



EXTRACTED FROM:

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**TRANSFORMING HIGHER  
EDUCATION THROUGH  
TECHNOLOGY-ENHANCED  
LEARNING**

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ISBN 978-1-907207-11-2

© The Higher Education Academy  
December 2009

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## **INTRODUCTION**

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AND MARTIN OLIVER**

This book represents an important snapshot of higher education's current thinking about the impact of technology on its own teaching and learning. Although this volume was first conceived as dissemination for the Benchmarking and Pathfinder Programme, the final edited collection is somewhat broader in scope, and more reflective in tone, than a straightforward account of the outcomes. The aim of the Benchmarking and Pathfinder Programme, in which 77 institutions participated between 2005 and 2008, was to help them assess their progress and then develop their priorities for the development of technology-enhanced learning. Some policy-makers have placed great store by the potential of technology to transform the trade-off between cost and quality in higher education, an issue that resonates only too strongly in the face of an inevitable financial constraint on development. The programme was initiated by the Higher Education Funding Council for England in the immediate aftermath of a rather traumatic event for UK e-learning – the demise of the UK e-University – and the programme represented a welcome opportunity to return the key responsibility for development back into the hands of policy-makers and practitioners in the institutions themselves. At the same time as Pathfinder, the Scottish sector enjoyed a similar opportunity with its e-Learning Transformation Programme. Latterly, Wales has initiated its own enhancement programme, with institutions again leading the development activity. Institutions across the whole UK HE sector have therefore had a recent opportunity to think hard about the opportunities offered by technology. The contents of this edited volume of articles offer both some results of their current analysis, and a reflection on the direction for future policy.

The book is structured into three sections, with six chapters in each. In the first section the focus is on national policy in technology-enhanced learning (TEL), the second is on institutional approaches, and the third looks at how technology is serving new thinking in pedagogy. The contributors to this volume were all invited by the editors to submit a chapter, based on the impact of their work in the Pathfinder programme, or because their work brings an important perspective that helps us to understand the programme in a wider context. All chapters were reviewed by at least two members of the editorial team, and in several cases by an appropriate anonymous reviewer.

In Chapter 1, Jane Plenderleith and Veronica Adamson, who have been influential advisers on e-learning strategy to all UK funding councils, set the scene for the rest

of the chapters by describing the policy landscape for transformation. Their chapter not only gives a comprehensive account of the development of national strategies in this area, but gives us insight into the subtle shifts in thinking that have underpinned the development of strategy, both from the Government and in the funding councils. Harvey Mellar and Magdalena Jara, in Chapter 2, approach TEL from a rather different but still crucial perspective – that of quality. Recent years have witnessed a distinct change of emphasis from quality assurance to quality enhancement, but there has been a surprising lack of policy around the issues raised by the rapid expansion of flexible delivery, e-learning in particular gives rise to questions about quality that echo even beyond the sector. In Chapter 3, Derek Morrison, who has led the Benchmarking and Pathfinder Programme, and now leads the Welsh programme, offers a critical reflection on the thinking about technology as transformational that informs much of the UK's current strategy. Following that, Terry Mayes provides a demand-side perspective that shifts the emphasis from institutional provision to the roles of the teachers and learners themselves. The idea of transformation may apply to individuals as powerfully as it does to institutions. Then, completing Section 1, there are perspectives from outside the UK, first an Australian view from Shirley Reushle, Jacque McDonald and Glen Postle, then a focus on European projects that have attempted to develop virtual campuses, from Mark Stansfield and Thomas Connolly.

In the first chapter of Section 2 (Chapter 7), Paul Bacsich introduces the institutional level of analysis by reviewing the methodologies used in the benchmarking exercise. Also at that level, Laura Czerniewicz and Cheryl Brown discuss the evidence suggesting that the effectiveness of e-learning policy will depend to some extent on the nature of institutional culture. This section then offers some specific approaches to transformation that have emerged from Pathfinder as issues for institutional policy. Susan Westerman and Wayne Barry describe an enabling staff development approach that involves intensive support for individual academics to raise their level of digital literacy. In Chapter 10, Alejandro Armellini, Gilly Salmon and David Hawkrigde describe the highly effective method of working with programme teams, called *Carpe Diem*, while in Chapter 11, Irene Anderson and Peter Bullen explain how their institutional 'Change Academy' approach has had similar success across an entire institution. Both these approaches exploit the crucial opportunity offered by course design or redesign, and both methods are being now being offered to institutions across the sector. Finally in this section, in Chapter 12, Harvey Mellar, Martin Oliver and Christina Hadjithoma-Garstka reflect on another key issue for institutions – the extent to which transformation is underpinned by the institution's own research.

The focus in Section 3 moves to pedagogy. Each of the national initiatives discussed in Section 1 has, in one sense or another, acknowledged that the transformations sought cannot be achieved through technology developments alone. Indeed this point is increasingly recognised in the funding councils' strategy documents in which technology is described increasingly as a tool that facilitates the

introduction of more powerful and effective methods, particularly in pedagogy. It is these changes in method that we need to understand: the nature of the technology used to achieve them can sometimes simply distract us. In each of the chapters in Section 3, therefore, we see a consideration of this relationship between pedagogy and technology. In Chapter 13, Rhona Sharpe focuses on the impact of researching the learner experience itself, and describes how a thriving Special Interest Group (SIG) in this area has emerged from Pathfinder. The remaining chapters then describe attempts to use pedagogical change directly to underpin transformation. Two of these were projects in the Scottish e-Learning Transformation Programme. The first (Chapter 14), described by David Nicol and Steve Draper, involved deriving a new approach from pedagogical principles around assessment and feedback, while in the second (Chapter 15) Andrew Comrie, Keith Smyth and Terry Mayes describe an attempt to give learners more control over their own learning activity. In Chapter 16, Richard Hall and Heather Conboy consider some key issues raised in Pathfinder by exploring the potential of the read/write web, while in Chapter 17 Jethro Newton and Andrew Middleton describe how sector-wide interest in podcasting as a tool that generates new pedagogical thinking has also led to the emergence of a SIG. Finally, in a suitably visual chapter, Phil Gravestock and Martin Jenkins argue in Chapter 18 that giving students the tools and competencies to present their learning in new media can have an invigorating effect on their motivation.

During the period when these transformational programmes were operating some striking changes have occurred in the world outside higher education, particularly as young people in general have started to use the Internet to share their experiences with each other digitally. This seems to signal a fundamental change in the way young people learn, though the change is more likely to be cultural than cognitive. In this context the impact of the programmes themselves in generating transformation in higher education is hard to judge since change is continuous and rapid in some areas, while the tendency to continue to teach in traditional ways is a strong counteracting force. This volume gives a sense – as the title of a Pathfinder report<sup>1</sup> indicated – of both the realisations and the challenges.

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1 *Challenges and Realisations from the Higher Education Academy/JISC Benchmarking and Pathfinder Programme.* End of programme report. Available from: <http://elearning.heacademy.ac.uk/weblogs/pathfinder>