The Manchester College on its e-Learning vision

Two colleges with extensive learning technology expertise - City College Manchester and Manchester College of Arts and Technology (MANCAT) - came together in August 2008 to form The Manchester College, now one of the largest colleges in Europe.

Picture shows: Openshaw

E-Learning in the context of the college's strategic vision
Although The Manchester College has been in existence for less than a year, the Senior Management Team has made great strides in merging the two predecessor colleges and building a leading institution.

Senior Vice Principal Marie Gilluley describes how learning technologies fit into the college's strategy: "Innovation is key to the delivery of our strategic objectives, and the innovative development of learning technologies is an area of priority. To support this, we have produced an e-strategy which sets out how information and learning technology should contribute to continuous quality improvement and how assistive technology can be used to remove barriers to learning."

Merging expertise
Coincidentally, both predecessor colleges had introduced the open source learning management system Moodle as their VLE and had made extensive use of it across a wide range of courses, using it as a vehicle for carrying resources as well as course creation within Moodle.

Students are now able to gain access to coursework in and outside the college through Moodle at anytime. The new college has its own 'OurTube' for podcasting where staff can upload their own video and other multimedia resources and download them in a wide range of formats. Other initiatives include developing Skills Zones for students who need support for literacy and numeracy skills and exploring use of Nintendo DS, Wii and accessibility tools for text, audio and multi sensory approaches. They are also using online assessment as part of the student basic skills assessment (BSKB – Basic Skills and Key skills Builders). This enables teaching staff to provide personalised support for students and help with basic skills or key skills. In addition, e-Portfolios are being trialled within work-based learning provision so that students and staff can gain access to information and data to support learning and assessment, both in and outside college.

Alongside these developments, learners are using technology in so many different ways. For example, they use mobile learning in construction courses where students collect evidence for their portfolios via their mobile phones. The Music Technology department also extensively utilises technology, including web 2.0 tools such as nings. They provide master classes that offer opportunities for learners to engage in online discussions with professional musicians, such as composer Simon May.

The college has a long tradition of supporting achievement of professional qualifications through open and distance learning, offering a wide range of programmes. The Flexible Learning Directorate within the college, branded as 'MOL', is now the preferred supplier for the Chartered Institute for Personnel Development (CIPD) and provides resources to support CIPD itself. Future plans include the development of CIPD learning from paper and CD to an online system.

In addition, The Manchester College is the largest provider of offender learning in the UK, currently delivering in four of the national regions, although this is due to expand further. Staff teaching in prisons are supported by colleagues with an "e-guide" role and a dedicated Moodle site provides a vehicle for sharing resources.

Although The Manchester College clearly has a national reach, of strategic importance is the impact it has within the city of Manchester and the North West region. To deliver its local mission, it works in partnership with a large number of organisations, including Manchester Library and Information Service, and several college campuses offer award-winning library facilities which operate as both public libraries and college learning resource centres.

The 'green' side of IT is not neglected, and the college is committed to developing technologies that can support sustainability and minimise environmental impacts -

reducing its carbon footprint by reducing energy resources. Planned accommodation developments will be carbon neutral and new technology will be wired-in.

Guidance and networking opportunities from The Association for Learning Technology (ALT)
ALT is one of the organisations that the college turns to for information and resources on technology in educational environments. It brings together all those with an interest in the use of learning technology. As well as being a sixth form and further education provider, The Manchester College is also a higher education institution, offering a range of foundation degrees and degrees.

The college finds that ALT provides valuable information on the FE/HE interface through its bulletins and publications. This is useful because IT in teaching and learning is not something to deal with in sector-based segments. The learners are moving between the segments even if the teachers and managers are staying put.

As the Head of Learning Resources, Kevin Carrick is involved in ALT discussion groups online, covering topics such as classroom voting systems, web conferencing and course creation tools, which the college is in the process of introducing.

Kevin says: "These discussion groups enable participants to approach others for advice and experience on software, and often provide good contacts for suppliers."

On The Manchester College's path to success, it is clear that developments in the use of information and learning technology will continue to ensure that it is very well placed to respond to the major changes and challenges facing the world of education and training.

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The Manchester College http://www.themanchestercollege.co.uk/

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