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THE CHANGING LEARNING EXPERIENCE: HIGHER EDUCATION IN A WEB 2.0 WORLD

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Investigating the Impact on higher education of the Use of Web 2.0 Technologies

Increasingly schoolchildren employ Web 2.0 technologies both socially and within the school curriculum. These technologies are normally on-line and facilitate communication, collaboration, participation, and sharing. Facebook is a good example. It had been noticed that this was not only changing behaviour (e.g. the use of computers in favour of watching television) but also attitudes and expectations. There were indications that new university students would presume the use of Web 2.0 technologies to be natural in a higher education environment. An independent committee was therefore established in the UK under the leadership of Prof. Sir David Melville to conduct an independent inquiry into the strategic and policy implications for higher education of the experience and expectations of learners in the light of their increasing use of the newest technologies. The committee was supported by the principal bodies and agencies in UK post-compulsory education. This paper summarises the conclusions and recommendations of the committee's report published in May 2009 ⁽¹⁾.

The committee reviewed the findings of cognate studies, took oral evidence from a range of practising academics and researchers; and commissioned briefings and studies, including one substantial piece of work on current and developing international practice in the use of Web 2.0 in higher education ⁽²⁾.

Conclusions of the Committee

Young people, especially those who will become higher education students in the next few years, inhabit the Web 2.0 world with ease. They willingly create, share and participate in web spaces, and have a strong and natural sense of being part of an on-line community. They expect to find information quickly and easily, but they generally lack criticality in evaluating their findings and they are casual in attributing authorship or recognising issues of copyright or intellectual property. The attributes of higher education tend to run counter to Web 2.0. The environment of academics tends to be individual or at best hierarchical, their work guarded, constructed slowly after careful consideration of the provenance of evidence, and published with extensive citations following a process of peer review. Meanwhile, the commercial market place is demanding more nimbleness and flexibility, expecting its employees to be adept at 'soft skills' such as networking, teamwork, collaboration, and self-direction, which are among those fostered by students' engagement with social web technologies.

Currently students adapt to the exigencies of higher education without necessarily changing their attitudes. However, the attitudes and expectations of the new generation of incoming students, coupled with the pressures for including aspects of vocational training in the curriculum, may necessitate some rapprochement in higher education if it is to continue to provide a learning experience that is recognised as stimulating, challenging, and relevant. The impetus for change will be reinforced by the positive experience of new cohorts of students, often with the support of schools, through engaging with Web 2.0 technology.

Higher education is respected for its academic rigour. The skills in interpreting information and data, leading to new understanding and knowledge, are essential to the development of society. Higher education must therefore fulfil the new role of helping students refine, extend, and articulate the diverse range of skills they have developed through their experience of Web 2.0 technologies whether or not *e-learning* methodologies are incorporated into the curriculum. Higher education needs to build on and perhaps champion, the behavioural traits associated with Web 2.0 technologies such as experimentation, collaboration and teamwork whilst addressing the negatives such as the casual and insufficiently critical attitude to information. In accepting responsibility to change in this way, higher education institutions must consider the choice and deployment of appropriate tools to achieve these ends. Considerations will be required for improving learner skills, staff skills, IT infrastructure, and relationships between the higher education, FE, and schools' sectors. In the UK, bodies such as the HEA, JISC, and BECTA will be vital in supporting this work.

¹ The final report will appear at: <http://www.clex.org.uk/ourfindings.php>

² Report of the review of current and developing international practice in the use of social networking (Web 2.0) in higher education, available from <http://www.clex.org.uk/latestnews.php> (accessed 30 April 2009)