Interview with Faculty e-learning Managers at The University of Manchester, December 2009

In early December 2009, I had the pleasure of going to interview Alison Hamilton (AH), Diane Bennett (DB), Ian Miller (IM) and Cath Dyson (CD), who are the four Faculty e-learning managers at The University of Manchester. The following is a full transcript of the interview. The interview can also be downloaded as a podcast from:

http://podcast.ulcc.ac.uk/accounts/UniversityofSheffield/altn68.xml

ALT-N: I've come to the University of Manchester today to talk to the faculty e-learning managers about e-learning and learning technology at the University of Manchester. So today I'm lucky to be joined by:

AH: Alison Hamilton, I'm the faculty e-learning manager for engineering and physical sciences.

DB: Diane Bennett, the e-learning manager for medical and human sciences.

IM: Ian Miller, the e-learning manager for the faculty of life sciences.

CD: And Cath Dyson, e-learning manager for humanities.

ALT-N: Thanks very much. So I thought perhaps we could start with an overview on the e-learning strategy at Manchester, perhaps including how we actually got to where we are today at the university.

IM: Well I think it really started when the mergers of the university came together back in 2004. And that's when everything came together and people started to identify e-learning and the 2015 vision was quite important to how the whole of the university was going to go in the future. So from that original joining together, the first thoughts about e-learning as a professional tool to be employed in the 2015 vision was actually envisaged.

DB: I think it's been taken forward by the restructure of e-learning, which took place in 2000, between 2006 and 2007, which looked at the establishment of faculty teams. So each team would... each faculty would have an e-learning team, and that would be supported by a central group of technical colleagues who are managing the infrastructure.

AH: Yeah, prior to that we had pockets of excellence in the university, but e-learning wasn't widespread. So there was effectively silos, although there was, there was the excellence and some flagship programmes and initiatives. So collaboration was informal, but the aim of this was to basically establish a baseline, adopting a VLE, and also to enhance the learning experience of students. So a lot of the goals which are in the current e-learning strategy were developed from the 2015 agenda, from,

which came from the merger of the university.

DB: Yeah, I think the original strategy was very much part of it, was establishing the teams and establishing the new ways of working. And that happened over 2007, 2008. And then the strategy for 2007 to 9 for e-learning was establishing those first, those first parts of getting the programmes together into Blackboard and getting undergr' concentrating on the undergraduates. And then latterly it's been concentrating on getting postgraduate presence in Blackboard.

AH: Yeah, we're currently looking at reviewing the strategy to get an operational plan for going forward from 2010 for the next period to be agreed. So we're reviewing that and looking to build on what we've already achieved and working on what enhancements we can build in further than that.

IM: The e-learning, first e-learning strategy document was put together based on the undergraduate review that the university undertook. And to identify what was required and what students may or not require. So when they originally put this document together, they decided what should be a minimum specification for e-learning. And it was the first port of putting everything out there and saying "This is what we feel all students should have exposure to." Which is partly the VLE and what is delivered in the VLE. And that is part of the strategy and the operational side of the current strategy, that is now running out. And we're now looking at, as Diane said, on the next version of the strategy, on how we're going to take it from that original one to the next level, into the next century.

ALT-N: So in terms of the central themes of the strategy we've had up to now, what would characterise that? I mean we're traditionally a campus based university here aren't we?

CD: Yes. Mainly the, our support and the drive for e-learning has been enhancing the student experience for the on campus students. So it's been very much about working with credit bearing courses and embedding it in the actual programmes and course units that students are taking.

ALT-N: So given you've got the strategy then, could you give us an overview about how e-learning is actually supported? I mean you're faculty e-learning managers – what's your actual structure that deploys this strategy?

DB: We each have a team of learning technologists and e-learning support officers. Generally structured very similarly, although the faculties will have specific requirements, you will need different skill sets there. And the e-technologists will work with academics in the faculty to help them understand what it is that e-learning can help them with, how it can enhance their teaching and learning of the student. And then we'll help them to get materials online. And that can be anything from uploading presentations, Powerpoints, reading materials, to using discussion boards and to using online assessment. Some courses will go much further than that, but that is the basis of what we're looking at with the strategy.

CD: Each faculty team really has quite a wide, a wide range of skills which allow us to deliver sort of the basic administrative support for the VLE, from staff development

to training, to consultancy. Working on small and large scale projects with academics, advising on funding bids. And an area which we want to increasingly embed in our work and develop is more sort of strategic relationships with school. So working with schools to identify what their teaching and learning agendas are, what role e-learning plays in that and how we can as teams help resource that, and help them deliver their goals for their individual schools.

AH: Okay. So within that we have various roles across the team, that the teams are responsible for. So we've got, we've got, there's a need for school liaison where the learning technologists find out the needs of the schools, liaise with various key people within schools, programme directors, learning enhancement officers or champions who have been identified as being people who are interested in e-learning. And they're trying to find out what are the needs within each school, so that we can obviously tailor our services accordingly. Then there's also help desk support, where people can email an address or go to drop-ins, or use the telephone service to provide... to get help from learning technologists. And then there's the training, you know, identifying training needs and working out what bespoke training is needed. You know with small groups or large groups across the faculty or across the school. And then we've got the other side of it as well which is the, where we actually help people to produce content. And that's where we're trying to look to help people enhance their courses using rich media or you know 3D or Flash animations and that kind of thing. So I think that, you know, one way of doing that is by inviting people to put project proposals forward, where we actually allocate staff time in the team to produce these things.

ALT-N: So you can actually develop resources in conjunction with academics ?

AH: Yes that's right, that's what we do, aim to do. But having said that, you know, that's one, that's considered to be one important side of what we're doing in the university, but the counterbalance of that is the aim to enhance the skills level across the university, so that people are comfortable with using the learning environment to do things that they can do themselves. So therefore they have the flexibility of using the tools in the VLE. We'll give them support and you know set them in the right direction. And our aim is to enable them to be able to do whatever they can by themselves. But we don't expect them to be able to be programmers or, you know, animators.

CD: It's a sustainable, it's a sustainable solution as Alison says, where people can make the most of the wide variety of tools that we've got available. But where specific skills are required, those can be, those can be used to deliver bespoke applications or to develop video resources. Or there might be specific assessment requirements that require something more bespoke developed. And we're very lucky really in the range of skills that we've got in terms of technical and programming and developmental, development skills as well as the softer skills, which are about developing a sustainable model for academics to be able to understand what tools are available and make informed choices about how they use them.

IM: I think it's also interesting when you latch on, we can't obviously go ahead and do everyone's project. So often some of the criteria we look at at developing projects is – is it credit bearing as a unit? How many students will be affected? It is maximum

value, if you're going to teach to five hundred students, then it's worth putting the investment in the e-learning. If you're only going to do a small course, then I'm afraid the investment goes very short. I think we've all tried to address this within the e-learning teams. If it's like a job that may take one or two days, we try to get e-learning technologists to just do it as part of their job. If it's something that's going to take longer than a few days – a week or a month, then it has to be approved by certain people. Because people in the faculties want to know how your e-learning teams are operating. We can't do things without someone actually giving us the go ahead. And that is really important to the way that we deal. Because we are treating e-learning as a professional product that we are delivering to the university.

DB: And part of that project proposal, projects approval is also trying to encourage people to get involved in different things, to get them to raise the awareness of what's possible. So it's a two-sided thing really; you've got that idea of prioritising, but also of enhancing and developing more people, more products.

CD: And I think as well, Diane, because it's about developing those effective professional relationships isn't it with academics? So that we each come as an equal professional...

DB: That's right.

CD: … to the development of teaching and learning resources.

ALT-N: Do you ever find yourself developing projects because you have identified them as a means of trialing something that you might want to move into in the future? I understand the basic criteria of the student fit, the numbers.

IM: Most of the teams have what we call ten per cent P and ER, personal development and how they wish to address that is they might want to "I'm really keen on trying out this idea." They can want to use their own personal development to try out an idea or a concept to see whether it's worthwhile pursuing. And a lot of the initiatives that we've done in our faculty have come from a team exploring an idea or a thought within a small window of opportunity. We have never ever asked the faculty "Can we do this?" But we know that it's always proved... once proof of concept has been done, "Great, we're gonna use it". And then it gets approved.

AH: I do think that there's definitely, you know, innovation is part of our role, and looking at what's on the horizon. So I think that in some respects, we are expected to do it, but we're not expected to spend, you know, that kind of eighty per cent of our time on doing something which hasn't really been asked for, but within that we should be looking, it's part of our role to look to the future.

DB: For other ways of delivery, because the focus always has, should be on the teaching and learning, what is needed to enhance that student experience, to help the tutor with their teaching. So that's where the focus comes. And I think where we can work, we all have people we know we can work with and say "Have you thought about this? Would you like to try this out?" And I think that's where that partnership comes in, with trying out new things with people who we know might want to use them.

ALT-N: How does your service integrate with some of the other services that are likely to be on campus, such as library and IT services? For example, you know, is the balance between pedagogical support at your end, against infrastructural support with IT for the VLE and that sort of thing?

IM: There is a central e-learning applications team that will support us, and they offer us key services of the VLE delivery. They offer us video library service to our teams. And they are handling some of the infrastructure of how we deliver our services. The one vulnerability that e-learning teams have in Manchester of course, we are, we rely on services from other faculty, other parts of the university from central service, the infrastructure and IT support in general. And we work very closely with them. Certainly we have major incident plans if anything happens to the system. We have communication plans set up ready. We have very strong links with the student advisory panels for the portal and how students access material. And we are part of the overall delivery. We do a lot of the start of year type activities with people. So e-learning is integrated into everything, as a part of the whole delivery. Likewise we didn't mention earlier on, there's obviously the students. We have an automatic system that allows students to report everything that may go wrong. They have it through... we use something called Remedy, which is a ticketing basis. So they can email e-learning at Manchester. We identify the name of the student, we work out which faculty they're from. That gets put through to the relevant eLearning team to look at their particular issue or problem. And we have a working relationship with the student for one working day to get back to them. Not necessarily solve the problem but to get back to them, to say that it's been looked at or something that way. That is really important to our commitment for the students, as well as, we've been talking about staff so far, but the students are equally our customers. And that was one of the things that happened when we did the whole integration with the four faculty teams – we worked out a methodology so that the how we handle student queries is adopted the same in every faculty. And that has been very successful.

AH: Regarding the library, our relationship with the library is developing. They've just developed... sorry, they've just put into place an e-learning team themselves. So they're seeing e-learning as being, you know, a strong area that they want to develop into. And it's quite new at the moment, but we're just getting involved in initial meetings with them to see how we can complement the service that they're offering. So prior to that, we worked with the library subject specialist, worked with the e-learning team to set up areas in the VLE, so that they could provide resources for students. And I think the students find it a very useful gateway into the library, because the University of Manchester library is enormous. And I heard an academic describe it the other day as like driving a Ferrari, it's you know, it's got so much power to it, but if you don't know what you're doing with it, then it can get, you know, out of hand. So the students really like that, that kind of slightly more simplified gateway that they can find in the same environment as they're looking at their teaching materials. They like going in through that kind of gateway to get a simplified range of resources, which they can then explore further. So we see that as being something which is going to be a continuing benefit.

CD: And there's two significant areas, two projects that the library is undertaking which relate to e-learning – digitisation of core texts. So ensuring that you know with

large... particularly with large cohorts, we have primer reading, core texts are digitised, so they're made available through the VLE. And we have a building block, a link between Blackboard and library reading lists, so that students can go straight through to their course reading list and seek availability in the library, whether it is an electronic resource, they can go straight through to it. If it's a digitised resource, they get access to it. So technically we've got some good links there. And practically and structurally we're working together to develop that.

DB: I think the other way we all work, we work very closely with the students, office as well, which helps us to work across the team of academic and administrative support staff. So work very closely with the people who manage the student system, student record system, the course management system, to actually ensure there's a coordinated approach, coherent approach to how the administrative staff support the students and support the tutors. Cos I think until then it was very much "This is how the student records system works." but it's gaining the understanding of how that relates to everything that happens with Blackboard as well.

Q4: So what's the balance of work and decision making between yourself as the managers and your actual team members?

AH: Well I think the aim certainly is that, is that we enable our learning technologists to make decisions wherever, you know, wherever they can. It's, you know, it's, our aim would be as managers to be in a leadership role with the learning technologists, actually kind of looking after, they can look after projects, develop them to look after maybe operational areas over, you know, a period. Because as, obviously there's some very large operational areas that need looking after like e-assessment and you know, that kind of thing. So it's quite interesting, because some of the teams are quite big and on a day to day basis, you know, as we've only been in position for a year or so, you know, we're kind of finding our way forwards with this. But we would be expecting to be involved more in the strategic decisions that, you know, getting involved with the strategic discussions which go on with the faculty and with the university. Working out how to operationalise things on a higher level and then feeding that down to our teams. And getting them to put things into practice. But it's a two-way, you know, it's a two-way approach. There's a bottom up, as well as a top down on this, that they feedback lots of information to us about where they think that we should be going forward to. So we're kind of in very much in steering role in that, you know. We do do a lot of decision making, because you know, because obviously somebody has to. But we get well informed by the people in our teams. And we feed that back into the centre.

IM: And to our faculty e-learning, to the other faculty academic staff. To make, help them make those decisions. Because they would always, sometimes say "I'm wondering how to do this" and we know we can talk to our e-learning technologist it's "we've got this option, this option or this option". And we would suggest this one, but we can never force anyone to go down... and that would work. And we know that our e-learning technologists can support that decision, if that's the method of delivery they want to try on something. Is that the way you would...?

AH: It's maybe a different tack. Not... different tack...

IM: Different tack.

AH: But a different thing that (talking together) was talking about, yeah.

IM: But it's worthwhile noting that we are, although we're four separate faculties, we handle the way we deliver some of the materials in different ways. Because the one thing we've not touched on so far of course, I'm very privileged in the sense that we are one faculty, one school. It makes it a little bit different to the other three faculties.

AH: We have a multi-school interface.

IM: Yes.

AH: The other three faculties have multi-school interface, which means that we actually look after a number of schools. And you know, it's quite a large number of schools, so it's a different scale. So we therefore have to be involved a lot more with kind of working out what's going on across those different schools, with different subject areas, different disciplines, different needs, different skills bases. And you know, we have, we're dealing with a different variety of circumstances. So some of the things that we get involved in, is, you know, on that strategic level or on that communications level, a large amount of communications with the schools and attending various, you know, various faculty committees and you know, wherever we can to make sure that people, people's questions are answered on e-learning. And that we're trying to inform about the way that we're moving forward, and what services are being developed to meet their needs. So that's kind of as a difference between a manager and a learning tech', the difference between the manager and the learning technologist is that the technologists are involved way more with the hands on meeting up with academics. I think that we're, I mean I know that I am less involved in that. Although it does happen from time to time. It's nice to do a little bit of it to keep in, you know, to keep in touch. But that's the area that the learning technologists really seize and move forward with, individual academics and projects. Sorry. Yeah.

CD: Yeah, sorry. I agree with Alison. We've, I think we've got about over sixteen thousand students and two thousand staff in humanities. So they're huge undertakings and very large school, and each of those schools will have a relatively diverse discipline base. So my role, as Alison has indicated there, is I interface with the schools, communicate with them, ensure that they are aware really of some of the activities that's going on in their school that we're supporting. And they can contribute to some of the debates and feedback to us about what type of services they want and and again for... and again we've been having discussions within the team, so it's not like it's a settled relationship. I, you know, I would like to say that it's not necessarily a settled relationship. And about where as e-learning managers we can be most effective. And therefore where our, members of our team can be most effective. Because they are a professional team, so it is very important to have structures where they're able to make, have a high level of decision making.

ALT-N: Do you find, is there an issue of trying to balance the specific needs of your

faculties and specific needs of your schools against some of the things that might sensibly be done at across institution level?

DB: I think there is, I think how we approach it is... there is a central e-learning operations group, where a lot of these things would be discussed. And so we will agree things in principle, for example we've just introduced Turn It In and Grademark. But how that's being devolved into the different faculties is responding to the needs in those faculties. Some people have been introducing it in a different way, working with people, identifying where it's best used. I think that's how we tend to have those discussions, is to look at the broad principles and apply them then in the faculty.

AH: Yeah. The other thing that we do is we actually get, we get groups of learning technologists from within each faculty to work together, with the central team as required. The central e-learning applications team, who support the VLE and associated tools. So we actually get working groups together which have representatives cross faculty.

CD: And also Alison's, we've made a lot of headway into collaborating on the kick start training haven't we for the Blackboard?

AH: Yes.

CD: … basic introductory training. So that's seen as really a cross faculty and centre as well, because they provide support there, to deliver that. So it's efficient, but it's effective.

ALT-N: Do you have any other cross institutional stuff like you know lecture capture and you mentioned the streaming media service, that sort of stuff?

IM: We have a video library service, which enables members of staff to upload any lecture material that they may want to upload to allow students to view again, or podcast type lectures. These are visual lectures, not just ordinary audio files. The material when they upload it goes into what they call a restricted area on there. So it's not available to the rest of the world, and can only be viewed by members of... or students from the particular faculty. Or linked into their particular course materials. Obviously, there is a public side to this VLS that we have, and obviously we've got to make sure that anything on there is not under any infringement of copyright or TV programmes or things. Everything has to be properly secured down that way. But obviously the copyright of the material that we, members of staff will put up, if the member of staff uploads the material, they must put in a disclaimer to say what it is. They should also make sure that there's nothing offensive in there, as much as any other form of upload library, that you would for any video site, that things could be taken down if someone complains or something that way.

ALT-N: Is that the sort of activity that could possibly feed into some of your other areas identified in you strategy, like widening participation, maybe via a gateway such as iTunes You, for example?

IM: Well obviously we are investigating it at the moment and looking into iTunes U.

And Apple have agreed that we could set one up and we are still just going through the usual legal requirements to enable that to happen. But obviously iTunes U would be maybe a vehicle for certain delivery for wider participation, which would be ideal to bring people in. in particular because it's worldwide. People would be able to download. But obviously, if you have an iTunes U policy, you've got to really be very careful of all your copyright implications, and make sure that the content is fit for purpose, and of a high enough quality. Because University of Manchester's brand name would be against anything that goes on iTunes U. But likewise, we also have just adapted and bought into Wimba classroom product, which is just being rolled out just at the moment. And that will help engage members of staff will be able to record more of their own lectures and do a few more things online. Or investigate different approaches to the learning through virtual classrooms or Pronto, or other tools that are built in within the product. Very early days on that, but that's what we're beginning to roll out and through the VLE at the moment.

ALT-N: Be interested to see how you get on with that. Talking about the cross institutional issues, I think it probably leads us naturally on to another couple of questions, which is – what do you perceive as being the major current issues or priorities facing the institution? Either at faculty level or in the institution as a whole.

AH: I think that one of the things that most universities have in you know, the forefront of their consideration is student satisfaction survey results. So you know on that level, we're always aiming to provide more feedback and enhance the students' learning experience. So these are, you know, some of the things that we feel that we can try to do using e-learning. So we've got a big push on developing formative feedback... formative assessment, sorry, with feedback for students. And not just, you know, trying to raise the quality of the feedback so that it is actually, you know, something that the students can move forward with. And you know, looking at other enhancements as part of the learning experience, to try to include high quality online interactive activities, feedback in rich media. Trying to embed those into the learning context is part of our strategic kind of aims really. I think there's probably some, you know, in terms of actually operationalising that, our role is finding out where the schools are up to and what their needs are, so that we can help them to move forward with this. Of course there's other issues which are kind of wider issues. Student numbers will be something which is going to be facing universities, with a cap on student, undergraduate student numbers at the moment, and also potential cuts in HF key funding, I think that you know, many universities are going to be looking at what they do as part of their core business. It would, you know, it would suggest that an increase in postgraduate distance learning courses would be, you know, something which would be appealing, so that we can attract overseas students and postgraduate students and see that as a new revenue stream. So I think that's something which should be considered as part of the, you know, the taking our e-learning strategy forward.

CD: As part of a general sort of operational activities, engagement with schools as well, developing these sort of appropriate relationships and appropriate blended learning approaches as standard. Or as a, you know, how do we develop a consensus about what that is, what that looks like and how that can be used across discipline areas. What one person might want to use in one... one person's approach to blended learning will be different to another, but we have to have that way of talking about

what it is to effectively integrate teaching and learning... integrate e-learning and teaching learning. And focus on these areas of enhancements, and develop agendas really which are driven by schools.

ALT-N: Are there any other... are there any particular initiatives or priorities or projects you're wishing to pursue over the next year or next couple of years?

CD: As an institution, we've put significant resources into developing teaching learning spaces, learning commons and refurbishment of the library, which helps us support students using technology in less formal teaching settings. It's more about student led, student directed and student owned space, and being able to use the materials and the resources, online resources in a flexible way.

ALT-N: I think you also mentioned did you not, you were re-visiting your e-learning strategy, and that was something you'd be looking at over the next few years.

DB: Yeah. And I think it'll be over the next few months actually, looking to revise it for the next... well we don't know what period it will be, but probably for three to five year period. And in line with the 2015 and what will become 2020 strategic vision. So there's a lot of consultation going on at the moment. We're contributing, we're just contributing ideas, what we think might be included, with an eye to some different things that are happening with the student surveys. With also the university's idea of increasing continued professional development provision. And then there'll be a consultation process after Christmas when a lot more people can input to what they think we should be looking at. I think the focus, it seems to be more on blended learning in general.

IM: I mean, there is a real risk with looking at a strategy with three to five years, do we really know what everyone will be doing in three years time? And I don't think anyone could actually say that at the moment. Because you only have to look back three years, and you could say "Where were you three years ago?" I mean, it's moving so fast. Technology moves along, the students are sometimes coming in with greater expectations than the universities can deliver. And that is a significant challenge that all universities are going to have. Because the universities cannot move fast enough to meet the expectations of students coming in.

AH: So I think that kind of brings on to another priority, which is really a top priority is engaging academic staff. Because I think we're moving, you know, we're on that kind of trajectory. We're moving towards getting more staff engagement but you know, we really need to continue along that line, and get staff to feel comfortable with working in an online environment. And talking about what they can do, you know, talking, establishing communities of practice across the university, where people discuss what can they do. You know, what works, what didn't work for them. You know, how it might work for somebody else maybe, or if they changed it what they could do.

DB: I think that's useful involvement in the academics' programme. It's only one group of staff but actually involvement in that, delivering sessions on technology, enhanced learning and blended learning, is helping to start those discussions. And also the university e-learning network which is open to anybody with an interest in e-

learning. So it's for anybody to go and discuss, where you get the academic teaching staff, the learning technologist, you get the administrative support staff. People there to discuss all the options and what's happening and to share ideas. The other thing that's just been set up in MHS is distance learning alliance and there's a great deal of input there from e-learning, involvement with e-learning team there. So there's various things are happening to try and share best practice across the institution.

AH: Yeah, we're really trying to encourage people to, you know, the schools and within faculty to establish and promote membership of these kind of teaching and learning groups. And you know, one idea is to sort of make them the equivalent of research groups. So where researchers regularly, you know, they expect that as part of their professional development, to go and be part of a research group and to be part of that community of practice. For people whose, you know who are involved in teaching, or teaching fellows and, you know, the lecturers who are involved heavily in teaching to be part of these teaching and learning type groups, would be, you know, that kind of thing would be a big step forward.

CD: As part of professional development in those areas, dissemination of... not necessarily I don't think best practice, but good practice, achievable practice, do-able practice. And that's something that as a faculty we're looking to ensure that we have little nuggets of practice really which can say more than you can about how to deliver effective teaching and learning in a very visual way.

ALT-N: I think that sounds like an excellent pragmatic approach. I really like the idea of the e-learning group. Is that quite new? Is there anything more we can say about that, how it's going, what you've done to set it up?

DB: It's something, I suppose it's been going about a year hasn't it? It kind of came along with the new, the restructuring of e-learning support and there used to be e-learning...

IM: … technology support.

DB: … academic... well there used to be an e-learning technologists' group, which was people who were doing... not necessarily all technology, but people who were interested in doing the doing. There was an e-learning academic network, which was the ac', teachers... academic staff discussing what they were doing. What this e-learning network does is bring together some of the discussions that are happening and that different people present. You'll have an academic present and you'll have member of the e-learning technology team presenting. And it may be a focus, we had a focus on different tools and Ian had somebody coming across from Australia.

IM: … Australia.

DB: … to speak about a particular application. We've had a focus on e-assessment where there was very much a "These are the tools you can use and this is why you might do it." And looking at formative assessment and feedback using things like the Turning Point and the Clickers. So it's trying to actually, while you're doing the, having the network meeting, that should demonstrate how things are used during those meetings. So what we're looking at now, we'll be looking at getting a

programme for the next twelve months together, so we can get some meetings set up. And I think they have been very well attended. It also gives us an opportunity to say "We're here, you know, come and talk to us. These are the people you need to talk to."

AH: I agree that I think they have been very well attended. I think that one, a way of sort of taking that forward, or a challenge in sort of taking that forward really is to start to invite new people to come along. Because I think you know, we've got quite an established group of practitioners, and they tend to come along to these things. So it's actually if we can get them to bring an academic colleague or you know, bring somebody new along, I think that will be, you know, a way of building that up in the future.

DB: And there are initiatives in other faculties. MHS have an e-learning seminar series at least once a month there'll be somebody come and speak. It will either be a practitioner or a guest speaker or somebody reporting on something that they've done. So once again it's all these ideas of how we can get the conversations going. I think Alison's right, how you open it up and encourage the people who you actually want to talk to who perhaps haven't really registered that interest yet.

CD: And I think it's the, making a link between institution level initiatives and groups like that with school based ones, where people will relate their allegiance and activity relate to a school. So it's trying to embed that within a school. For example I know Manchester Business School has an innovation forum and we have one at a faculty level. But again, it's making it relevant and useful to individual academics and transferable into their discipline area. So trying to sort of set up discussions or encourage that type of innovation which happens in schools, which I know it does in various schools in humanities.

AH: Yeah. I think that's where I was kind of leading with the idea of the...

CD: … the themes.

AH: ... teaching and learning groups. Where it's not, it's something that you know has been suggested, it's not just only about e-learning, but it's actually e-learning will be a part of this, so you can actually look at innovation and teaching and learning and how it all fits together. So they're seeing it not as it being a separate activity, but being something which is becoming part of their mainstream teaching and learning activities.

CD: Yes. I think that's very important. And it's where the e-learning network is great, you know, this cross institution e-learning community which is really about embedding innovation in teaching practice. And e-learning being a crucial component of that, but it's not (…).

IM: I mean there is thoughts even around trying to "Do we have to call it e-learning? Can't we just call it learning?"

ALT-N: That's the, I mean, that seems to be the broader trend doesn't it? I mean that's the sort of conversation we've been having at my university is going on. Just for example, they've actually backed off calling things an e-learning strategy now

altogether haven't they. So that could be... I was wondering whether we could focus on perhaps some slightly more specific details of some learning technologies without delving into the technology too much. One of the big questions I think across the whole sector is where we're going with VLEs and that means both choices of actual products but also perhaps the broader approach itself. What's your current strategy with the VLE? How's it shaping up at Manchester?

IM: Well the current... we adopted Blackboard as the current VLE when we first did the restructure. And the idea was we were gonna go with one, we will work with one and we'll get one rolled out. Because it's more important to get e-learning out there, rather than trying to decide on the VLE that we choose. That was the original decision. We are still obviously working with Blackboard. There's different versions of Blackboard coming along which are gonna obviously be challenges in their own right. As as much as a VLE is, it depends on what you put in there is more important than the VLE itself. And I think all the e-learning teams have always been conscious of that, is the quality of the material that goes in it. The VLE is only the box to deliver it, and the tracking system. So in the future, do you think we ever will be using a VLE? I think we will for a foreseeable future, because it's what certain students or whatever will expect. However, I do expect in the future that maybe the content that's delivered through the VLE will be completely different. And it might well be just a gateway. The VLE will be just a gateway to deliver content through different means. That's possibly the way it will work in the future. There's very few VLEs back in the world because Blackboard is owning them all for instance. It's gradually your choice is getting less. We don't really know. I don't think anyone will say that we'll be using the VLE in the next three years. We, I presume we will, we will carry on. But that decision... we've only signed contracts for the next three years or something. After that – we don't know.

AH: Yeah, I think it will just be under review.

IM: Yeah, I think it will continue under review.

AH: Because you know, as things develop, we will assess it and say what's appropriate. At the moment, yeah, the decision is that we stick with a VLE and that VLE is Blackboard at the moment. But it's interesting, it's been an interesting journey for us actually, because we started off with Web CT and it was centrally supported. But it actually started off as a pilot study, and people started using it more and more and more, and in the end it was realised that it had to become centrally supported, because there was suddenly a huge demand for it. And Web CT were bought out by Blackboard, so the version we're using at the moment is Blackboard Vista. So we'll be, you know, we're evaluating progress with Blackboard as they bring the two projects, two products together. And seeing where we're going to go with that. And you know, we are looking to stay with them for a little bit longer. So you know, we're taking it as it comes really. But we do have a number of other, a number of other applications, which Diane's written a list of on a piece of paper.

CD: I know we're very well resourced for different applications and I agree completely – great answer that, Ian, about where we're at. It's just the, you know, it's just the platform. And I think that's what we're trying to get, is a consistency of

student experience and a high expectation of your online learning resources. That's what we want and Blackboard delivers that, then great. But we have a variety of other tools which can support collaboration, communication.

ALT-N: I was going to specifically ask you what other tools apart from the good old campus VLE, but...

DB: Of the ones I've got, Ian will no doubt remember others. I mean, we've just invested in Wimba collaborative suites, we've got Wimba Classroom, Pronto, Voice Tools and Create and people have been using Create or Course Genie for quite some time at Manchester. It's something we find quite useful. Also got Turn it In and Grade mark, which have now been embedded within Blackboard so again it's delivering through Blackboard but... We've got Turning Point Handsets and that's something that's used outside Blackboard. We've got assessment tools responders people use and ABC and I'm coming to the end of mine, because I wrote Screenflow down, but couldn't remember if that's what I meant or not, cos I...

IM: Yeah. Screenflow we use for capturing lectures, which is essentially a piece of Mac software for, it's an inline embedded recording of lectures. We use it for podcasting, so we can put a Mac with Screenflow in there, they press the button and record it and it's a perfect recording. And then that's recorded and done. The trouble is it relies on one Mac, one machine but it's a nice portable podcaster and very high quality. And that uses Screenflow. In our faculty we also run, and certainly the university has got at the moment an agreement with Australia for SBLI, so that the scenario based learning interactive, which we use routinely in our faculty for problem diagnosis type software and being able to go through scenarios and rebuild things. We also use a lot of other normal tools that e-learning technologists use, like Captivate.

AH: Can you say a bit about Raptivity? We're kind of piloting a few things aren't we?

IM: Yeah. We invested quite heavily last year in quite a few little initiatives on bits of software. Raptivity was one. Another one was iSpring Presenter. Another one we use was Poll Anywhere. So if we went back to Raptivity, it was very much a case of it's a set of 250 templates for rapid building of e-learning content into Flash, using a template system. It's not for designing whole sequences of things, but very much for a one off little learning pod, that, and a member of staff can do it. We have a current licence, so we can give them the detail, they can download it, and they can just create something. It could be something simple from flipping the pages of a book, to a, quite an interactive card game or something that way. Again, it's got to meet what the member of staff is trying to achieve. So you've got "Oh, I've got all these things. Which one shall I use?" You don't go "Which one shall I use? Which one are you trying to... what are you trying to achieve and try to match something that you can do." So we are investigating that. The other one that we've been looking at is iSpring Presenter, which enables us just to record a high quality Powerpoint basically with audio, convert that to Flash, but you can do a lot more interactions as well within there, and insert movies and publish that. That can be just a Flash movie that can go straight into the VLE or put onto the server. The other one we've not actually invested, but we're looking at at the moment is Poll Anywhere to enable anyone to use text voting. So they can vote in a lecture theatre, and we have a licence for up to 500 users. So that people in a lecture theatre can use their mobile phones to vote. And it's

all on the big screen. That is different to Turning Point and the Clickers. We are trying to use the mobile technology that students may have. There is a problem with the mobile technologies. We cannot expect them to text answers with their own phone if they're gonna pay for it. So we have to make it on the basis it's optional – if you would like to, you can. But we're expecting a lot of students will have contracts for free texting. So we don't really think that will be a problem. But to latch into quite a lot of the mobile technologies, developing apps for instance with the I-touch and I-phone. We really are, we are looking at that now as the future technologies. And we've been thinking of lots of different ideas. We've got some programmers who are looking at building some of these apps. But mobile learning in the future. Everyone has these bits of technology in their hand. The VLE could be delivered on a little mobile technology. That may be the future for some of the tools that we're developing.

DB: Another tool we've got which I think is coming where old technology now, we forget about it, but the Wiki which is in Blackboard which is being used quite a lot by some of our distance learning programmes. Just had a pilot last year. One of the programmes has quite a lot of, high quota of overseas students used a Wiki to have some collaboration online with group work. And that worked really well, so there's more people taking that up now. So people are beginning to use some of these tools that were kind of novel, little novelty things, they are actually beginning to use them and teach them, and find them very effective ways of student learning.

ALT-N: I was going to ask you specifically what you were doing about moving into the world of Web 2 technologies. Because you know you just can't go anywhere without hearing the phrase and there's been a lot of high profile reports come out in the last six months about that. So that's very interesting. Is there anything, is there a more general approach to Web 2 technologies?

CD: Well just in terms of non proprietary applications really. I mean, it's, it can be difficult to look at that in terms of the level of support that we have to provide, but we do a lot of widening participation activity, pre-arrival activity. And we have to look at appropriate platforms or discuss with, you know, schools what the most appropriate platform is. So we've got online resources and support for pre-arrival and widening participation activity which is outside Blackboard. We've also got it inside Blackboard, so we do use, we are... it's considered like a pilot or a testing or a comparison project really about how that works. What different functionality there is and you know, what's the most effective tool for the job really. So we do use non proprietary applications.

AH: We're actually developing something... well there's been a pilot project developed in EPS, which is looking at using some sort of social networking type thing to get collaborative, collaborative learning for the students. And it's being used in the school materials for some fashion retailing students. I think it's fashion retailing. But basically, the university has actually got an application called Wordpress, which is a blog, blogging software, and there's an open source version of that called Buddypress which a couple of members of my team have been developing into social networking. Right, okay. So what's happening now is they've started to use this with a group of students. And it's, in conjunction with Blackboard; it's not replacing Blackboard. But it actually provides, they found that it provides a more responsive kind of Wiki social networking type environment than the one that we've currently got in Blackboard. So

they're using it to collaborate on their coursework, the students. And they like it because they can have groups, which the students can create their own groups. And then they can do, they can work on it together and they can get feedback on what they're doing and build up their ideas. And they can actually create a web page, you know, web resources inside there, so they can put their ideas online. So that's another area that we're... it's a pilot really, and it's certainly not something which is mainstreamed across the university at this time.

DB: No, but it is something that some members of my team are thinking of looking at, yeah.

AH: It's happening. Yeah.

ALT-N: Yeah, that's very interesting because something again at our own institution, that's something we've actually invested quite a lot of resources in the last year. I'm quite interested to know, is there an interest in student generated content in a general way? Whether that would be blog writing, Wiki writing, uploading to the media server, producing podcasts. Are many people following student generated content as a means of constructing knowledge and learning?

DB: I'm not sure it's quite so focussed as that. There's certainly a lot of interest in student generated content. Partly what at the moment we're focussing on group work and assessed work. For example we've got an inter professional education module that runs across the faculty. For very practical reasons, even though the students are in the main on campus, there are either timetabling issues and they can't get together or they're on clinical education placement. So they're doing that online, and one thing they have been doing is using the Wiki to, and they initially used Wordpress. They've tried using one that's in Blackboard now, can't remember the name of, but... To create patient information sheets, which is a way of actually for them it's very focussed on what they would be doing in clinical practice. It's a way of creating content and then some of that content can then be used in future for students to look at, so it is, there is an interest in actually getting students to contribute some way to the content.

CD: I think that's happening for us more at postgraduate level, particularly in sort of reflective disciplines such as education, where we've got to be reflective practice and heavily used I think particularly in some of their distance learning courses, for the development of content which I'm aware is reused year on year.

ALT-N: Certainly blogging is certainly quite popular in the education field again, isn't it for that reflective...

CD: Yeah.

ALT-N: In fact there was a couple of presentations about it at the LT conference we had here. Something I just wanted to follow up on Ian, that you mentioned rolling out some new tools. I'm just wondering, you know, what the sort of take up of those has been, and how you've actually promoted those. How you actually got people to use them amongst the academic community.

IM: Well we have, every year we have our thirty to forty final year project students,

who do an e-learning project. So part of the training that we do with those students is actually teach them some of these tools, the use of those tools. We work with them to work out what they're trying to achieve as their project. And then we try to match a piece of technology to allow them to create it. Now the piece of software tools may well be things like, could be using Wimba Create for something. Could be using iSpring. Could be using Raptivity. We don't know yet because we're still doing some of these now. But in the past we've been using Opus, Headstart Pro, which we have a site licence for. Really simple applications to actually create quite innovative type of software which is pretty simple. The good thing about using the students this way is they introduce the technology to the supervisors. And it's one way of engaging staff - "What have you been using to that?" And suddenly they're latched in to what bit of software. "Oh you can use... Oh can I do that?" And it's been very useful to actually engage staff members into using some of the newer technologies that we've done. Equally, when the students work with an e-learning project, they come to looking at the subject matter in a totally different way to a member of staff. And a number of our projects now have been using SBLI, they've been using Opus or something. And they're now getting bolted in to the mainstream teaching, with bit of modification by ourselves and a member of staff. And suddenly they're getting bolted in as little modules within Blackboard, and can often be assessed as well. And those are based on the e-learning project students. Now I know Alison and I have talked about e-learning project students since 1990s we've been doing them in Manchester with e-learning. But I would say in the last couple of years there has been a tremendous change in the quality of the material that's coming out, and the uptake that the members of staff are now latching into, because they've got Blackboard, and they've got a way of delivering something. "Oh this was actually quite good." And the tools have got simpler. Suddenly we have a method of actually getting better content. And we've got little slaves doing it for us every year. Sorry. F', stu' (can't say that?) (laughter). No, the students actually do the content and actually do the content really well. And with a different perspective.

DB: It would be really useful to showcase some of those.

IM: They're all on, there's some on our e-learning, already there.

AH: Yeah, cos one of the things with that was when I used to have that role, many years ago, was that I had to teach the students how to write HTML and you know, do Java Script quizzes. And you know, used to have a lot of fun with that. But there weren't the same tools as there are these days. And now you can actually generate clean HTML using Wimba Create and all sorts of other tools that you can use. So they can actually really focus on the content, rather than on the...

IM: Yes.

ALT-N: Absolutely.

AH: … methods.

CD: The rolling out of new applications and getting, engaging academic staff is an interesting one though, about how we do that.

IM: Yeah.

ALT-N: Great stuff.

CD: Because what I'm going to straight after this meeting is we're running a roadshow, so we're basically just setting up a stall in the foyers of the most well used buildings in humanities, to get an awareness of what's out there in terms of support and technologies to people who wouldn't... to people who wouldn't come and seek it. So it's to put it really...

ALT-N: Yeah, sure.

CD: … when they're carrying a coffee past you to their office, trying to engage them in that way. We have very good formal links into schools in terms of committees, and informal links in terms of academics working with individual learning technologists. But I think there's that group of academic staff who aren't, you know, aren't at the minute using technology, how do we raise the awareness of what's available there? You know, it's a challenge and it's interesting.

ALT-N: A real question I think.

CD: But there's not a way where we would say "This is a successful path to the rolling out and mass adoption of particular technologies". But it's just trying and testing things out, dissemination of good practice, exemplifying practice.

DB: I think it's about making things accessible, and I was speaking to somebody the other day who just felt there was too much choice, was almost too aware of what's available, he didn't know how to make a path through it. And I think that's the other side of it is being made... disseminating it, but disseminating it in a managed way, helping people understand quite what is there to do.

ALT-N: Yeah, I think that's... you know picking up on our, my experience, that's absolutely the way. You know, because they... we all now accept the fact there's a no one size fits all, because you know we've got all these fantastic diverse disciplines at universities like Manchester and Sheffield. But at the same time, you can't just throw them to the lions. So I suppose as many academics are now seeing their role with the students as being people who scaffold and guide through, I think that's... guess what we're doing with the thing. Now I've come to the end of the list of my questions. So I'm just wondering if there's anything else that you'd like to say, that... to represent what you're doing that we haven't yet covered.

IM: But certainly I think, I think the overall idea of Manchester, we've tried to put a set of teams in to professionally deliver e-learning to the university. And that is a real big commitment by the university to identify the needs of e-learning as such, such a higher priority that it has got to be that, it's got to be a professional product, it's got to be integrated with everything. And hopefully in the future, we hope that e-learning as a name will just disappear and just become learning, because I think that's all our visions, that we just think "Just drop the e, it's very small emphasis. It's technology, everyone uses a technology."

DB: I think that's right. I was in a discussion a couple of weeks ago, people were asking, we were trying to define e-facilitation, e-moderation, e-assessment. "What am I doing when I do this? Am I feeding back, am I assessing or am I moderating?" We say "You're teaching. You're doing what you do all the time, it's just using different tools to do it and different modes of delivery." I think that's what we want to get to.

IM: And the technology should not be a rod to anyone's back. It will hopefully complement their normal teaching and learning. It may mean that some people may have to change the way they teach, but hopefully if it changes the way they teach, it will improve the student experience, and to match into today's learning styles, which are totally different. I think in, that's really where our role is to try to help people achieve some of this change.

IM: And above all achieve. What are we trying to do with e-learning is achieve. Not knock it back; we've never tried to overstep what we can't achieve. I think we've managed to do a lot with Manchester with e-learning. We have achieved. We've got it in there.

DB: We've come a long way in eighteen months.

IM: We've come a long way and we've achieved. But we've not tried to set the goals so high that we've had...

AH: We've established a baseline I'd say is where we are now. There's, you know, now we have the opportunity to grow.

ALT-N: Brilliant, fantastic. Thank you very much indeed for your time.