e-Learning survey report

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Introduction

This article presents the results of a survey undertaken to identify the strengths, weaknesses and development needs regarding e-learning in our core subject disciplines (Philosophy, History and Philosophy of Science, Theology, Biblical and Religious Studies).

Care was taken both to cover issues related to actual e-learning practice and to identify attitudes towards e-learning (both in terms of used tools and in terms of tendencies for future developments). There were two versions of the survey, one for academics and one for students, to try to provide an holistic picture of the identification of strengths and weaknesses. Recent developments in e-learning (such as the rapid growth of collaborative tools and methodologies, the proliferation of synchronous Internet based communication technologies, and the virtual learning worlds such as SL) were covered.

The scope of the survey made its design challenging. New areas and items of investigation demanded more care in terms of cross referencing questions and results, so that a picture that makes sense out of all these significantly greater amounts of data comes to the surface.

An even greater challenge in terms of the analysis and discussion of this survey was the fact that there are no determinate statistics for the number of academics who teach and research in PRS, or for the students who are taught by them in the same disciplines. There are many academics who teach, and students who study, PRS related subjects in departments that are not labelled as such (for example PRS subjects are taught in Schools or Departments of English or the Humanities or Critical and Communication Studies). This challenge was addressed by contacting, via e-mail and post, all the departments and other academic units that have in their title one of the subject areas that our Subject Centre caters for through out the UK (covering England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). Parallel to this, emails and announcements of the surveys were placed in many discipline-specific open access discussion boards, blogs and wikis, in the hope that this would increase the base of the survey. Other activities such as further advertisement efforts in Discourse (the Subject Centre's journal), our website, and email lists with a learning and teaching focus augmented this effort.

The Bristol on-line survey system was used, and this proved a very useful tool which helped a lot in both the design and the implementation phases of the surveys. However, any fixed system has its limitations where depth is required, and so a question was inserted asking participants for their willingness to take part in follow-up interviews to clarify and make sense of the results. Eventually, four interviews took place, and their findings are included in this article, to add a qualitative dimension to the results of the surveys.

e-Learning Survey for PRS academics: the findings

The characteristics of the respondents

Despite various efforts to advertise the Survey widely, only 68 respondents participated during the period the Survey was open. The Survey was launched on August 13th 2007 and was closed on July 27th 2008. The response rate itself could be considered to be representative of major trends and attitudes towards the subject of e-learning in the PRS disciplines. Taking into consideration the significant challenge in terms of defining the target base of respondents, and in trying to compensate for this, analysis and discussion of the results below is focused on major trends and large percentages (more than 60-70%) indicating a clear majority in the opinions expressed.

In terms of the geographical location of the respondents, all regions were represented: 15 respondents came from Scotland, 39 came from England, 3 from Wales and 1 from Northern Ireland. The UK respondents came from 39 HEIs. A few (4) came from the Americas and other EU countries, while 6 respondents chose not to disclose their location.

In terms of their association to a funding council out of the 58 UK based respondents, only 4 were from Colleges and Universities not associated with a funding council.

The majority of the respondents (51) came from universities and colleges teaching primarily via traditional methods, 2 were from the OU (which teaches with an Open University and long distance methodology) and 5 more came from colleges and departments that teach primarily via distance and long distance education. Responding to a specific question about their primary teaching methodology, 14 academics indicated that they were involved primarily in long distance/ distance teaching and 51 that they followed traditional teaching methodology.

In terms of their subjects and disciplines, 41 taught philosophy, 19 theology, 17 religious studies, 5 philosophy of science and 1 history of science.

In terms of their role in the department/college they belonged to, 12 were heads of department or managers in their academic unit and 55 were teaching staff.

In terms of the level of studies they were involved in, 56 taught primarily in undergraduate studies, 43 taught in postgraduate programmes and 35 taught research students (while 7 indicated that they were involved with all of these

levels in some capacity or another).

Use of the Internet for social and research activities

This section of the survey asked participants 14 questions about the use of the internet for social and research related activities.

- 100% of the respondents used the Internet for e-mailing friends and family
- 37% used it for chatting
- 47% for job hunting
- 41% used it for applying to jobs on-line
- 70% used it for online research in terms of searching on line PRS databases and PRS journals
- 57% subscribed to PRS e-mail lists
- 7% had a blog (while 41% used the internet to see other people's blogs)
- 28% used the Internet to participate in social networking sites such as Facebook etc.
- Below 10% indicated that they used it to interact in virtual worlds with avatars.

There were also a few respondents who indicated in a free text box provided that they used the Internet for things not mentioned in the survey, such as to listen to radio, have an on line diary/agenda, maintain a personal website, Google searches for documents and Google tools for on line collaboration, to have video sessions with friends and family via Skype and for their CPD needs in terms of a webfolio.

Equipment used by respondents

The survey also asked participants to indicate what equipment they used.

- 51% indicated that they use a laptop
- 33% use a desktop at home
- 47% a desktop at work
- 6% have a PDA.

9 respondents indicated use of equipment not mentioned in the survey, such as voting pods and related software, projectors (for showing PowerPoint slides in lectures), iTunes, U. audio lectures and Librivox.org, and other video equipment, such as DVD players and VHS players.

Use of ICT for learning and teaching purposes.

Some of the most significant results of the research were related to the use of ICT for learning and teaching purposes:

- 64% of the respondents indicated that they used it for e-mail to staff and students
- 53% used it for provision of on-line resources
- 48% had a VLE resource for their students
- 36% had on-line discussion forums
- Less than 20% used blogs, wikis, on-line forms of assessment or on-line multimedia

- 33% indicated that their students could submit their assignments via email
- 8 respondents indicated uses not directly mentioned in the survey, such as Adobe Connect and Turnitin

There was also a free text answer in this section of the survey for people to add any information on projects they were involved in terms of ICT use not indicated in the Survey. 17 respondents indicated that they were involved in a variety of projects, such as maintaining sites that discuss recent developments in the disciplines (**http://ethicsinthenews.typepad.com/**), designing on-line CGI programmes for logic and critical thinking, creating models of argumentation via Java based technology, using ICT for course administration and registry related purposes, or to check plagiarism on line and others for discipline specific projects (some funded by our SC; one mentioned the site **http://www.div.ed.ac.uk/elearn.html** for more info on their discipline specific projects).

Level of support and provision of ICT in departments and schools

To contextualise the responses about the use of ICT for learning and teaching, the survey included a series of questions about the academic units' organisation of support for ICT use and provision of ICT in terms of teaching and learning. The findings here gave a clearer picture of the level of ICT use in PRS departments and other academic units:

- 24% indicated that their departments require compulsory provision of on-line resources (e.g., module handouts etc.)
- 22% used a VLE as a compulsory element in their teaching
- below 10% indicated that they have e-assessment, multimedia files, blogs, wikis, discussion forums and e-portfolios as a compulsory element in their teaching
- 18% stated that participation in discussion forums was actively encouraged

Evaluation of the e-learning condition of the disciplines, attitudes towards e-learning and future development

The survey included a series of questions (20 questions in total) asking the respondents to indicate whether they agree or disagree with statements related to how they saw the e-learning condition and trends in their disciplines, potential challenges, future development and feelings they may have in relation to them.

Responses of significance here were:

- the majority of respondents believed that the use of ICT provides flexibility in terms of need for teaching space (50% either agreed or strongly agreed)
- 80% believed that the use of ICT increases flexibility in terms of staff/student contact time
- 80% believed that the use of ICT is no substitute for face to face staff/student interaction
- 65% thought that the use of ICT makes things easier for students with a physical disability
- 57% believed that the use of ICT helps students with specific learning difficulties
- 90% thought that the use of ICT can benefit traditional methods of teaching
- 80% believed that the use of ICT in teaching and learning can benefit personal career development
- 80% thought that it is important for the future job prospects of students that their course provides them with experience in using ICT
- 80% disagreed with the statement: 'the use of ICT is not appropriate to teach in my subject area'

- 83% indicated that they encourage students in the use of ICT

This group of questions also included a question for a free text answer about what the respondents saw as major benefits in e-learning. Respondents there noted the great administrative and pastoral potential of e-learning related methods of gathering data for identifying significant patterns in student behaviour; others emphasised the student empowering role of e-learning especially in terms of students creating learning content themselves; others noted the international dimension in the use of e-learning and that it is easier via e-learning to talk simultaneously with many teachers, students, and external authorities and resource providers or experts on the same platform. They also highlighted the advantages of e-learning for dealing with shy students, or international students, who want to check spelling and validate their views on line before they respond to teacher and student requests; they noted that dealing with shy students in this way can be a most effective way to boost motivation and morale in them, provided they receive the appropriate training and induction process to gain all the necessary skills in the use of e-learning tools and methods. Some observed that ICT makes life easier for some students with special needs but more difficult for others. A few noted the availability of course material (on line journal articles and other web based material including video recorded lectures) at all times to students as an important e-learning advantage. Some observed that encouraging students to think by using different and novel media makes them think better in more traditional ones. Finally, others mentioned the fact that even though they think that e-learning is inevitable and all teachers have to use it in one way or another sooner or later, it provides teachers with the opportunity to think about new ways of teaching and learning and potentially in this way improve their teaching methodology.

Another free text question asked for the respondents' view regarding what they saw as major drawbacks in using ICT for teaching and learning. Answers here discussed issues such as the need to have certain provisions in place so that students keep coming to lectures and tutorials. Others emphasised that badly used ICT from both staff and students is working against teaching and learning; for this they suggested continuous training for staff (from specialised discipline specific advisers and consultants) and specialised induction sessions for students so that they know how to use ICT before they have to use it in course assignments etc. Others mentioned the fact that the teachers and tutors must make the rules of contact clear to their students at the start of the e-learning process, with availability at specific hours and in a specific way, if there is not to be an unreasonable demand made on staff in terms of workload. Most stressed the fact that more time is needed for staff to get acquainted with new technology; they indicated that this should be in the form of an institutional policy: so much time should be dedicated for all teaching and administration staff so that they can use ICT effectively. Some observed that e-learning does not allow for a process which was termed by one respondent 'the osmosis of learning', which can occur in a face-to-face tutorial where students learn in an indirect yet beneficial way. Yet others warned about the dangers of not having efficient and robust e-learning systems in place, noting that if systems do not work well when needed then the process can actually discourage learning. Finally, there were a few who noted that care should be taken that e-learning does not result in 'spoon-feeding' students, but rather is designed in such a way as to stimulate the critical abilities of both students and staff.

Beliefs and attitudes towards sharing of content, methodology and experience

In this section of the survey a series of questions related to sharing of resources (content, methodology, experience) were asked; most of the questions were based on similar questions in the HCA Survey (discussed earlier), in order to establish any significant similarities or differences across the disciplines in the humanities. The significant responses here were as follows:

- around 85% of the PRS respondents believed that sharing of ICT resources is important for the further development of the associated disciplines
- about 50% thought that it allows for an exchange of knowledge, experience, pedagogical approaches and teaching innovations
- in terms of the way that the sharing of resources should be implemented a significant number of the

respondents (around 30%) thought that such a sharing should be available for members of a given department within a university and be made available externally in a repository for people within the same discipline

- 70% indicated that they share teaching resources, and of those that did not, 40% indicated that they would like to

The three most significant responses to the question of what they consider as barriers for the sharing of electronic resources in their area were:

- lack of awareness of available electronic resources (41%)
- lack of time to undertake research on available resources (46%)
- concerns over ownership (42%).

Attitudes towards advances in the use of ICT for teaching and learning

The survey asked the respondents about their attitudes towards innovation in teaching and learning:

- 62% tried to read and keep informed of recent advances in the use of ICT in teaching and learning
- 64% indicated that they do not try to write up and publish results from their use of ICT.

Finally, the survey included a free text question, asking respondents for their feedback in terms of what they felt the survey should communicate to e-learning organisations and the UK government about what they should do to help develop e-learning further in our disciplines. More than 60% noted that more funding and resources should be provided for the development of e-learning our disciplines, both in terms of subject specific training and in terms of specialised software and databases for the use of teachers and students in our disciplines. Some suggested the creation of a web portal with subject specific information, resources and training with on-line conferences and on-line workshops available to all academics working within a specific discipline. They also suggested that this could involve a repository where all teachers and students could contribute with their own resources to create a shared pool of resources. Some stressed the fact that free and open source software and resources should be more supported by us and other governmental organisations and all training and resources using these open and free resources should have a priority. Some suggested that they would like to receive a newsletter highlighting recent developments in e-learning. Others noted that philosophy is one of the humanities subjects that has very few trustworthy resources available on-line, and observed that the Subject Centre's decision to support the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (**http://plato.stanford.edu/**) deserves praise. Finally, some observed that in order for academics in our disciplines to feel more at home with the new ICT media and their use, they should be more informed about the genuine academic discourse related to these media and the history and theory of technology.

e-Learning survey for PRS students: the findings

The characteristics of the respondents

The student survey (which was open from November 29th, 2007 till July 23rd, 2008) had a significantly larger pool of respondents (419 students responded to the questions of the survey) but because of the same considerations that were mentioned above it is not possible to ascertain the level of representation in terms of the target population. What can be determined, however, through this survey, are the major tendencies, attitudes and beliefs that students have towards e-learning in their subject specific studies. All major UK regions, levels of study and core subjects in our disciplines were represented. There were 214 students from England, 130 from Scotland, 64 from Wales and 11 from

other parts of the world; 382 were undergraduates and the rest postgraduates: 24 taught and 16 research; 314 students indicated that they studied at a Department of Philosophy, 104 at a Department of Theology, 66 at a Department of Religious Studies, 14 at a Department of Philosophy of Science and 4 at a Department of History of Science, while 90 indicated that they belong in other cognate disciplines (2 indicated that they studied for a degree in Biblical Studies), or that they studied for combined degrees with PRS as one of the main directions of study (with the other disciplines being quite varied: economics, sociology, psychology, literature, history etc.). (Undoubtedly, this significant percentage of the respondents (almost 20%), who, even though they do feel that they study PRS, do not belong in one clearly demarcated PRS department or school, affords an extra challenge for the survey to meet in terms of establishing what the conditions are of e-learning development in PRS departments and schools.) Almost all study at a university with a traditional teaching methodology (99%), while some indicated that their university follows a blended (traditional and e-learning) approach (11%) and some indicated that their university teaches courses off campus as well (23%).

Use of Internet for social and research activities

In their response to this group of questions:

- 96% indicated that they use the Internet to keep in touch with friends and family
- 65% used it for jobhunting
- 92% used it to access discipline specific journals on line
- 78% used it to access on line databases
- 92% used it to research in other portals and websites
- 15% used it have a blog
- 43% used it view other people's blogs
- 82% used social networking sites (such as myspace, facebook etc.)
- 35% used the Internet to play games on line
- 72% listened to music on-line
- 62% watched videos on-line

Use of equipment

- 344 students indicated that they used a laptop computer
- 270 used a desktop computer at their university or college
- 177 used a desktop computer at home
- 18 indicated that they had a PDA

In a free text question about what other equipment students use in their learning some indicated ipods, smart phones, mobile phones and dictaphones for recording/downloading lectures.

Use of ICT in learning

- 409 students indicated that they use e-mail to contact teachers and fellow students
- 385 accessed the on-line resources for their course
- 234 indicated that they had a VLE and they accessed it to study for their course

- 159 used discussion boards
- 48 used blogs
- 140 used wikis
- 20 used e-portfolios
- 99 used on-line multimedia
- 107 used on-line forms of assessment
- 237 submitted their work via e-mail
- 6 used avatars and virtual worlds (Second Life) for their course based learning

In a free text question about other uses of ICT in learning, students indicated that they use Instant Messenger and Skype for communication with other students about their courses, and that they download and listen to other relevant lectures from other lecturers in the UK or abroad.

Use of ICT in departments and schools

Students were also asked questions relating to ICT use in their departments and schools:

- more than 80% indicated that the use of e-mail and on-line resources was compulsory, actively encouraged or available to a great extent
- the use of a VLE was unavailable to a significant percentage of 13% and 20% of students were not actually aware of its existence
- more than 65% indicated that they were actively encouraged to use discussion boards, or that they were at least available, although a significant percentage of students were not aware of their existence (17%)
- A significant percentage of students also did not know about the availability of blogs (43%) or wikis (52%) for their course, while for e-portfolios it reached 60% and for multimedia 44%

Student attitudes towards and beliefs about e-learning

In terms of their attitudes towards and beliefs about e-learning, students responded as follows:

- More than 80% indicated that it provides flexibility in terms of a learning space and that it increases flexibility in terms of staff/student contact time
- 80% thought that e-learning cannot be a substitute for face-to-face staff/student interaction
- 68% thought that e-learning is helpful for students with physical disabilities, and 54% thought that it is helpful for students with learning difficulties
- 82% thought that e-learning can help traditional teaching methodology become more effective
- 70% thought that incorporation of ICT in their learning will benefit them in terms of their personal career development
- More than 40% disagreed with the statement that 'there is too much pressure to incorporate the use of ICT in teaching and learning'
- More than 75% thought that their courses should provide them with experience in the use of ICT for the improvement of their job prospects, but..
- Less than 20% either try to convince their Departments/Schools to incorporate more ICT in their teaching or try to convince themselves or other students to learn more about how to incorporate ICT in their learning

Student attitudes towards sharing of e-learning resources

In terms of the student attitudes towards the sharing of e-learning resources the responses were as follows:

- 76% thought that sharing of resources is important of the future development in their subject disciplines
- More than half of the students thought that sharing of resources amongst students saves them effort and time and enriches them with each other's knowledge, experience and learning strategies
- More than half thought that all the electronic material for courses within their department should be made available to all students of the department
- More than half also actually do share the electronic resources prepared for them by their teachers/tutors
- More than half thought that the most significant barrier to the sharing of electronic resources is lack of awareness about their availability

In a free text question about other issues students feel to be relevant for the sharing of resources, they indicated that students would benefit greatly through a creation of subject specific virtual libraries because 'there are never enough books'. Also some indicated that it allows full access to knowledge for students with physical and/or learning disabilities. Others stressed the fact that through this sharing, students get exposed to arguments and ideas not promoted by their own departments and thus gain a more wide knowledge in their disciplines. Yet other students commented on the fact that as travel becomes more expensive, sharing on-line resources becomes more and more important for students from small departments and universities, especially in disciplines such as PRS that rely heavily on texts and commentaries.

Attitudes of students to plagiarism

Most of the students knew, understood and agreed with the guidelines of their department/school about plagiarism (percentages ranged from 87-94%). In a free text question students were asked to describe what they thought is the difference between plagiarism and sharing of resources. Most answered this by noting that acknowledging the source is not plagiarising but 'stealing' from a source, and passing this off as one's, own is; and that you can share resources without plagiarising. There was a large percentage of students (more than 35%) that either did not understand or could not express the difference clearly: responses ranged from 'It is OK to share resources as long as one persons work is repeated or copied elsewhere without the owners permission and is then referenced' to 'it's a very fine line...' or 'not really sure'.

Also, in a free text question about the reasons for why students think that departments and universities should have plagiarising guidelines, most of the students replied that they need to have their degrees safeguarded from cheating and that these rules give meaning to grades and distinctions; also that they provide a moral nexus of values in academic work (honesty, integrity, respect and honour). There were however, some students who commented on the differences between departments and schools in their plagiarism guidelines, and some also expressed the common misconception of plagiarism in philosophy by saying that they felt at risk of being accused of plagiarism as in disciplines such as in the PRS to find something truly original and never thought of before, and in this way it is difficult to avoid plagiarism (in ignorance of the true source of one's idea).

Finally students were asked to provide their message to funding bodies and governmental agencies that support e-learning. They replied that universities should be convinced to allow more bandwidth to students in all areas of the campus (like residences and student halls), that all lecturers should be forced by departments and schools to put all the course material in VLEs or course websites in an appropriate time for study and that this should be a universal rule across all faculties for the benefit of students who have to study and work or live away from campus. Some actually commented on the poor state of e-learning conditions they had to deal with at a PRS department in comparison to other departments, schools and faculties they had to take courses from. Many students requested that

all lectures be video-recorded or at least recorded as audio files and be put on VLEs and course websites for students to catch up on lost lectures and tutorials, and to help them revise for exams. Finally some of them commented on the fact that either they lack the training to use e-learning resources effectively or that they have difficulty getting access to a desktop computer in their university; they also noted that any advance in e-learning conditions in PRS should also mean that students should have access to the resources available on-line either through special loans and grants to buy laptops, or by having more computers available for them on campus.

Follow-up interviews with students

In order to clarify the results of the survey and get a little more depth to the responses, a series of four scheduled interviews with students took place in late August. Two of the students were average ICT users, one advanced (with previous IT systems knowledge) and one with no previous ICT knowledge. Two were undergraduates and two were post-graduates. For the purposes of this article, I shall go on to summarise some of the more interesting responses.

Some students indicated that they use student e-mail lists for getting ideas for their work.

Another student indicated that he used blogs as a diary in his training for ministry work to help him collect and record his thoughts and experiences?an activity that he found particularly rewarding since he could use this method to en gage in discussion with colleagues and friends prior to course meetings. Students did indicate, however, that the emotional aspect is something they miss in their on-line conversations.

Another made the comment that since there was no provision in their departments for support in teaching them to use the e-learning resources available to them, and no induction course of any kind, this meant that either they did not know enough to use these resources effectively, or that in some cases they did not even know of their existence.

More than one student commented that the use of ICT cannot take the place of face-to-face contact between staff and students, expressing the feeling that face-to-face interaction in disciplines like philosophy is important for both the emotional aspect of teaching required (the teacher should be a friend to a student and this emotional aspect of teaching cannot be supported solely by ICT and e-learning) and the importance of immediacy of communication and non-verbal intuitions between teachers and students.

Some students compared their previous e-learning experience during secondary school and their current e-learning experience in the university. They thought that during their high school years they had a lot of e-learning tools and gadgets but not so much content, while in the university the situation is reversed: the emphasis is on content and less on tools. This, they felt, is somewhat imbalanced: they would like to see the increased availability of on-line resources to go in unison with a better provision of tools.

They also commented on the fact that some lecturers insist on their students taking on-line quizzes etc., which they found patronising and, where these on-line tests were prerequisites for exams, rather an imposition on the freedom of students to use the methods of learning with which they felt most comfortable. The students felt that e-learning tools and methodologies like these could be more enjoyable for students if they were provided for their own personal revision purposes.

Some students thought that one of the best uses of e-learning for their courses (especially in TRS subjects) is to use video-links with major religious figures, in order to facilitate direct questioning about their faiths.

Also, some students commented that plagiarism was never an issue during their high school days. So, there is an urgent need to have special induction courses at the beginning of their academic studies to build a clear understanding of what constitutes plagiarism. They thought that e-learning can provide this educational experience to them much more efficiently through on-line quizzes and exercises that students could do repeatedly till they figure out what they should do when they use other people's ideas and text.

Finally, some thought that our Subject Centre should take a more proactive role in terms of preparing students for a possible teaching career later on and this involves training them in discipline specific e-learning methodologies and the educational use of electronic resources.

Comparison of the findings in the two surveys

A comparison of the above findings brings to our attention some rather interesting points about the state of e-learning in PRS related disciplines in the UK. One of the most notable is the difference in percentages between the replies of academics and students in terms of their use of e-learning to research and socially interact. The students use the Internet to do research and interact socially with their peers and family to a significantly larger extent than academics. This perhaps can be partly explained through generational difference?what Prensky called 'digital chasm' (in his 'D igital Natives, Digital Immigrants', 2001). Prensky's ideas however, have attracted serious criticism (see Athanasopoulos, 2008 for some discussion of this criticism) and his theses alone cannot provide sufficient explanation for the causes for such a chasm between academics and their students in the PRS core disciplines. An explanation might be a genuine hostility among the PRS academics to anything emphasising technology. Many notable and authoritative figures in PRS subscribe to the cultural and philosophical/ theological critique against technology (e.g., Heidegger, Adorno, Deleuze, Virilio, Derrida, Baudrillard, Babich, Graham). But there are also theorists who try to answer such critiques (e.g., Dreyfus, Dewey, McLuhan, Stiegler, Ihde, Borgmann, Dennett, Floridi). So, is it merely the fact that these theorists who try to answer to the PRS critique of technology are just not so influential yet, which determines the rather limited provision of e-learning methods and tools in our core disciplines? A more detailed look at the findings of the survey may indicate further reasons for such a phenomenon. One of the related issues for the genesis of this phenomenon is that students today come from secondary schools that use e-learning tools proactively to both impress and familiarise their students with technological innovations. Most of the academics teaching in PRS do not have the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the available technology and furthermore are not provided with enough time and training opportunities to learn how to use e-learning tools well and efficiently (note the academics' message to the funding bodies described above, their replies to how they feel about ICT and the barriers they see as most obstructive for the future development of e-learning in their disciplines).

Another very important finding from the survey is the fact that a very large percentage of both academics and students in PRS disciplines believe that e-learning should not replace face-to-face interaction between teachers and students. Both academics and students noted that through a face-to-face interaction more aspects of (good) teaching are fulfilled. Academics mentioned an 'osmosis' of learning that can be effected with face-to-face interaction while for students the emotional support they need from their teachers and tutors for the continuation of their studies and their success in academic life cannot be delivered on-line.

Both groups agreed that in general e-learning can be beneficial for the further development of the PRS disciplines. However, both identified lack of training, funding and available time as major problems in allowing e-learning to push forward teaching and learning in PRS disciplines.

Important practical aspects regarding e-learning support were identified in both groups of respondents. Academics insisted that, with more training, attitudes towards the sharing of e-learning resources might improve and students insisted that such a sharing improves the conditions for learning especially for the students who meet specific challenges (whether physical or learning ones).

PRS students identified serious limitations in the use of e-learning: they felt that university and school authorities, as well as academics, should be convinced to have a more wide spread of e-learning resources available to students through VLEs or websites. (PRS disciplines seem to have been excluded somehow from such a pressure from university administrations). Students also noted that an increase in the e-learning development of the PRS disciplines needs to go hand in hand with an increase in e-learning support provided to the students in terms of the infrastructure offered to them by the university (e.g., available computers to them and enough broadband on campus).

Finally, PRS students identified a factor in their learning that could both support motivation for their studies in general, and for the incorporation of e-learning methods and tools in their learning: e-learning design and provision should be both fun for them, and presented in a way that allows them to understand its usefulness for their academic and future lives. If this is not the case, they react to it as paternalistic and an authoritarian tool for increasing the power of academics and of the university over their lives.

Comparison of findings with other Surveys (HCA and JISC)

As was mentioned above, some of the questions in our surveys were based on questions used in similar surveys in other disciplines. A published report from a relevant discipline to PRS (HCA's Report about Using and Sharing Online Resources in History, Classics and Archaeology, 2006) can provide the basis for more reflection on the survey results.

The PRS survey results were similar in some aspects with the findings of HCA's report: both have low levels of use for VLEs and digital archives as well as multimedia and on-line discussion groups. Both also provided answers to questions which offered broad agreement on the major barriers to the sharing of e-resources. However, there are also significant differences; for example in HCA, 79% of academic respondents indicated that they used e-mail for teaching, while for the PRS academics the percentage was significantly lower (only 64%).

These differences might be indicative of a lower level of e-learning support in PRS disciplines in comparison to HCA. Taking into consideration that the HCA findings are more than two years old (data was gathered in 2005), the low percentage rates in PRS surveys indicate that the e-learning support for PRS disciplines is in a worse condition than HCA.

This picture is further supported by the student survey, which notes the low support for e-learning in PRS at an institutional level.

A further insight to the findings of our Surveys can be found via a comparison with a recent study from JISC (Great Expectations Study, 2008) which has some interesting data for comparison. According to the publication 80% of the students use social networking sites regularly; this is very close to the percentage of PRS students (82%). Also, according to the JISC publication 73% use social networking sites to discuss coursework with other students; our study has found a significantly lower percentage (around 60%).

Further lines of inquiry

Based on the above report, I would like to outline some of my recommendations as to the further lines of inquiry that seem to be necessary and which would provide the basis for further research. A more detailed study, with a more representative sample of respondents, would be necessary in order to identify the reasons for the relatively low level of e-learning support in the PRS disciplines. The 'digital chasm' between PRS academics and PRS students could be studied in more detail and major reasons for this phenomenon should be identified and discussed.

I would recommend that the use and implementation of e-learning strategies at an institutional, school and departmental level (with a specific emphasis on PRS departments) be studied further, and the specific reasons for a low level of institutional e-learning support to PRS departments should be analysed and discussed.

Specific regional variations could also be investigated further, with more representative respondents and specific reasons for such variations in e-learning support identified and discussed.

Recommendations based on the surveys

One of the key findings from both surveys is that more discipline specific training is needed to allow both PRS academics and PRS students to be aware of the e-learning resources available to our disciplines, and to use them

efficiently. The Subject Centre could take a key role in co-ordinating such training events, in collaboration with other e-learning support organisations such as TechDis, JISC and the Academy. Another major finding is that there should be an institutional change in the way that PRS academics are supported to participate in e-learning training sessions organised by the Subject Centre and to apply their knowledge to their own teaching circumstances. More time and more financial support should be given to PRS academics to learn and try out new tools and new methods. PRS students also should be supported both in terms of infrastructure and in terms of additional discipline specific support and training. Finally, further follow up studies should be carried out on key findings from the surveys, to identify reasons and possibly recommend more practical solutions to the problems identified.

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