Excellence in e-learning: the key challenges for universities


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The E-xcellence methodology (e-xcellence.label.eadtu.eu) facilitates higher education institutions in reviewing the quality of their e-learning offerings, supported by benchmarks, guiding resources and external assessors.

An analysis of E-xcellence reviews at nineteen higher education institutions was undertaken, in order to identify the most challenging aspects of e-learning provision for the institutions. The analysis revealed the E-xcellence benchmarks that were considered the most problematic in self-assessments, or which attracted the most planned actions for improvement. This profiling exercise indicated that the main challenges were:

- developing e-learning strategy
- building online academic communities for students
- managing staff workload.

There was also a strong focus on increasing the interactivity of learning materials. In contrast, the provision of reliable IT systems and hardware was unproblematic.

E-xcellence reviews have been carried out at a number of European higher education institutions (HEIs) over the last ten years. These reviews, taken together, reveal aspects of e-learning that are particularly challenging for institutions. This article presents an analysis of the outputs from nineteen E-xcellence reviews carried out in the period 2009-2016 (Rosewell et al. 2017). Identifying the benchmarks which institutions frequently self-assessed as problematic, and those which attracted the most planned actions, highlights the aspects of e-learning that institutions find most challenging.

**Findings**

The results from self-assessment data (see Figure 1) show that staff **Workload management** is the benchmark most commonly rated as problematic. The development of online **Academic communities** is the next most problematic benchmark (and this same concern may also be reflected in self-assessments for **Social media**). The issue of an **E-learning strategy** is also highlighted as problematic.

All institutions viewed some benchmarks as unproblematic (already largely or fully achieved). For example, **Reliability and security** was not rated as problematic by any institution. Notably, all benchmarks in
Based on data from the institutions’ self-assessments and roadmaps, the analysis identified several key issues that institutions find challenging when implementing e-learning. These are: e-learning strategy; staff workload; academic community; and, to some extent, interactivity. The analysis has also shown that the more practical and technical aspects, such as providing information for students, and technical infrastructure, are relatively unproblematic. It is encouraging that these ‘building blocks’ of quality e-learning are in place.

Comparing the two sources of data (self-assessments and roadmaps) raises further considerations about the issues identified and the E-xcellence process itself. One might assume that benchmarks that are frequently scored as problematic in self-assessments would lead to planned actions listed in the roadmap. To a large extent this is the pattern seen. However, the two sets of data are not entirely consistent. Notably, there were a large number of roadmap actions for Interactivity even though this benchmark was not highlighted as problematic in self-assessments.

Perhaps institutions find it relatively straightforward to include actions in their roadmap that have already had some work done on them, and are thus not scored as particularly problematic in self-assessments. One example is Interactivity. Improvements here are core concerns for many e-learning practitioners, who wish to improve quality by moving away from e-learning as transmissive content delivery; however, current provision may not be seen as particularly problematic. There could also be issues highlighted as problematic in self-assessments where no plans have yet solidified that can be committed to a roadmap. Social media may be one example; institutions may have held back from planning major actions in this fast-moving area. More worrying would be to see evidence of issues frequently assessed as problematic, but for which few improvement actions are planned; there is little evidence of this in the current data.
Conclusion

An E-xcellence self-assessment and review is an opportunity for an institution to take stock of its e-learning provision, recognise its strengths and weaknesses, and plan actions that will enhance its quality of provision. Looking at evidence from past E-xcellence reviews suggests that HEIs introducing e-learning have faced particular challenges in:

- developing an institutional strategy for e-learning
- building online academic communities for students
- managing staff workload.

Many HEIs are also planning actions to improve the interactivity of their learning resources.

This picture of the issues that have proved to be challenging for HEIs moving into e-learning should be of value to other HEIs, and also to educational policy makers.

![Figure 1: Count of institutions judging individual benchmarks as problematic in self-assessments](image-url)