.7 This policy is underpinned by a series of seven strategic objectives, including:

▪ Creating a national integrated e-learning network, based on a 'one to many' principle – where all learners can access all sources of learning available in Wales.

▪ Providing a high quality delivery infrastructure to enable all people wishing to participate in e-learning to do so at a location of their choice

▪ Enabling the local construction, or national procurement of, high quality e-learning programmes from content sourced nationally and internationally, and the application of electronic resource discovery tools

▪ Promoting inter-operability to agreed standards

▪ Ensuring high quality support for learners

▪ Ensuring the skills are in place to develop, deliver and distribute e-learning effectively

▪ Exploiting the opportunities e-learning can offer for economic growth

3.8 ELWa has responded to the e-learning strategy with a planned expenditure programme of £2.97m for 2004-05, under two main headings:

▪ To scope, model and test actions that will maximise the potential benefits from the development of e-learning

▪ To develop the capacity and readiness of the learning infrastructure to exploit leading edge e-learning practices

3.9 Some of these actions are detailed in the ELWa Corporate Plan for 2004-07, including commitment to:

▪ Commissioning research into issues such as technical inter-operability, accessibility, technology skills gaps and e-learning best practice;

▪ Collaborative projects with CCETs and other partners to identify and share best practice

▪ Engaging with key stakeholders including the Sector Skills Councils and the Knowledge Exploitation Fund to create an integrated e-learning network in Wales.

3.10 The Operational Plan for 2004-05 includes a number of additional actions in support of the e-Learning Strategy, including:

- The development of high bandwidth and video networking facilities to support Further Education teaching, learning and research, via JISC[5]

- Progression of thematic learning network pathfinders to address areas of e-learning, basic skills and bilingualism.

Policy in England and Scotland

3.11 The reports of the Scottish e-Learning Group[6] and the English DELG[7] share common ground with expressed policy in Wales. Particular themes include:

- Creating learner-centred provision

- Developing the skills base to deliver and support e-learning

- Sourcing high-quality, cost-effective, appropriate learning materials

- Centralisation of resources and greater utilisation of available materials

3.12 Both reports stress the importance of designing learner-centred approaches to development and delivery of e-learning. The reports favour the development of blended learning as the most effective approach to the implementation of e-learning – supporting traditional teaching methods rather than transforming current colleges or universities into exclusively on-line institutions.

3.13 The English report states: "*Our vision is rather one of learning opportunities that can be powerfully enriched, extended and varied by the judicious, expert and high quality deployment of e-learning*" Hence e-learning is seen as being primarily concerned with enriching and extending other learning approaches.

3.14 The report cautions against over-expectation in terms of e-learning as a stand-alone distance learning mechanism at present: "*The experience of both the business world and the public sector is that stand-alone use of e-learning which lacks or limits integrated support, delivers neither the return on investment anticipated by employers, nor the level of achievement of learning goals anticipated by learners*".

3.15 The working groups in both Scotland and England highlight the need to develop the distinct skills needed to capitalise upon e-learning among teaching and non-teaching staff. However, the Scottish report makes clear the need to distinguish between technical skills of specialist staff and the e-learning support skills required by teaching staff.

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[5] Joint Information Systems Committee
[6] *The report of the Joint SFEFC/Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) E-Learning Group (ELG),* July 2003.
[7] *The report of the Distributed and E-Learning Group (DELG),* Learning and Skills Council, October 2002.

3.16 The Scottish group noted a shortage of high quality content relevant to the post-16 sector, implying a need for sourcing or development of new materials. However, both reports warn against small-scale material development that may not be interoperable with more widely available content, or which may not have wider application for other reasons.

3.17 In terms of budget, £6m has been allocated over two years for FEIs and HEIs in Scotland for partnership work on new ways to increase levels of e-learning. The Funding Councils, however, stress that they consider that significant levels of existing materials are available and that delivery should be the focus of the partnership developments.

3.18 The LSC in England allocated a budget of £7m in 2003/4 for materials development and acquisition, whilst a further £8m was made available for centralised procurement of materials from NLN.

Best Practice in the UK and Abroad

3.19 It is possible to see that there has been a significant worldwide expansion in the uptake of e-learning projects. The majority of these projects involve collaboration in the distribution of information and there are currently relatively few examples of collaboration on content and curriculum. Many programmes have not been running for long enough to make a complete and thorough judgement on their effectiveness.

3.20 The following sections provide some short case studies of emerging regional and national e-learning partnerships from across Europe.

Scotland – The e-Learning Alliance

3.21 The e-learning alliance is a membership based, not for profit organisation based in Edinburgh. It was started in the spring of 2002 with funding from Scottish Enterprise and plans to be self-sufficient within three years. Its main aim is to "*To promote, enhance, assist, facilitate and encourage by whatever means the highest quality support for skills development in Scotland through the use of e-Learning products and services.*"

3.22 The Alliance was formed to give companies and educational institutions in Scotland some guidance through the world of e-learning. By offering information, advice and some limited financial resources, it hopes to bring its members closer with suppliers and other connected institutions. The Alliance does not expect e-learning to become an alternative to face-to-face teaching situations, but it is encouraging the uptake of blended learning to enhance traditional teaching methods and also to give those who cannot attend schools and colleges the opportunity to learn.

3.23 Its members include the large majority of Scottish Universities, Further Education colleges, Local Authorities, a variety of private companies and the Army. It is not,

however, a one-stop portal or information gateway for learning resources. Each member runs it's own distinct e-learning programme. All the Universities and Further Education colleges in Scotland are connected by the e-learning alliance, but there is no sharing of course content at present.

Scotland - The Interactive University

3.24 Collaborative trends are starting to emerge from the success of the e-Learning Alliance. The Interactive University was established in 2002 as a joint initiative between Heriot-Watt University and Scottish Enterprise. It develops, publishes and delivers Scottish qualifications to students across the globe, incorporating more than 20 Universities from 14 countries. Through local learning partners, the Interactive University aims to provide a more rounded e-learning experience.

England – The National Learning Network (NLN)[8]

3.25 The National Learning Network (NLN) is a national partnership programme designed to increase the uptake of Information Learning Technology (ILT) across the learning and skills sector in England. Supported by the LSC and other sector bodies, the NLN provides network infrastructure (through JANET) and a wide-ranging programme of support, information and training, as well as the development and provision of ILT materials for teaching and learning.

3.26 The initiative began in 1999 with the aim of helping to transform post-16 education. To date, the Government's investment in the NLN totals £156million over a five year period. Initially for the benefit of further education and sixth form colleges, the NLN programme of work is now being rolled out to workplace learning and Adult and Community Learning.

3.27 Projects to date include mapping connectivity, skills training for practitioners and a substantial amount of materials development.

England - South Yorkshire e-Learning Partnership (e-sy.info)

3.28 The Partnership describes itself in the following terms: "*e-sy.info is a massive investment programme for people of all ages across South Yorkshire. It's about opportunities to grow and prosper for individuals, communities and businesses.*"

3.29 The partnership was started in the spring of 2002 and is funded by Objective 1 European funding, Learning Skills Council, Yorkshire Forward[9] and all four Local

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[8] http://www.nln.ac.uk
[9] The Regional Development Agency for Yorkshire

Authorities of Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield. It hopes to be self-sufficient by December 2006.

3.30 The main emphasis of e-sy.info is on skills and information on ICT issues. The portal provides a gateway on the Internet to knowledge and skills, which have been provided by a number of academic institutions and private companies.

3.31 There are plans to expand the services of e-sy.info to include resources from HE institutions such as the University of Sheffield.

3.32 The partnership has experienced a variety of issues with IP rights. Currently there are no set guidelines for the distribution of IP rights for materials that are made available through an e-learning partnership. The IP rights stay with the author or the author's institution. The partnership is currently campaigning to pool the IP rights but is experiencing a number of difficulties in achieving this.

England - East Manchester EAZ[10] and the Wired Up Community Project.

3.33 The East Manchester wired up community provides good example of how a disadvantaged community can benefit from a Government initiative to "e-enable" a community. The aim was to link 4500 schools, homes and public buildings.

3.34 The EAZ received an initial £1.8 million pounds to purchase capital equipment. The initiative provided over 1000 homes with heavily subsidised PCs and broadband access. Teachers, parents and students all had access to one learning resource, which enabled free access to community information and educationally based support. The major success of this program was increased school attendance and it also heightened parental awareness to the benefits of education.

Other Initiatives in England

3.35 There are a number of e-Learning Partnerships in England, aimed at distribution of materials, mainly through Learndirect.

3.36 Other groups have by-passed the statutory sector in favour of public / private partnerships in e-learning. For example, the Surrey e-Partnership, comprising local authorities, public and voluntary sector organisations with 70,000 total employees, has launched a learning programme in partnership with private provider Futuremedia plc. The "Learning For All" programme offers employees who do not have access to a computer at work, or who work in an environment not conducive to e-learning, an opportunity to participate in their employers' e-learning programme through a low-cost fully installed PC in their home with Internet access and e-learning programmes for professional, personal and family use.

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[10] Education Action Zone

3.37 An example of a sectoral approach to e-learning collaboration is provided by the Universities' Collaboration in e-Learning (UCEL), which was founded in March 2002. It is led by Cambridge University, in partnership with the medical and nursing schools of the Universities of Nottingham, Manchester, East Anglia and Wolverhampton[11].

3.38 Following a six-month pilot stage, the partnership aims to roll-out nationally, with a mission to establish itself as the leading provider of interactive education resources for doctors, nurses and other professions allied to medicine.

3.39 The underpinning rationale for the project is the economics of provision in the sector - the cost of creating learning resources can be too costly for individual universities, whilst their generic nature means they can be used, re-used and shared between institutions.

3.40 Flexibility is a key aspect of the resources created. UCEL recognises that, in the past, computer-based learning has tended to be based on large stand-alone courses, which were difficult to incorporate into teaching. They have concentrated on developing flexible packages of discrete components, called reusable learning objects (RLO).

3.41 RLO's allow for more frequent updating of materials and flexible content delivery in individual institutions. However, the partnership is clear that they favour a blended approach and that e-Learning does not replace traditional teaching methods. *"You can't replace face-to-face….UCEL (creates) content to enhance traditional teaching, not to replace it"*.

The Northern Ireland e-Learning Partnership

3.42 The partnership aims to evaluate the feasibility of using online tools for e-learning in Northern Ireland and develop the mechanisms needed to operate an e-learning service in Northern Ireland, with a focus on the school curriculum.

3.43 The Partnership concentrates on utilising and adapting existing materials, rather than developing new products.

3.44 Future research priorities have been identified in the following areas:

▪ **Blended learning approaches:** developing appropriate approaches to course design and development, growing out of classroom pedagogy, and taking account of the impact of technology on learning styles, which fully exploits the potential of e-learning in a school setting.

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[11] The University of Wolverhampton also runs The Learning Lab, an e-Learning joint venture in collaboration with Advanced Distributed Learning – an initiative of the US Government

- **Content adaptation**: Adopting and adapting already-published online content and integrating into e-Learning programmes; influencing the commercial development of new content through public/private partnerships.

- **Assessment:** supporting the design and use by teachers of appropriate methods of diagnostic/formative assessment for learning online and the use of self-evaluative tools by learners.

- **Management of learning:** refining the use of the functions provided in online environments to manage learning (e.g. tracking, annotation, feedback, archiving and evaluating online dialogues)

3.45 Partnership members include a variety of schools and FE colleges in Northern Ireland and also more recently, the University of Ulster.

The European Network of e-Learning Centres (e-Len)

3.46 The project aims to create a Network of e-Learning Centres and leading organisations in learning technologies. It aims to support a diverse range of learning centres around the world, to develop capacity for creating and delivering teaching-focused technology for effective e-learning and to share experiences amongst institutions.

3.47 Activities of this project include:

- An evaluation of existing e-learning centres

- The establishment of the e-LEN network

- The design and development of a portal for the gathering and exchange of e-learning resources and expertise and the evaluation of the project's achievements.

Collaborative European Virtual University (cEVU)

3.48 The collaborative European Virtual University project was aimed at developing validated e-learning models and ideas for a European virtual university. It was a proposed collaboration between five existing international university networks, which were already working in collaboration: EuroPACE, EUNITE, ECIU, Coimbra Group and EUA.

3.49 The project was structured around a central hub, with members from all interested parties having an input. Management of the hub was devolved to three key committees:

- A steering committee, with responsibility for overall management, final responsibility for content, decisions on funding and administration of contracts.

- A Scientific Committee, dealing with quality assurance issues.

- A Technical committee covering guidelines and procedures regarding support systems.

3.50 IPR was identified as a particular issue for the collaboration. "*The approach to Intellectual Property rights and Copyrights led to the conclusion that currently there is no standard*" Hence it was accepted that authors would licence or assign any copyright to their individual institution and that any update to the materials would require the author's consent.

3.51 The results of the project were far from conclusive, with significant questions left unanswered.

European Commission projects

3.52 There are a number of current European Commission projects into the feasibility of e-learning collaborations.

▪ Towards Effective network supported collaborative learning activities (TELL) – This project aims to create a human network of experts to facilitate interaction between students and teachers.

▪ TELPEERS - The consortium will form a network of peer reviewers in order to assess in a field-based study:

- The opportunities and risks of the integration of ICT at university level
- Factors that make Technology Enhanced Learning Environments (TELEs) work
- To determine what is transferable in a good pedagogical practice and how this can be transferred to non-university institutions and to other countries.

▪ OrmeE – This project aims to provide assessed information and data to all the players along the e-learning content and value chain on copyright issues. In particular, the project aims at connecting the different people at various stages of the value chain, to avoid conflict and encourage collaboration.

▪ JOIN - support for use of open source Learning Management Systems. The JOIN Project will provide consultancy and support for organisations/ institutions that want to employ open source Learning Management Systems in all relevant topics ranging from the choice of a platform, didactics and organisational issues. It will establish support centres in Germany, Spain, France and Italy, as it believes that accessible native support is vital for both teacher and learner.

▪ Edu.Broker - viable business models – Edu.Broker's goal is to study and facilitate the deployment of viable business model(s) based on the exchange of educational content between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and the corporate sector (large corporations and SMEs) at European level.

Potential Impacts of e-Learning

3.53 E learning can impact on most channels of learning delivery, whether as a supplement to traditional teaching activities (blended learning), as stand-alone distance learning, or in centre-based flexible learning. It is seen as having particular potential for work-based, or community-based learning – with or without tutor support.

3.54 Particular benefits of e-learning stem from the flexibility of time and place that the technology offers. This can permit access away from centres of learning at times to suit individual learners. For employers, it can reduce the traditional barriers to learning, i.e.:

- The cost of training and of replacing staff whilst they attend learning off-site

- The time taken up by attending learning off-site.

3.55 E-learning can also allow learners choice in terms of a mixed approach to learning channels, tailored to their individual support and access requirements.

3.56 In addition, the ability to widely distribute materials can impact on standardisation and potentially the quality of materials available to learners.

3.57 Learning providers can benefit from e-learning through:

- Reduced costs of learning delivery, once materials are developed or procured

- Access to wider geographic catchments through use of Internet-based materials

3.58 However, there is risk for providers in terms of:

- Initial investment in infrastructure, although the majority of statutory sector training providers (FE/HE/Schools) are likely to have significant infrastructure in place for delivery of e-learning, in terms of:
  - High quality connectivity and Internet access
  - Internal networks and Intranet
  - Additional hardware such as interactive whiteboards, multimedia projection etc.
  - In some cases a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)

- Initial investment in materials. The cost of content development has been a significant barrier in the past, either directly or in terms of procurement costs. For providers in Wales, the provision of bilingual materials is an extra cost that will have an impact. Further, many existing materials may not currently be available through the medium of Welsh, implying further development costs. However, a collaborative approach can significantly alleviate the risk attached to investment in materials.

- Initial investment in staff skills. Although some support for this was offered through the NOF funded Teacher Training programme, the provision of training was described by

one commentator as *"patchy…..(leaving) a gulf between the providers who adopted early and those only now coming to develop their policy"*

▪ Increased competition from more digitally advanced providers elsewhere. Providers who do not fully engage with the e-learning agenda run the risk of being left behind as the market develops and thus will become exposed to higher levels of external competition.

▪ Attitudes and skills levels of potential learners in terms of using the technology. Many learners are reportedly reluctant to engage with pure e-learning, preferring personal contact and support. Other potential learners may lack the skills to access e-learning opportunities, or may lack the awareness or confidence to access them in the first place.

The North Wales Context

3.59 The National Economic Development Strategy identifies the North Wales economy as characterised by low wages and low skills levels. A high proportion of employment is in seasonal sectors such as tourism and relatively low-paid employment, such as the care sector. In addition, parts of the region suffer from poor communications infrastructure, which can prevent adequate access to services.

3.60 A co-ordinated, network approach to e-learning across the region could help to build the skills and knowledge base, through offering access to learning for those in remote parts of the region, or through provision of learning in the workplace.

3.61 Some examples of the way in which e-learning can benefit learners in the region are exemplified by projects already underway at Coleg Llandrillo[12]:

▪ E college Wales – An online degree in enterprise. This programme uses the web to deliver knowledge alongside paper and CD/DVD resources; communication with tutors is via e-mail and telephone.

▪ Health and Safety on-line – A short programme delivered on CDROM and on the web. CDROM is used to deliver knowledge and assessment.

▪ ECDL on-line – A web based programme in computing skills. Can be studied at home, in work or by visiting a college centre, leads to the qualification of European Computer Driving Licence.

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[12] Taken from "*e-learning for Conwy and Denbighshire – a Position Paper for Consideration by the CCETs*". Dr Kevin Palmer, Coleg Llandrillo, 2003.

- Ufi/Learndirect – A national programme covering a wide range of courses. Learners attend centres on a flexible drop in basis and gain access to interactive learning resources and learning skills support from staff.

- Virtual Learning Environments – A technical infrastructure delivering knowledge content and communication tools to learners on a variety of programmes in colleges. VLE's enable students to access an integrated suite of learning support functions, where content is delivered on a managed basis and tutors track assessments.

Background to the North Wales E-Training Network

3.62 The North Wales E-Training Network (NWETN, formerly North Wales e-Training Partnership) was formed in July 2003, under the umbrella of the pre-existing Community University for North Wales (CUNW), in response to ELWa's invitation to bid for monies under the Knowledge Exploitation Fund (KEF).

3.63 The ultimate aim of the Partnership was to exploit the technical and pedagogical capacity within the region's Higher and Further Education Institutions to deliver flexible training designed to meet the needs of the North Wales economy. The Partnership was one of three regional e-training partnerships formed in Wales, the others being in SW and SE Wales.

3.64 Between July and December 2003, the NWETN set the foundations for its future work, including:

- Drafting a Memorandum of Understanding between members;

- Defining standards and protocols for materials development;

- Accepting nominations for membership of distributed technical and content development teams;

- Establishing links with the two other Welsh e-training partnerships;

- Liasing with business support agencies;

- Approving content profile for 100 hours of learning products in English and 100 hours of products in Welsh.

3.65 In October 2003, the NWETN submitted a bid for further KEF support that would enable it to build upon the developments described above from January 2004. Specifically, the Strand 2 KEF application aimed to:

- Design and develop high quality on-line training materials in English and Welsh, with a focus on the training needs of SMEs

- To take existing materials and maximise suitability for use in terms of teaching methods, bilingualism and common standards

- To pilot delivery of solutions, via sectoral consortia for training

- To equip partners with mentoring skills to ensure effective delivery of on-line materials

- To develop a digital repository for materials produced by NWETN

- To develop strategies for effective partnership working to maximise the benefits of individual institutional capability.

- To work with the regional networks in SW and SE Wales to share materials through digital repositories and to test national systems

- To ensure sustainability beyond the period of KEF funding by developing a commercial market for products and services and ensuring consistency with other strategies and initiatives.

3.66 Shortly after the bid was submitted, however, responsibility for managing the Knowledge Exploitation Fund was transferred from ELWa to the WDA and this led to a delay in approving the bid. The resultant four-month hiatus resulted in a loss of momentum for the Partnership.

3.67 Following the transfer of responsibility, the WDA commissioned a review of the KEF: The findings of this review are due to be published shortly.

4   Findings from Fieldwork

Introduction

4.1 In this section we set out the findings of our discussions with:

- All members of the existing NWETN;

- A sample of schools and Local Education Authority representatives;

- A sample of general and sector-specific work based learning providers;

- The NWETN's former Project Manager;

- The Project Manager of the South West Wales E-Training Partnership;

- The Director of the Knowledge Exploitation Fund.

- Key policy staff from ELWa;

4.2 This section is presented in five parts as follows:

- Perceptions of Current Policy

- Providers' Current Engagement in E-Learning

- Technology in Place

- The KEF-Funded NWETN

- Views on an Expanded Consortium
    - Attitudes towards Schools' Involvement
    - Attitudes towards Work Based Learning Providers' Involvement

Perceptions of Current Policy

4.3 ELWa is still very much in the throes of defining its approach to e-learning and has not, at this stage, made clear what role it expects e-learning to play. Neither has it set out policies for the development of the learning infrastructure to ensure that providers make optimal use of technology for learning.

4.4 That is not to say that programmes are not in place to drive forward the use of e-learning[13], simply that there is not yet a firm basis for a shared understanding of how the e-learning agenda should unfold. Indeed, a number of parallel strategic developments are likely to influence ELWa's approach to e-learning, specifically:

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[13] The E-Learning and ILT Champions Fund, for example represents a significant investment in promoting the use of e-learning in FE colleges.

- The emergence of Learning Networks as a key policy theme for ELWa

- The transfer of responsibility for KEF, which provides funding for the existing NWETN

- The current review of the KEF Programme, which is expected to shape policy from 2005 onwards

- The likely impact of the National Assembly's GEST Programme upon schools' approach to e-learning

4.5 Given the uncertain backcloth against which this study was undertaken, perhaps it is not altogether surprising that policy-makers had mixed views about the appropriateness (rather than the feasibility) of establishing "a formalised consortium of post-16 e-learning providers in North Wales".

4.6 Despite these misgivings, policy-makers were generally supportive of provider 'networks' as vehicles for enabling providers to 'share' expertise. However, policy-makers and providers alike were divided over the appropriateness of geographic networks rather than thematic ones based on sectors or curricula, particularly given that curricula/learning frameworks operate at a national level.

4.7 It was acknowledged that the regional approach had been born of a desire to replicate elsewhere the effective partnership that had been formed in South West Wales.

4.8 In defence of the regional approach, it was argued that partners need to be within easy travelling distance of each other to encourage practical collaboration and that partnerships need to be kept to a manageable size. Furthermore, it was felt that the effort which had gone into establishing the NWETN and agreeing protocols had created a sense of belonging among members and stood the Partnership in good stead for the future.

4.9 The main arguments in favour of a thematic approach were thought to be:

- Providers could play to their strengths (in terms of subject areas), thus ratcheting up the overall quality of the materials developed

- Those which saw themselves as experts in particular fields perceived that playing a leadership role would provide kudos

- It would remove some competitive tension, because providers engaging in sectoral partnerships would not generally be operating in the same geographic areas. This is, of course, a particularly FE centric view and does not recognise that WBL providers deliver across school and college catchment 'boundaries'

- It would remove a layer of differing traditions which a regional approach would allow to develop

- It would accord with ELWa's Networks of Excellence strategy, although it may not help in terms of KEF's knowledge transfer ambitions because of the potential loss of regional connections

4.10 Contributors' reservations about a thematic approach included:

- A fear that smaller generalist providers would be swamped by their larger counterparts, both in terms of their involvement in developmental activities and, in the longer term, in the remote delivery of learning

- A fear that developmental activities would gravitate southwards, depriving North Wales of skilled jobs and North Wales providers of influence

- A fear that some generic subject areas such as management and basic skills would be lost or duplicated

- It would not help ELWa's credibility to be seen to change tack (from a regional to a thematic approach), although it was recognised that KEF documentation had indicated that sectoral partnerships/networks would be formed

4.11 If a Wales wide thematic approach were adopted, certain considerations would be paramount:

- ELWa would need to provide clear leadership in terms of which themes/sectors should be addressed and the terms under which providers could be involved. Whilst providers could contribute to formulating criteria for involvement, ELWa would need to be seen to be directing the process

- ELWa would need to be very open in its dealings with providers - uncertainty surrounding the future of KEF did a lot to damage credibility and trust

- Providers would need to be clear about the benefits they would derive from being involved (the 'what's in it for us' factor) and about the ways in which they could contribute

- Mechanisms would need to be put in place to ensure that all providers (and learners) could benefit from consortia's outputs

4.12 Regardless of the approach taken, policy makers and providers alike were in agreement that partnerships would need to be professionally managed and properly funded.   The hiatus into which the NWETN was thrown demonstrates clearly that the partnership was not sustainable without dedicated funding, in that case, from KEF.

4.13 There was widespread consensus that partnerships need to be managed by individuals who:

- Understand secondary education;

- Understand tertiary education;

- Understand different curricula;

- Understand school, college and WBL provider cultures;

- Understand regional and local politics;

- Have a sufficient grasp of ICL/ILT;

- Are perceived to be impartial.

4.14 Some policy makers argued that it was not appropriate for ELWa to have commissioned this study on the basis that it no longer controlled KEF and had no other specific budgets to support e-learning networks.

4.15 Whilst it is, of course, possible that the KEF review will recommend the continuation of funding for regional e-learning partnerships, a North Wales e-learning consortium involving schools would need greater latitude than would be allowed under KEF in order to pursue activities of 'academic' rather than 'vocational' value.

4.16 Furthermore, KEF is currently limited to supporting HEIs and FEIs and could not be used to 'fund' schools or 'private companies', including WBL providers.

Providers' Current Engagement in E-Learning

4.17 The extent to which providers are engaged in e-learning varies widely, with colleges tending to make rather more use of Information and Learning Technologies (ILTs) than schools and certainly making more use of them than the majority of work based learning providers (WBL providers).

4.18 On the whole, ILTs are used to support traditional teaching methods, rather than to provide remote access e-learning, although there are some exceptions. The following provides a synopsis of the use made of e-learning by North Wales providers at present:

- Larger colleges act as Learndirect centres

- One HEI delivers a handful of courses remotely (mainly MBAs), and makes modules of other courses available on-line with tutor support provided on-site

- One WBL provider uses e-NVQ to manage work-based learners' progress through LCCI's Modern Apprenticeship (MA) frameworks in Administration

▪ Some schools and colleges make limited use of video conferencing to deliver courses to learners at more than one site simultaneously. In some cases, this involves collaboration between colleges, between schools or between schools and colleges

▪ Technologies such as electronic whiteboards and PowerPoint are used by most providers to enhance teaching/training in traditional 'classroom' settings

▪ Some providers offer learners access to learning materials, the internet and e-mail using computers on site

▪ Most colleges and schools have been involved, to some extent at least, in developing e-learning or blended learning materials, but only two WBL providers interviewed have. Generally, this was done on a unilateral basis for internal use, with limited evidence of collaborative materials development.

4.19 The variation in the extent to which e-learning has been adopted is partly attributable to the use of different policy directives and interventions to 'encourage' the adoption of ILTs by different types of provider:

▪ Local Education Authorities (and thence schools) and colleges have been required by the National Assembly for Wales (NAfW) and ELWa respectively to develop ICT/ILT plans, whilst WBL providers have not.

▪ Schools have been supported to develop their e-learning capacity through programmes such as TVEI and GEST (Priority 7)

▪ Colleges have been subject to a succession of programmes such as the Welsh Learning Network, QUILT, the E-learning and ILT Champions Fund, and KEF.

▪ On the other hand, WBL providers, as non-statutory bodies, have been left to make their own investment decisions and have not, generally, been able to access external support for materials or skills development. Hence they have tended not to have progressed as far down the e-learning road, although some would have wished to, had resources been available to them.

4.20 It also appears that 'size matters', with smaller providers, across all provider types, tending to be further behind than their larger counterparts in terms of their adoption of e-learning. This is, undoubtedly, partly attributable to their inability to invest substantial sums in hardware, software and in developing their staff.

4.21 Although providers vary in the extent to which they use e-learning at present, there was widespread acceptance that it will become increasingly important and the majority

of providers were keen to step-up their use of ILTs. Having said that, however, most providers perceived e-learning as a means of enhancing taught courses, with only one or two seeing themselves as deliverers of unsupported or lightly supported distance e-learning. Most saw that as the domain of specialist providers such as the Open University, the BBC and Learndirect.

4.22 One WBL provider had encountered very practical hindrances in trying to roll out its use of e-learning to the Care and Retail sectors. Whilst the facilities existed to deliver and manage training remotely via e-NVQ and the relevant awarding bodies, learners lacked access to computers and/or the ICT skills necessary to undertake training in this way. It was thought that this may be a factor that could influence the uptake of e-learning in several other less 'technical' industries. It also seemed that indifference towards or ignorance of technologies among some training/teaching staff could be holding back the adoption of ILTs.

Technology in Place

4.23 All providers enjoyed broadband connection of some sort, although some sites relied on wireless technology, which was not thought to be 100% reliable. In the region's southern and westernmost reaches, the absence of broadband was seen as a barrier to people accessing e-learning from home or from outreach centres.

4.24 Most (all but three) colleges had installed Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), but there was no consistency in terms of the products used. Some contributors were of the view that the region's colleges should all use the same VLE as a means of increasing purchasing power and sharing expertise. This view was not shared by all contributors, however, one arguing that *"bridges[14] rather than uniformity"* was the key.

4.25 Schools and WBL providers all had intranets of some sort, but only one WBL provider used a proprietary VLE. Indeed, it was argued that most schools and WBL providers probably serve too few learners to warrant investing in their own VLEs, although VLE sharing might be a viable proposition for some.

4.26 The majority of providers saw their web-sites as marketing tools with most colleges and one WBL provider claiming that theirs also served as password protected gateways to VLEs or intranets.

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[14] In terms of interoperability.

Previous Involvement in e-Learning Related Partnerships

4.27 Some providers had a history of e-learning related partnership working prior to the establishment of the NWETN. Coleg Llandrillo, Coleg Meirion Dwyfor and Coleg Menai, for example, had been involved in a previous KEF funded e-learning materials development partnership – Linc.

4.28 Although no subsequent use had been made of them, Linc had developed some e-learning materials using a system of distributed technical and pedagogical teams. To some extent, it is possible that 'small was beautiful' in the sense that three colleges were able to agree upon priorities and protocols at an early stage and, thus, move on to the practicalities of materials development more swiftly than a larger partnership would. Some colleges (most commonly HEIs and larger FEIs) had worked with organisations outside Wales to commission or develop e-learning materials.

4.29 Some colleges also worked with schools on the development of e-learning materials. An example would be the involvement of Coleg Meirion Dwyfor with CYDAG member schools in developing Welsh medium materials for vocational courses under the Sgiliaith project. Another would be the work of Y Gamfa (the Gwynedd CCET) members in developing A-level sociology materials. Some schools had been involved in developing materials for wider schools consortia, although the experience had not always yielded the 'quid pro quo' envisaged in terms of access to new materials produced by other consortium members.

4.30 One WBL provider had been involved with an FE college in developing materials under a first round KEF project and had found the experience particularly helpful. The materials developed included induction resources, interactive Health and Safety training materials and Key Skills software, all of which were still being used by the provider. Other WBL providers sourced the limited e-learning materials they used (generally CD-ROMs) from commercial suppliers.

4.31 Some schools and colleges used video conferencing and other e-learning resources to deliver courses to small groups of learners at more than one site, sometimes co-operating across institutional divides.

The KEF Funded NWETN

4.32 Members (FEIs and HEIs) generally felt that the KEF funded NWETN had reached a point where it could start to deliver tangible outputs, primarily in terms of:

- E-learning materials compliant with agreed specifications and standards;

- Tutor support through designated 'expert' sub groups;

- Training for pedagogical and technical staff.

4.33 It was, therefore a source of regret that the Network had lost momentum as a result of the delay in the award of Strand 2 KEF monies. Indeed, the hiatus had been compounded by the departure of the Partnership 'Project Manager', who was held in high regard by NWETN members, amid uncertainty about the future of his post[15]. The discontinuity experienced by the NWETN over the last few months has clearly done little to promote the case for a wider e-learning partnership and members are likely to be more concerned with regaining momentum following the appointment of a new Network Project Manager than with engaging the wider provider community.

4.34 Indeed, some NWETN members saw the regional partnership as a first step in working towards an all Wales consortium over a couple of years and saw the gap in KEF funding as an opportunity to accelerate that agenda.

4.35 The primary benefit that commentators felt their colleges had derived from the NWETN was that it provided a forum for 'techies' to meet, share best practice, provide mutual support, learn and 'grow'. Some commentators also argued that bringing together technical staff had enabled exchanges and sharing which would not have happened had it been left to college managers – "*what we can share without telling the bosses".*

4.36 Although the NWETN had not got as far as developing materials, several contributors emphasised the importance of involving both technical and pedagogical staff in doing so. One contributor observed that materials should be developed with teachers/trainers in mind in the first instance rather than learners, because it is crucial that materials engage teachers if they are to be used at all.

4.37 It was acknowledged that some 'partners' had been more proactive in the NWETN than others. Indeed, it was recognised by a number of contributors that some colleges, particularly smaller general colleges, would almost inevitably be followers rather than leaders in the development of e-learning materials. Having said that, smaller colleges were anxious that they should not be left behind and excluded from the materials development debate.

4.38 The NWETN had reached an accommodation over how to handle Intellectual Property Rights (IPR). In brief, the IPR of materials developed under the KEF project vested in the consortium, although member colleges would retain the IPR of subsequent amendments/improvements made under their own steam. There were sensitivities

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[15] *We understand that the Partnership Project Manager's post has recently been advertised for the second time.*

about IPR, especially where colleges saw commercial potential in materials, but by and large, consortium members saw the sense of yielding IPR for the common good.

4.39 A strong argument in favour of yielding IPR was that the consortium would be better placed to maintain and update materials over time – the 'sustainability' issue. Allied to this, many contributors thought that a central repository of materials was essential to enabling consortium members to share - indeed, creating a 'digital repository' had been one of the KEF project's objectives.

4.40 Several contributors argued for a Welsh rather than a regional/NWETN repository, possibly linked into NLN and FENC sites to provide Welsh teaching/training with staff a single access point to an array of materials. One commentator argued that a Welsh repository linked to NLN and FENC would meet Welsh needs in terms of:

- Providing bilingual materials

- Being tied into Welsh curricula

- Reflecting the National Assembly and ELWa's priorities

- Reflecting Welsh culture

4.41 It was further argued that a Welsh repository should be actively marketed to teachers/trainers by:

- Providing an icon to sit on their desktops

- Containing a section describing the benefits and potential of applications

- Providing guidance on how to engage with e-learning

- Providing safe environments for teachers/trainers to 'try it out'

Views on an Expanded NWETN

4.42 Establishing the NWETN under the CUNW umbrella had enabled HEIs and FEIs to address issues of potential competition and to agree 'boundaries', both spatial and in terms of institutional focus. However, it is arguable that this approach also served to confirm the partnership as a FEI/HEI 'club' and may make the inclusion of non-CUNW members more problematic. One commentator thought that NWETN should have been allowed to stabilise under the CUNW banner before thoughts of widening the partnership were considered.

4.43 Whilst it was thought that an HEI/FEI partnership could work, NWETN members were less confident about a wider partnership. The pros and cons of including schools and WBL providers are discussed below, but it was thought that a number of generic issues

would need to be recognised or addressed if the partnership were to be enlarged. Specifically:

▪ A larger and more diverse partnership would be considerably more difficult to manage

▪ Tensions relating to funding methodologies might undermine widespread co-operation

▪ The partnership would need to take a step back in order to develop relationships and agree protocols with a wider membership

▪ Colleges might be reticent to share until they were clear of the benefits which a wider partnership could offer them

4.44 Although not necessarily warm to the idea of a wider NWETN, most members indicated that they would be prepared to be involved. However, this was primarily because they did not perceive that their institutions 'could afford to be on the outside'.

4.45 Generally speaking, schools and LEAs thought that a partnership involving colleges and schools could be beneficial, particularly in terms of avoiding duplication in the production of materials and providing opportunities to share expertise and to extend the curriculum offered in some smaller schools.

4.46 One contributor thought that such an arrangement could provide important first steps in preparing schools for the cost cutting pressures that ELWa's funding review will inevitably mean. It was also thought that more obvious partnership between schools and colleges would be beneficial to learners in terms of easing their transition between providers. One commentator thought that involving schools in a regional e-learning partnership seemed a *"natural progression"* from the KEF funded network already created, although the relationship between schools and KEF's objectives were not altogether clear.

4.47 Schools found it more difficult to see the benefits of involvement with WBL providers on the basis that they tended to serve substantially different learners.

4.48 Schools are generally much smaller than colleges and it was recognised that their capacity to contribute to an e-learning partnership would be limited. In terms of contribution, it was felt that schools would be best placed to offer pedagogical expertise in particular curriculum areas rather than technical expertise.

4.49 Whilst not dismissive, the majority of WBL providers were a little more hesitant about the prospect of a wider e-learning partnership, indicating that they would need to be very clear about the benefits that they would derive from membership - *"we'd have to*

be very clear about membership costs and what we'd get out of it". Two exceptions to this were:

- A WBL provider that had been involved in a previous KEF partnership project

- A sectoral proactive provider which was keen to access funding to develop materials

4.50 WBL providers who had less experience of e-learning did not generally see access to e-learning materials as a key potential benefit of membership. Rather, they thought that they could benefit most in terms of exposure to technical expertise and increasing their awareness of e-learning related developments - *"we don't want to get left behind".*

4.51 All but one of the WBL providers were clear that they could contribute little in terms of technical expertise, but did believe that they could help in terms of *"providing ideas and opinions as to how materials might be used in live training situations".* They felt that they possessed occupational expertise as well as strong relationships with employers which would be useful in ensuring the effective implementation of e-learning in the workplace. The one exception was a sectoral specialist who felt that their organisation could provide specialist input into materials development, for dissemination across the Network and beyond.

4.52 WBL providers were not generally convinced that they shared enough common ground with schools to justify working with them. In terms of their relationships with colleges, most already had sub-contracting arrangements in place and were accustomed to dealing on a commercial basis.

4.53 All providers were clear that a regional e-learning partnership would need skilful management and was not a realistic proposition without 'significant' resources being made available, be that through KEF or other sources.

Attitudes towards Involvement with Schools

4.54 Perceptions of competition from schools among other providers were not as pronounced as might have been expected and, broadly speaking, contributors would have been content to see schools included in a wider NWETN. Barriers that would make schools' involvement more difficult were thought to include:

- The sheer number of schools in North Wales would render the partnership less manageable

- Schools and colleges' definition/understanding of e-learning differ

- It is likely that different technologies are used by schools and colleges

- Planning processes aren't aligned in terms of strategy, finance or curriculum

- Schools and colleges see each other as competitors and, therefore, wouldn't necessarily find it easy to co-operate

- Developing a partnership would be resource intensive and there is no cash to fund it at present

- Schools may not be particularly enthusiastic to be involved in a partnership which is geared up to develop e-learning materials designed to transfer knowledge into SMEs (in line with KEF objectives)

- Schools should not seek to be involved in developing e-learning materials for use in businesses

- At present schools are precluded from accessing KEF funding.

4.55 On the other hand, it was perceived that there are some factors which would facilitate the development of a partnership:

- Schools would be keen to have access to colleges' ILT resources

- There would be potential cost savings (particularly in terms of frictional costs)

- The exchange of expertise would give schools and colleges the opportunity to develop

- Collaboration could lead to the development and use of materials, such as basic/key skills diagnostic tools, which could help learners' transition from schools to colleges (although this would be more of a benefit for colleges and learners than schools)

- Exposure to college resources whilst still at schools could help to ease learners' transition form school to college

Attitudes towards Involvement of Work Based Learning Providers

4.56 Whilst schools were not necessarily convinced of the merits of their involvement in an e-learning partnership with WBL providers, they were generally open to the possibility. FE Colleges, on the other hand, were far more reticent and, rather ironically, most WBL providers were not as eager to be 'on the inside' as existing NWETN members thought they would be.

4.57 Specific barriers to their inclusion were:

- The WBL provider network does not observe spatial boundaries in the same way as schools and colleges and would not lend itself to agreement about territories, which reduce competitive tensions

- An overwhelming perception of WBL providers as "opportunistic and untrustworthy competitors"

- A perception that WBL providers play to different rules and that they would be driven by profit motives rather than working together for the common good

- Many contributors thought that WBL providers lacked technical and pedagogical expertise - there was a snobbery in some contributors' attitudes towards WBL providers

- A perception that WBL providers would not be capable of contributing much to the partnership and an expectation that the partnership would operate on a quid-pro-quo basis. There was a suggestion that extending the partnership to involve WBL providers might provide the common ground that would galvanise colleges into inaction, in that colleges would withhold resources and become protectionist if they did not feel that WBL providers were contributing to the partnership

- Many WBL providers' staff are some way behind college and school staff in terms of their understanding of and attitudes towards ILT

- It was felt that existing partners would be frustrated by having to go over old ground as WBL providers were brought up to speed

- The absence of appropriate technology, although it was acknowledged that WBL providers would not generally need VLEs, merely learning content and learner management tools

- An inability to access funds to invest in technology in the same way as the statutory sector

4.58 It is arguable that some commentators were uninformed in their views of WBL providers, but it remains that there was a great deal of hostility towards them among FEI staff in particular. Despite these misgivings, however, contributors did generally recognise some benefits to WBL providers' involvement:

- They were perceived to be better at penetrating businesses than colleges and would therefore, help to speed up the adoption of e-learning in the workplace

- They could introduce work-based e-learners to colleges for support and accreditation

- Their involvement could ratchet up the quality of WBL provision

- WBL providers could capitalise upon other partners' expertise

- Their involvement could lead to the purchase of a joint VLE for WBL providers

4.59 It was clear that most FEIs would prefer to see WBL providers admitted into the NWETN as second-tier members, with control vested in existing partners. Some contributors went as far as to suggest that their involvement should be confined to developing commercial relationships with existing partners.

4.60 If WBL providers are to be included in an e-learning partnership, it was thought that a useful first step would be to audit in detail the current state of affairs in terms of WBL providers' infrastructures, attitudes, ambitions and usage of ILT.

5   Conclusions

Introduction

5.1 This study has been undertaken against a backcloth of relative uncertainty in terms of ELWa's e-learning policy and in terms of the future of KEF as an instrument for supporting regional HE/FE e-learning partnerships.

5.2 Nevertheless, it is clear that the principle of using e-learning has been established among policy makers and providers alike. The challenge now is ensuring its application in the most appropriate ways.

5.3 In this chapter, we summarise the findings of our research and present our conclusions surrounding:

▪ The potential benefits that could accrue through the formation of a wider North Wales consortium of post-16 learning providers

▪ The level of support among policy makers and providers for the establishment of such a consortium

▪ The level, the nature of involvement and commitment of resources that partners could offer

▪ Alternative models which might be adopted to widen and standardise the use of e-learning among learning providers

Potential Benefits of a Wider E-Learning Consortium

5.4 Contributors expected that a wider e-learning consortium could deliver a number of benefits, many of which it was expected that the NWETN would yield its HEI/FEI members anyway. These include:

▪ Increased awareness of e-learning developments

▪ Peer group support for technical staff

▪ Access to e-learning materials compliant with agreed specifications and standards, including Welsh medium materials

▪ Technical support and possibly training for teachers/trainers

▪ The easier identification of opportunities for collaboration in the delivery of learning.

5.5 Of course, these are assumed benefits and the experience of NWETN members would suggest that some would take some time to materialise. HEIs/FEIs expected to have

access to e-learning materials developed by the NWETN, but as yet none had been produced and the primary benefit which contributors felt their institutions had derived from the Network was that it provided a forum for 'techies' to exchange information, to learn and to support each other.

5.6 This correlated closely with schools' and WBL providers' perception that a wider consortium would provide them with a vehicle for accessing information about e-learning developments and for supporting 'technical' staff. This flags up two important issues:

▪   A mutual support network for 'technical' staff is considered important and should therefore, be a specific aim of a wider consortium, if it is to be established

▪   It appears that the all Wales ILT Champions Network may not be satisfying 'techies' support needs, possibly because Wales represents too big an area for effective 'networking' to happen, thus pointing to the need for a regional forum.

5.7 Most potential members perceived that the proposed consortium could provide them with tailor made e-learning materials, but their expectations of the types of materials that would be produced differed.

5.8 Schools were keen to access materials that would add value to 'academic' courses, whilst WBL providers wished to access materials to support vocational learning, more akin to those which the NWETN plans to produce under the KEF project.

Level of Support for a Wider E-Learning Consortium

5.9 There is little opposition to embracing the school sector into an extended NWELC, but the question of including work-based learning providers is likely to be a little more problematic. This is due to issues of mutual trust and perceptions on the part of existing NWETN members of the relative skills and resources amongst WBL providers to contribute effectively to an extended partnership.

5.10 By and large, both schools and WBL providers would be prepared to become involved in a wider NWETN, subject to some specific caveats. These caveats relate to two primary issues:

▪   The contribution members would be required to make (inputs);

▪   The benefits members could expect to receive (outputs).

Input Related Caveats

▪ Most providers would/could only contribute if their involvement was fully funded. However, ELWa has no dedicated budget for this purpose, which begs the question whether ELWa can effectively support a wider e-learning consortium. Furthermore, neither schools nor WBL providers are eligible for KEF support. Hence, in the absence of a change in policy, KEF could not be used to extend the existing NWETN.

▪ Both schools and WBL providers would join on the understanding that they would not be expected to contribute as much as colleges. By and large colleges accept this, but would probably want to be 'in the driving seat' in exchange for their greater contribution.

Output Related Caveats

▪ Schools wish to access 'academic' course materials, whilst WBL providers wish to access materials for 'vocational' courses.

▪ The materials that schools wish to access are more typically at the 'blended' end of the e-learning spectrum, whilst WBL providers would wish to access materials to support low contact e-enabled learning.

5.11 A number of policy-makers and members alike thought that the existing NWETN should be given the opportunity to consolidate and mature before any moves are made to involve a wider community of providers. The fact that the NWETN has been awarded KEF funding until April 2005 should help this to happen.

5.12 There was no question among contributors of establishing an alternative partnership in parallel with the NWETN. The NWETN was seen as the platform upon which a wider consortium could be built, which leads to the question of what shape a wider regional consortium should take. A number of alternative models are discussed below.

Moving Forward — Possible Models for a Wider Consortium

5.13 In this section we propose five alternative models for a wider NWELC and discuss the pros and cons of each model as well as the factors, which could enable or inhibit progress.

Regional Model 1

5.14 The first model would assume a consortium of equals among North Wales providers, something akin to the existing NWETN, with each member contributing according to their ability (larger institutions recognise that they have greater capacity to contribute than smaller general colleges) and all members sharing equally in the spoils. The pros

and cons of this model are discussed below, as are the factors which would enable or inhibit the formation of such a consortium.

Table 1 Regional Model 1

Pros	• Capitalises on existing relationships with learners / employers • Manageable size • Builds regional identity
Cons	• Lack of specialism for sectoral / thematic delivery • Risk of duplication with other areas of Wales • Lack of critical mass for materials development • Providers with less developed skills / experience will hold back existing Network members • Wider range of technology / infrastructure to accommodate
Enablers	• The allocation of funding on the basis of contribution made/time spent on consortium business
Inhibitors	• Inequality of access to funding will distort partnership • Schools and WBL providers not eligible for benefit under KEF funding • Established relationships and working methods between current NWETN members could feel 'exclusive' • Issues of trust / Perceptions of providers, particularly WBL providers as competitors

Regional Model 2

5.15 The second regional model would assume that schools and/or WBL providers are admitted as 'associate' or 'second tier' members of the existing NWETN, with control and leadership of the wider consortium vesting in HEIs/FEIs.

5.16 As 'lead' or 'first tier' members HEIs/FEIs would retain responsibility for materials development, the creation of a repository and the agreement of standards and protocols for information classification and sharing.

5.17 Associate or second tier members' interests would lie in accessing, using and disseminating materials. The pros and cons of this model are discussed below as are the factors which would enable or inhibit the formation of such a consortium.

Table 2 Regional Model 2

Pros	• Allows providers to develop at their own pace
	• Capitalises on existing relationships with learners / employers
	• Manageable size
	• Builds regional identity
	• Addresses inequalities in resource and skills base amongst providers
	• "Ring fences" KEF funding for first tier partners
	• Widens learner base for first tier partners
	• Allows second tier partners access to materials
Cons	• Lack of specialism for sectoral / thematic delivery
	• Risk of duplication with other areas of Wales
	• Lack of critical mass for materials development
Enablers	• The processes, protocols, standards and specifications devised by the existing NWETN could be adopted
Inhibitors	• Established relationships and working methods between current NWETN members could feel 'exclusive'
	• Issues of trust / Perceptions of providers, particularly WBL providers as competitors

Regional Model 3

5.18 The third potential North Wales model would assume the existing NWETN develops commercial relationships with other providers, on the basis of geography i.e. local 'clusters' or on the basis of specialism i.e. thematic clusters. The pros and cons of this model are discussed below, as are the factors which would enable or inhibit the formation of such a consortium.

Table 3 Regional Model 3

Pros	• Thematic approach would offer:
	• Development of specialisms
	• Potential for distribution of materials beyond the region
	• Launch point for creation of a National Network
	• Local cluster approach would offer:
	• Development of learning support network
	• Embedding of e-Learning in the region
Cons	• Threat to cohesion of existing NWETN
	• Risk of duplication with other areas of / sectors in Wales
Enablers	• The processes, protocols, standards and specifications devised by the existing NWETN could be adopted

Inhibitors	• Thematic approach:
	• Justification of regional basis for thematic approach
	• Schools looking for "academic" materials to tie into national curriculum
	• Geographic Approach
	• Different skills / resource levels of providers
	• Lack of critical mass at sub-regional level

5.19 Of course, it would be possible to adopt a model that falls somewhere between the second and third regional models described above, either treating schools and WBL providers differently or allowing providers to decide upon the type of relationship they would choose to have with the consortium.

National Model

5.20 Many contributors had understood from the outset that the existing NWETN would eventually be merged with the parallel e-learning partnerships in South West and South East Wales to create an all Wales 'partnership' and e-learning materials repository.

5.21 Indeed, a number of contributors felt that an all Wales thematic approach would be preferable to a regional one. A national thematic or sectoral model would be predicated upon groupings of providers developing materials according to their particular areas of expertise or excellence, possibly tied into ELWa's Networks of Excellence initiative and priority sectors.

5.22 A thematic approach could also address the development of cross-cutting themes such as materials in support of the Welsh Baccalaureate or Welsh medium material.

5.23 The pros and cons of a national model are discussed below as are the factors which would enable or inhibit the formation of such a consortium.

Table 4 National Model

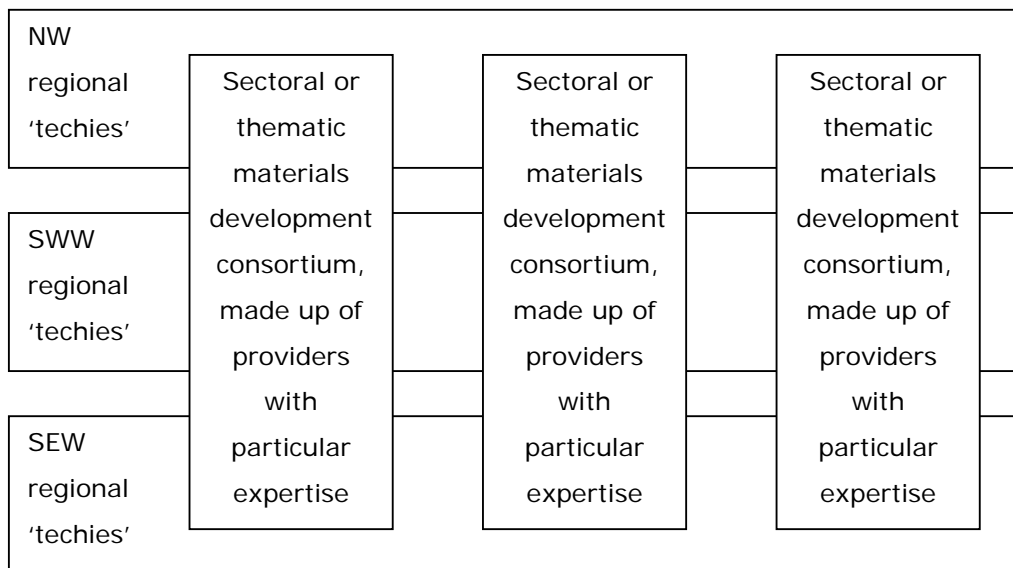| Pros	• Maximises use of resources – economies of scale
	• Allows for a range of specialisms to be developed
	• Wider input of expertise
	• Low risk of duplication within Wales
Cons	• Lack of regional identity – loss of control?
	• Large Network may be less easy to manage
	• Needs of North Wales may become marginalised

Enablers	• The processes, protocols, standards and specifications devised by the three existing Networks could be combined / adapted
Inhibitors	• Agenda may become more centralised to FE/HE • Schools and WBL providers not eligible for benefit under KEF funding • Existing partnership benefits and mutual trust would be diluted • Timescale likely to be longer

Combined Model

5.24 If a national model were adopted, there would be a danger that the support mechanisms provided by the NWETN would be lost. An alternative approach might be to combine the use of all-Wales thematic groupings of 'expert' providers to develop materials with a regional forum of 'techies' to facilitate the exchange of information and to provide mutual support.

5.25 Clearly, technical staff would need to be involved in sectoral/thematic consortia and could, therefore, provide 'bridges' between the regional and the national. Figure 1 below provides an illustration of the 'combined' model:

Figure 1 Combined Model - Schematic

NW regional 'techies'	Sectoral or thematic materials development consortium, made up of providers with particular expertise	Sectoral or thematic materials development consortium, made up of providers with particular expertise	Sectoral or thematic materials development consortium, made up of providers with particular expertise
SWW regional 'techies'			
SEW regional 'techies'			

5.26 The pros and cons of a combined model are discussed below as are the factors which would enable or inhibit the formation of such a consortium.

Table 5 Combined Model

Pros	• Allows thematic specialisms without compromising regional networks • Local protocols for delivery could remain in place • Manageable size at regional level

	• Allows regional identity, but with national resource development
Cons	• North Wales' sectoral priorities may be diluted
	• Regional providers may lack specialist sectoral support skills
Enablers	• The processes, protocols, standards and specifications devised by the existing NWETN could remain to a large extent
Inhibitors	• Existing Network members may be reluctant to cede control
	• Schools and WBL providers will need budget to buy in materials

5.27 One key issue needs to be resolved before further discussion surrounding the future of a/the e-learning Network/consortium takes place, is that of funding. The existing NWETN is guaranteed funding under KEF until April 2005, but it is possible that the WDA will adopt a different approach to transferring know-how from colleges into business as a result of the KEF review currently underway.

5.28 At present, ELWa had no budgetary provision to support regional or national e-learning partnerships. There is a grave danger of raising providers' expectations only to blight their hopes in six months time. The damage done to the NWETN by uncertainty surrounding KEF funding in early 2004 should serve as a lesson in taking any discussion forward.

6   Recommendations

6.1 As noted in the previous chapter, there is a fundamental issue of funding for a wider Network that needs to be resolved before any development can take place.

6.2 That aside, our preference is for the development of a model on the combination template, as we feel that this offers considerable advantages, especially in terms of materials development.

6.3 In the circumstances that such a combination model could not be developed in the short term on a national basis, then there would be some merit in adopting a combination of regional models 2 and 3, with schools / WBL providers as tier 2 members of the Network in terms of delivery and support and specialist thematic partners for materials development. Such material would be intended to fit seamlessly into a national model in due course.

6.4 A further permutation would be for schools to become second tier members of the Network, with WBL providers retaining a more commercial, customer relationship with the Network.

6.5 Providers need to be absolutely clear about what partnerships are expected to achieve and ELWa has an important role in providing unequivocal leadership in terms of defining priorities, co-ordinating activities and, if necessary, acting as impartial arbitrator

6.6 Having said that, ELWa needs to engage with e-learning experts from the provider network to develop informed, integrated and acceptable policies. The ILT Champions provide a particularly valuable resource in this sense and can ensure that different elements of ELWa's e-learning strategy are complementary

6.7 ELWa needs to acknowledge the limitations of e-learning as well as its potential. There is a danger of over promising and disappointing

6.8 It could be helpful to involve awarding bodies in laying out topic areas and standards for particular e-learning materials.

6.9 Priority should be given to developing e-learning materials which will be used by the greatest number of learners, giving careful consideration to materials which are already available through sources such as NLN, FENC and learndirect

6.10 Priority should be given to developing materials which add value to traditional teaching/training rather than remote access e-learning materials. Remote access learning is not what schools, colleges and WBL providers do best - that that should be left to properly resourced expert organisations such as the Open University, UfI and the BBC

6.11 It was argued that FEIs are probably in the best position to act as a bridge between various types of provider and they should be granted that role

6.12 ELWa should allow some room for providers to learn from experimentation and accept that not all e-learning materials developed will be effective

6.13 The partnership/consortium should encourage collective training or local mutual support arrangements between providers

6.14 Funding arrangements will need to reflect the need to maintain materials as well as to develop them

6.15 Finally, ELWa needs to ensure that there is both the awareness and the desire amongst providers to participate in a wider NWETN. In the absence of strong support, there may not be a case for investment.