

# Professional development for e-learning: A framework for the New Zealand tertiary education sector

Tertiary e-learning research funded by the Ministry of Education

## Otago University Project

Professional development for e-learning in the tertiary sector

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Professional Development for e-learning: Adoption, Implementation and Improvement

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction and approaches

1. New Zealand is one of many developed nations that is exploring the role that e-learning may have in strengthening its education system and tertiary education's contribution to national development. Since the early 2000s New Zealand's tertiary education sector's e-learning capabilities have been the subject of considerable discussion, research and promotion. Several studies and reports have highlighted professional development (PD) for e-learning as a priority so that teachers may best support and encourage their students' learning.
2. The broad aim of the research reported here was to devise a strategic framework to support professional development for e-learning within New Zealand's tertiary education sector. The research was supported by grants from the Ministry of Education New Zealand for two projects; Professional development for e-learning in the tertiary sector (the Otago University team) and Professional Development for e-learning: Adoption, Implementation and Improvement (a consortium team based around Massey University). The topics arose from stakeholder feedback to the Ministry on previous e-learning projects.
3. The Otago project started with a review of research in the UK, Australia and NZ with a focus on PD for e-learning in order to establish a structural basis for a PD framework and a preliminary outline of the framework. The Otago team proposed that the adoption and success of any PD framework would depend on how individuals related to the framework and its mode of operation. In this context, their conceptions of e-learning and of PD for e-learning would likely influence the application of the framework to them and to their professional development. The Otago team then set out to explore variation in the conceptions held by teachers, and by those who support teachers, of e-learning and of professional development for e-learning so as to better understand the likely application of the framework.
4. The Massey-led project focussed on the factors that influence the uptake and delivery of current professional development opportunities in institutional contexts and involved an on-line survey and semi-structured interviews to examine the beliefs, experiences and practices of individual staff. These methods were used to explore staff and institutional capabilities and to consider the implementation and embedding requirements for the adoption of, and continuous improvement in, e-learning. The research drew on experiences of staff to help identify priorities for e-learning PD and to identify strategies and/or materials which could be used by NZ tertiary education organisations (TEOs) to inform current and future need, priorities and practices associated with e-learning PD.
5. The two projects worked collaboratively for much of 2007, using a wide range of research approaches, and came together to develop a framework and associated

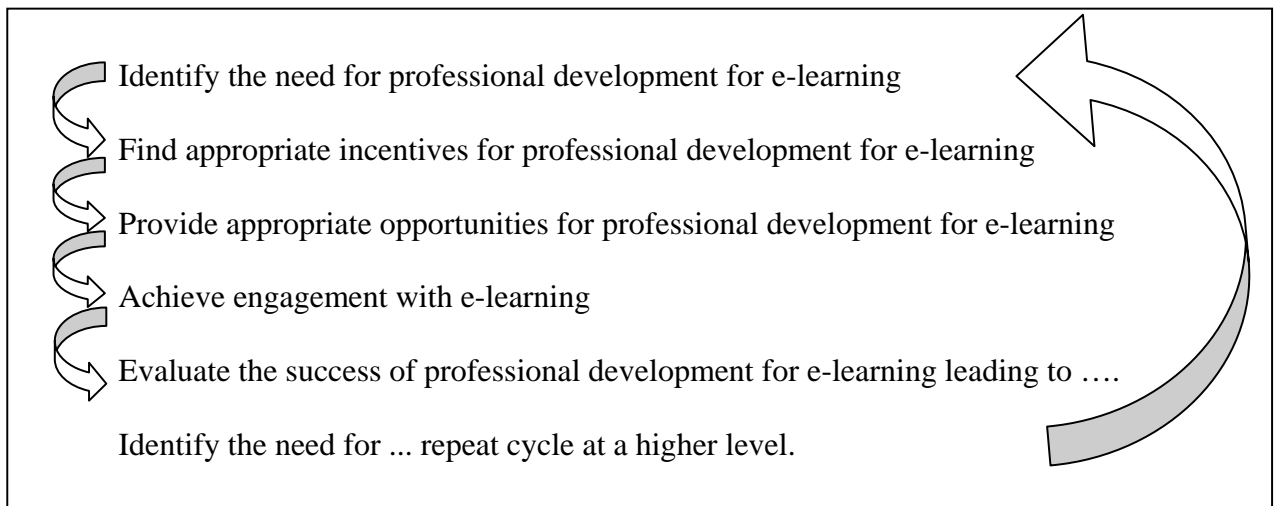
resources to support the ongoing PD for e-learning of teachers, and of those who support them, in the tertiary sector.

## Results leading to the development of a *PD for e-learning* framework

6. Despite the impressive range of research on this and related topics and the breathtaking extent to which governments, representative bodies and institutions have developed and implemented strategies to achieve certain outcomes, the range of approaches to promote professional development for e-learning, described by the Otago team from the international literature, may be simply categorised. Whether the perspective is that of an individual teacher, a particular academic department, an institution or a segment of the tertiary education sector, those who seek to influence can do so by providing direction (leading the way), by persuasion (by providing incentives; reward and recognition) or by coercion (with obligations and penalties).
7. The online survey conducted by the Massey-led project demonstrated that the top five ranked approaches for PD for e-learning are: sharing knowledge with colleagues; spontaneous learning arising from work or personal activities; learning through informal discussions in the workplace; regular reading of journals and books relevant to a profession; and acquiring knowledge through browsing websites or ‘surfing the net’. These can all be classified as informal activities, defined for the purposes of the survey as “activities undertaken that increase your knowledge in a particular area but which are not formally acknowledged”. There was also a high level of awareness of more formal e-learning PD courses available across institutions (71 %), and a much lower percentage of respondents (53 %) having engaged in some form of either formal or informal professional development for e-learning.
8. Phenomenographic research conducted by the Otago group resulted in a description of the domain space of e-learning (5 categories) and of PD for e-learning (4 categories). The categories describe substantial variation in the ways that teachers, and those who support teachers, conceptualise these phenomena.
9. Massey’s interviews to record, contextualise and review the experiences of staff demonstrated different and varied trajectories in their e-learning journeys, and staff had different expressed PD needs, capabilities and self efficacy. Moreover, the interviews demonstrated the importance and impact of institutionally specific factors related to policy and practice influencing uptake and continued engagement in e-learning, and e-learning professional development. For example, infrastructural, policy and social connections were often poorly linked, causing both confusion and frustration for staff. Staff sometimes struggled to negotiate institutional structures, particularly where support was dispersed across different organisational units. Managerial support was seen to be important by staff, but was not always forthcoming. Staff expressed a desire for recognition and

allowance for the time commitment needed for building e-learning capability through PD, with recognition in workloads.

10. The two research groups developed a PD framework (see diagram below) that variously combined practitioner participation, leading the way, and incentivisation (via reward and recognition), conceptualised within a development spiral. Working at all levels the framework suggests an iterative sequence of analysis and activity. This always starts with an analysis of development needs, of incentives for development and of opportunities for development. This is continued through active engagement in learning or research and is followed by an evaluative exploration of progress. This professional development framework reflects the five principles underlying the interim Tertiary e-learning Framework; outlines levels of analysis and activities concerning the development of teachers engaged in e-learning and those who support them at all levels in the tertiary sector; and is intended to be used by Government, TEOs, tertiary teachers and their academic units, professional development groups, and other relevant stakeholders.



## Discussion and application of the framework

11. It is clear from both the Otago and the Massey research that there is a wide diversity of belief, opinion and practice amongst staff, and that these are informed and shaped with and through an equally diverse range of institutional contexts. In addition, e-learning and professional development are not static concepts but are subject to continual forces of change and innovation. Consequently, it is not possible to identify a particular policy or strategy, a mode of implementation, or prescriptive action, which will be entirely appropriate for any given individual or institution.
12. The Otago research highlights a range of conceptions about e-learning and e-learning PD held by tertiary teaching staff and teaching support staff, including insights into what they would like to have in the way of professional

development, and in what form. The Massey team's research emphasises the ways in which conceptions, experiences and practices are shaped in institutional settings, and the factors which both constrain and enable uptake, engagement and implementation of e-learning PD. E-learning PD within institutions is influenced by conceptions of e-learning as highlighted by the Otago research. The way in which e-learning is used, experienced and shaped at the institutional level, and the broader macro level of the tertiary sector is highlighted in the Massey research. The sum result is a rich account of how e-learning and e-learning PD is shaped by the conceptions, experiences, beliefs and preferences of a wide range of teachers, managers and support staff in TEOs. Acknowledging and understanding the voices of TEO staff and recognising the influence of diverse institutional contexts is critical if the framework outlined above is to be usefully applied. Although informed by different philosophical perspectives and orientated towards different aspects of e-learning and professional development, the Otago and Massey studies are complementary. Together they create a coherent foundation for e-learning and PD practice in New Zealand's TEOs and for the implementation of the framework.

13. The two projects also worked together to identify two substantial approaches to promote application of the agreed framework. The Otago team approached the application of the framework through the generation of vignettes. To make explicit links between the conceptions discovered in the Otago study and the PD framework, vignettes of fictional individuals who represent combinations of the conceptions were developed. The Massey team approached the application of the framework through the generation of key principles that could be examined by institutions to help them develop their e-learning and PD strategies in line with the framework.
14. Evaluation is irrevocably built into this framework and will be accomplished as individuals, institutions and governance bodies at all levels engage with this development spiral.