

Charles Darwin University

Title: Evaluation of *Learnline*

Background

Web-based learning was formally introduced to Charles Darwin University (CDU) in 2003 using a learning management system called *Learnline*.

Learnline integrates web-based learning, other e-learning resources and student administration data into a centrally managed system that is accessed by staff and students. The system is based on licensed Blackboard software and includes Horizon Wimba LiveClassroom and Voice Tools plug-ins, locally developed websites and blogs.

CDU is a dual sector institution with approximately 17,000 students and nine campuses located across the Northern Territory. Since the implementation of *Learnline* the university had experienced a large increase in enrolments in units offered online. A very diverse group of learners spread across urban, regional and remote areas were able to access learning and training using *Learnline*. Online delivery of higher education units was steadily increasing, but vocational and technical education units needed more input and improvements to encourage the move to blended and online delivery modes.

Prior to the evaluation of *Learnline* there was no research data available to show what helped or hindered staff adopting online delivery. The university also needed evidence about the usage and quality of its online learning services.

What was done

The university appointed an external consultant to undertake a benchmarking survey of staff who were both users and non-users of *Learnline*. CDU provided strategic support and funding to carry out the exercise.

Eighty teachers (approx. 15% of academic staff) participated in the survey. Focus groups, telephone and face-to-face interviews, and email surveys were used for data gathering. The response rate was high (more than 80%).

The university is now able to extract data on the use of e-learning in terms of the number of units and access to those units. It has data on a set of 24 indicators – three on teaching and learning and 21 on course development, institutional support, course structure, faculty support, student support, and evaluation and assessment. This data provides valuable evidence of the quality of web-based learning delivery, services and resources.



Benefits

- The evaluation informed the review of professional development content and delivery, and shaped strategies for equipping teachers with the right sets of knowledge and skills so that the quality of online content and services to students could be improved. Data gathered by the project identified the specific areas of e-learning services that were considered satisfactory and those that need further improvement. For example, the existing introductory staff training sessions for *Learnline* were rated highly. On the other hand, needs were identified for customised training in some subject areas, for some of the less commonly used features of *Learnline*, and for sessional and remote area staff. The findings also highlighted the need to allocate more time to teaching staff to develop the online content, especially for new courses and units, or those undergoing major revisions.
- The data, which provided solid evidence on the performance of *Learnline*, was incorporated into a submission to management for additional resources such as information technology hardware and software and staff time. This aligned well with the university's commitment to evidence-based decision-making.
- Management and staff at the university recognised the advantages and value in collecting this data. A recommendation to conduct a similar survey with students in late 2006 has been proposed to the Vice Chancellor's Management Group. It is also proposed that the benchmarking survey be repeated with staff every two years.
- There was much interest in the outcomes from teachers, CDU management and external networks of the university (eg ACODE members) who were considering similar exercises. This showed that effective evaluation was valued widely across the organisation and its networks.
- The findings of the survey will inform the Northern Territory's Flexible Learning Plan.

Lessons

- The use of an external consultant led to increased staff support for and participation in the evaluation, and ensured that an independent opinion was obtained and teachers were able to be open with their views. It also meant that university staff did not have to conduct the survey in addition to their normal work.
- The use of focus groups, interviews and questionnaires resulted in a more complete understanding of the impact of *Learnline* than any one method alone would have produced. "My advice to others is to use more than one method to collect data and to use an external consultant. For instance, if you rely only on a questionnaire, there may be limited responses and you would not get the whole picture." Dr Terry Clark, project manager at CDU.

Final statement

"Benchmarking is essential if you need an evidence base for your decision-making around online learning. That needs to come from a position where we know where we've come from and where we are going to. And prior to this survey we were only basing our decisions on anecdotal evidence." Dr Terry Clark, project manager at CDU.