



Planning for personalised online learning

Personalising learning is at the heart of achievement for all learners. Enabling learners to learn at the pace and place that suits them is difficult for education providers to achieve, but is supported by new developments in technology. Learning and teaching for the 21st century needs to harness and exploit these new technologies to create opportunities for all.

Educational strategy needs to meet the future as well as the current requirements of our ever-changing society. Recent trends towards 'lifelong' and 'anytime, anywhere' learning mirror the changes from a manufacturing-base to a knowledge-base economy. As a consequence, there are associated pressures not just for increased skills but a demand for those skills to be both flexible and transferable.

The e-strategy published in 2005 by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), *Harnessing technology: transforming learning and children's services*, aims over the next few years to:

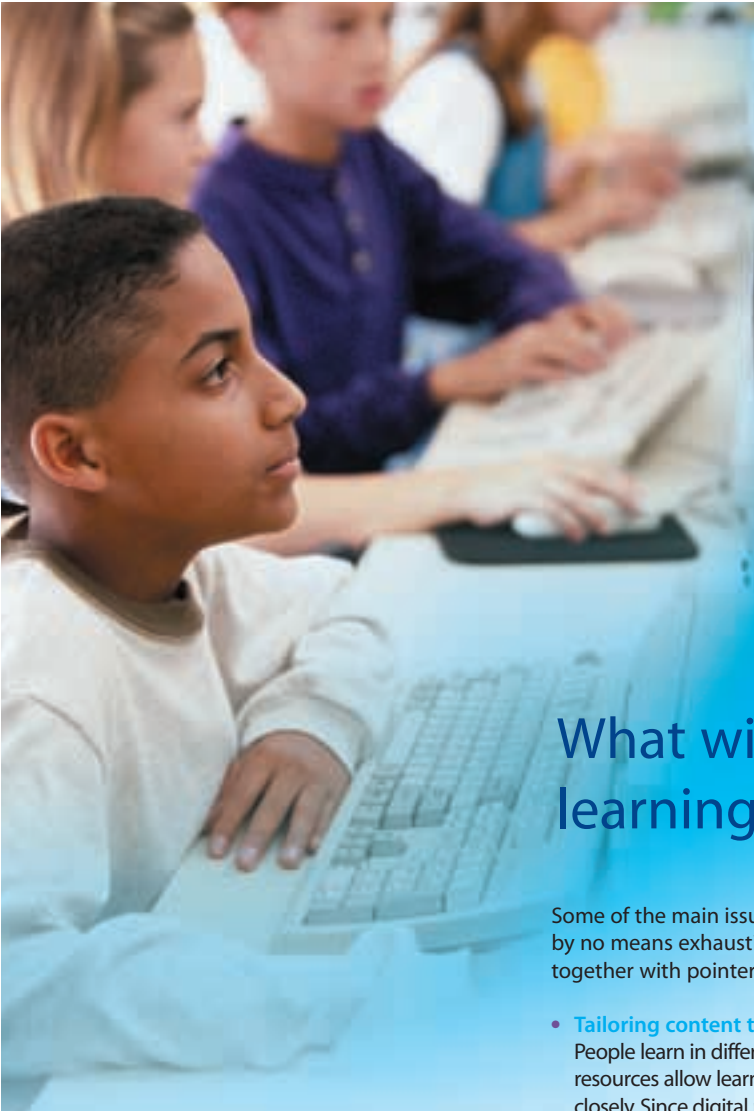
- transform teaching, learning and help to improve outcomes for children, young people, and adults through shared ideas, more exciting lessons and online help for professionals
- engage 'hard-to-reach' learners, with special needs support, more motivating ways of learning, and more choice about how and where to learn
- build an open accessible system, with more information and services online for parents and carers, children, young people, adult learners and employers; and more cross-organisation collaboration to improve personalised support and choice
- achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness, with online research, access to shared ideas and lessons plans, improved systems and processes in children's services, shared procurement and easier administration.

Much of the e-strategy will be delivered through an integrated online information service. It will provide support for learners, allow a collaborative approach to personalised learning activities, enable personal development for practitioners and leaders and be delivered through a common digital infrastructure. One of the key objectives of the e-strategy is to provide:

a personalised learning space with the potential to support e-portfolios available to every school by 2007–08.

The e-strategy therefore raises two key questions for schools: 'What will it mean for my school?' and 'How do we plan for this strategically?' Providing answers to these questions will lead to a range of other associated issues.

This publication aims to address these questions and define a starting point for schools and other educational institutions. Below are some issues for you to consider in defining a starting point for the development of a practical, strategic vision for your school.



What will personalised online learning mean for my school?

Some of the main issues relating to personalised online learning are listed below. These are by no means exhaustive, but they will provide an overview of some of the key aspects, together with pointers to other areas for consideration.

- **Tailoring content to user needs and learning styles**

People learn in different ways and at different times. The breadth and flexibility of digital resources allow learners to customise their learning to meet their individual needs more closely. Since digital resources can blend many forms of media, they can also make the learning experience more engaging to students – particularly for those outside the main stream.

- **Continuity of learning and out-of-hours learning**

Online technologies enable home learning to take place. Much informal learning takes place outside school hours and new technologies can help to make this possible. They can facilitate the involvement of parents in their children's development and give parents secure access to performance information.

- **Supporting anytime, anywhere learning**

Where online learning is available, students will be able to access resources remotely from outside the school, thus removing traditional boundaries to learning. Not only does this create new opportunities for enhancing the learning experience, it is also particularly valuable for re-engaging disaffected students and for children who have less traditional lifestyles (members of the Traveller community, for instance).

- **Enabling peer/mentor dialogue**

The sharing, adapting and repurposing of digital resources need not be restricted to the immediate institution. Online technologies can support the spread of exemplar and innovative practice across schools, authorities, regions and even countries. Also, the wealth of digital assets can be more effectively mapped to the programmes of study, thus matching learning outcomes to curriculum expectations.

- **Assessment for learning**

Learners have the potential to make more progress if they understand the aims of their learning, where they have reached in relation to their aims and how they can achieve those aims (or close the gap in their knowledge). Online or digital assessment tools can support the process – and even include planned teacher interventions.

- **Involving learners in their own learning**

Learners must be at the heart of any educational strategy. Encouraging ownership of learning as well as providing the tools to enable this to take place enhances the motivation to learn.



How does a school plan strategically for online learning?

Every school's needs are different and each school's readiness to adopt – or adapt – online learning technologies will vary. The following indicates some of the considerations that schools need to address in order to help them move towards a readiness to implement a realistic, achievable strategy.

Experience suggests that the successful implementation and embedding of an online learning strategy within any school is dependent upon making information and communications technology (ICT) in learning and teaching an integral part of the school's culture. This means planning for change management. It is suggested that school leadership teams take advantage of training and support offered by their local authorities and/or regional broadband consortia (RBCs), by organisations such as the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) with its Strategic Leadership of ICT (SLICT) course or by commercial suppliers. It is hoped that everyone involved in educational institutions will adopt new technologies so that ICT becomes embedded in the strategic direction of learning and teaching at all levels.

Defining institutional readiness

This is about defining and measuring the answers to the question: 'Where are we now?' Understanding a school's starting point allows management to plan and describe its future developments as well as put in place the instruments to measure progress. The move towards online learning requires institutional change and, for this to be embedded successfully in your school, the issues presented here ought to be at an appropriate stage of maturity.

How do you make it happen?

As well as making the infrastructural changes, it is vital not to overlook the human factors. Consider everyone – pupils and parents as well as teachers, governors and support staff – throughout the planning and implementation process. Change often requires investment in new skills, so professional development has a significant role to play in successful strategic implementation.

Cultural change and change management

New ways of thinking and different ways of doing things contribute to a change in culture. The careful planning of change and the involvement of those affected in the process will increase your chances of success.

School development planning

Schools constantly need to review their planning in order to extend and challenge learning and teaching as well as exploit new and emerging technologies. To achieve continuous improvement they must also review the effectiveness of the delivery mechanisms and plan their infrastructure accordingly. They need to consider carefully the required short-, medium- and long-term investments in the online technologies to meet the school development plan.

Enabling data flow

Management planning also needs to acknowledge demands that personalising learning places on data outside of the institution. Enabling access to learning, and information about learning has huge associated benefits, for example involving parents in their child's learning.

Building in accessibility

Accessibility to learning support for all learners should be built in to institutional strategies from the start.

Online learning technologies: two case studies

The impacts of planned and managed change on the effective integration of ICT in a school should not be underestimated. Recent case studies from two secondary schools, both using the same online learning technologies, reflect differing outcomes. Both schools were using a learning platform for the first time.

School 1

The school set aside five teacher days for the project. It used the first of these to present an overview of the new hardware followed by a brief introduction to the technologies. It identified a number of teachers to act as 'champions' to explore the teaching and learning opportunities. Exemplars of these are being disseminated throughout the rest of the school through a series of planned events.

In the words of the headteacher: "All in all, I believe we have got every opportunity to make an impact on joint planning, quality curriculum materials and more interactive learning. And teachers feel they have been given the tools to do the job."

School 2

Some staff received one-to-one training, but there was no whole-school training strategy for the teachers. As the ICT co-ordinator said, "The danger is, with all these things, if you are not careful you don't get enough teacher input into the whole thing. It becomes a wonderful front face for advertising the school, but a useless tool for the curriculum ... the initial rush of enthusiasm from the teachers has gone because it didn't work first time."

Some months into the project it was recognised that the school had a need to set a strategic direction for the learning platform. "There is much potential, but the vision needs to be consolidated and management of the project extended to ensure that the main goals are met."

The school is now working to redefine its implementation strategy.





Support for planning and funding

To help to support the crucial decisions that need to be taken over the coming months and to pre-empt common pitfalls, Becta is developing an online tool as part of the self-review framework due for release during spring 2006. Working with this tool will help you to understand your school's present position and to create a developmental framework to increase your levels of e-competence.

In addition to this, the DfES is issuing a complementary set of advice and guidance notes relating to its funding strategies designed to help schools achieve these aims and objectives. Its publication, *Funding to support the provision of learning platforms in schools 2006–2007*, is available online [<http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/learningplatforms>]. The booklet provides advice and information for primary and secondary schools as well as local authorities. It covers the strategy behind the funding allocations in the short, medium and long term. The booklet explains how schools should be planning their expenditure, with case studies of successful learning platform implementations, as well as references to sources of further information.

What is a learning platform?

Learning platforms vary considerably. There is a great deal of jargon about learning platforms, but basically there are three levels of sophistication. Below are some brief descriptions of the main differences. These pointers are intended to be indicative rather than definitive.

- **Simple web-based learning content systems**
These are simple internet-based services. They usually offer facilities to upload and download files, as well as tools for basic communications such as message boards or maybe a chat facility.
- **More advanced systems, often called virtual learning environments (VLEs)**
These offer more sophisticated tools such as learner support (course information, tutor support, live mentors, peer support), learner tools (such as tools to create web pages), management and tracking of learner activity, and more highly developed assessment tools.
- **Managed learning environments (MLEs)**
These are comprehensive systems where the VLE and the school management information systems (MIS) and other programs (such as finance or staffing systems) can share data and exchange information. It is intended that all schools will ultimately have access to an MLE.

You can deliver personalised online learning with any of these types of learning platform. However, the level of sophistication and the range of services that a learner can access will, of course, depend on the type of system used.

Taking personalised learning forward

Becta is working to develop a set of functional and technical specifications for learning platforms. This is due for publication in the spring of 2006 to coincide with the publication of the Becta self-review tool. The specifications will provide details of the services that learning platforms should offer at each level and how these should function. The intention is two fold:

- To provide more technical guidance, clarity and reassurance to schools purchasing a learning platform or improving and updating an existing service (working in conjunction with the self-review framework cited above)
- To provide a baseline of requirements to which vendors will be expected to conform or match their products (even for products they have already supplied to schools).

Exactly which learning platform a school chooses to purchase, and when, will still be the decision of the school. However, by using the self-review framework together with the functional and technical specifications, schools will be able to make better-informed decisions and have more confidence in the products they choose. Added to this will be the capacity to use aggregated powers of procurement through clusters of schools, the local authority or the RBC.

By embracing ICT and embedding these new and emerging technologies into whole-school strategic planning, school leaders will have real opportunities to transform learning and teaching to meet the needs of the 21st century.