applied infoKit

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Creating an MLE

Why might you want an MLE?

- Where are we now?
- Reasons for implementing an mle
- Approaching the question
- Who should be involved?
- What are the key questions?
- Other issues

2. Why might you want an MLE?

This section advises you on how to examine and establish the reasons why you might need an MLE and what it will offer your institution.

Who should read this:

Senior managers, heads of service, academic leaders, and representatives of teaching and research staff.

Outcomes:

If you follow this process you will produce a policy document outlining the institution's deliberation and decision, demonstrating its involvement of the possible stakeholders and what it seeks to achieve from the particular proposed implementation

Approach:

The aim of this section is to tackle the fundamental question which must begin every process of MLE implementation. Namely , do you actually need a Managed Learning Environment? In an ideal, uniform world, of course, the answer would be a simple yes or no but unfortunately we are not dealing with a homogenous environment where every FE institution is like every other, and in turn like all of the HE institutions. Not only are there considerable differences amongst FEIs, HEIs, and between across the sectors, we are also dealing with a world of variable resources, and one where some institutions are further developed than others.

This therefore necessitates a different approach to answering the question. That is to say the method adopted in the following discussion, is one of presenting you with some guidelines, but more importantly to illustrate how other institutions have gone about attempting to answer the question for themselves.

The first stage in answering this is to split the question into key topics. These are again in the form of questions but correspond to the rest of the sections for this part of the infoKit:

1. ***Why*** might you want an MLE? This presents a summary of the many advantages and drivers commonly aired to support the implementation of an MLE.
2. ***How*** have others gone about answering this question? Here we will look at the methods other institutions have adopted to start to answer the question.
3. ***Who*** should be involved? Here we look at the various stakeholders; who might have input to, or would be affected by, discussions surrounding MLE implementation.
4. ***What*** are the questions you should be asking? Although the directness of 'Do we need an MLE?' has an attractive simplicity it is clear that to answer this question you will need to address some key topics and this section will outline some of these.
5. ***Issues***. Although this breaks away from the questioning format it is worth pointing out further issues which need to be addressed or will arise as a result of starting on this path. Many of these will be picked up in subsequent sections of the infoKit.

2.1. Summary for why you might want an MLE

Although the aim of this infoKit is to direct people as quickly as possible to the relevant sections this represents a fair amount of reading. Therefore, it is worth summarising the main points and arguments raised in this section:

- Why might you want an MLE? The reasons presented fall under three categories: the advantages to administration (tracking students, facilitating easy interchange of data between systems etc.); the advantages for learning (MLEs encourage a learner−centred approach, instant and easy access by the learner to relevant information to support their study, etc); and the political benefits (maintaining a national profile, keeping in tune with Government initiatives, etc.)
- How have others gone about answering this question? For the most part the majority of institutions have set up a new 'committee' or used an existing one to start to discuss the issues surrounding MLE implementation. To assist in this process institutions may wish to look to such methods as setting up 'roundtables' which might offer some guidelines for increasing discussion and efficiency.
- Who should be involved? It is clear that there are a range of 'stakeholders' who should possibly be involved, though there are clearly some core ones. There can be problems with striving for full representation as this may lead to increased bureaucracy, and there are also further complications when working across sites. The most important figure is that of a senior manager or Pro−Vice Chancellor who must at the very least be seen to be supporting the project.
- What are the questions you should be asking? There are clearly a set of questions that need to be discussed from the outset, such as what does everyone want from an MLE. In order to do this you will need to have a clear understanding of the processes already in place in your institution. Existing models for looking at systems may be of use here.
- Issues. The most important issue that will arise (which is discussed in 'Understanding your Organisation') is that of readiness for change, i.e. is your institution ready for such a major initiative? Does it have change management systems in place or relevant experience to help this along?

2.2. Reasons for implementing an MLE

Scenario: Senior managers at your institution have begun to hear of Managed Learning Environments through contact with other colleges, and calls for funding. You have been charged with preparing a brief document on what an MLE is, but more importantly what it can offer.

In this part we will look at the common reasons put forward for implementing an MLE. The aim of this is to provide a handy reference list for you when called upon to summarise the benefits of an MLE. These are listed below under clear headings, but no attempt has been made to prioritise them. This is up to you and will depend upon your role, your institution, and your institution's strategic direction.

In some cases the advantages listed are hypothetical (i.e. they have not been fully tested in reality), but in many case studies these are the reasons why institutions actually have decided to look at getting an MLE up and running (these are listed in the Key Resources for this section).

It is clear, when reading these case studies, that there is much commonality between the 'lists of advantages' printed in reports. Moreover, when reviewing the reports it is also clear that there is much confusion between the terms 'MLE' and 'VLE'. Although we are not actually looking at VLEs as such, these discussions can be turned to our advantage as the plus points of a Virtual Learning Environment can also often be used to support MLE implementation (e.g. see Grantham, 2003). For further information follow this link, www.ukcle.ac.uk.

The list has been sub−divided into three categories: pedagogic (the benefits an MLE might offer to a learner or member of teaching staff), administrative (the benefits it would offer to course/institution administrators), and political (the factors that senior managers might wish to use to release funding). Some or all of them may be appropriate to your institution.

Group	Benefits of an MLE

Pedagogic	• Overall the access to, and delivery and monitoring of learning (learning resources, assessment, administration of courses etc) would be streamlined by an MLE. • Students and staff have specific roles and responsibilities within the institution yet they are often forced to use unconnected multiple systems which are not directly relevant. The MLE could allow direct access to information. This would create the feeling that the gap between the services offered centrally and those needed by students or academics was narrowing. Studies show that direct and seamless secure access to data from remote locations, and 24/7 operation, is exactly what students want (MARTINI Prototype User Group Evaluation 1.3 2002, p. 2). • From the student perspective, combining these two should lead to an improvement in the learning experience. This responds to changing views of learning which are moving from the more scientific objectivist approaches to a more learner centred experience. The MLE facilitates this as the systems would be integrated, moving from a fragmented experience to a more cohesive approach. Teaching and learning models are not being explored here but see Jefferies and Waterhouse (2002) for an introduction to some of the benefits. • Colchester Institute found that the MLE brought improved transparency and availability of timetable and register data to the learner. • The The MLE in FE Case Studies report that implementation of an MLE has played a part in the increased expectations of students in the immediate availability of information about their progress.
Administrative	• Without an MLE it is often the case that institutions base their administration on a myriad of diverse data sources and interfaces which are not always accessible by all departments. By bringing these together under an MLE access for administrative updates will be eased, as will synchronisation across data sources especially when wishing to correct mistakes or update records. • If an implementation of an MLE is agreed it would lead to a thorough assessment of existing practices which could in turn lead to a better understanding of administrative and support issues, making people think more holistically about administration, a better overall communication structure, and a scrapping of outdated and inefficient systems. • New administrative tasks such as transfers between institutions by students (involving transcripts and Personal Development Profiles at the very least), as well as changes in syllabi structures (e.g. the introduction of modularisation) could be helped by having an overall cohesive system. • External demands such as the preparation of returns to funding councils or quality agencies could be greatly eased as the MLE will allow for a more efficient means of extracting and collating data. • City University found that support services gain a better understanding of how systems impact on the educational experience of students. • College managers at Banff and Buchan College were keen that the MLE would reduce the administrative burden on all staff.
Political	• An overall streamlining of processes and a holistic view of systems and how they interoperate can lead to increased efficiencies and costs savings. Boys (August, 2002) notes that the PLUS2 project at Sunderland University for example, demonstrated that many of the University's processes were being unnecessarily duplicated and that these could be reduced. The JISC commissioned MLE in FE Case Studies report supports this view. Another key factor highlighted in the report is the widening participation agenda.

	• The overall reputation of the institution might be enhanced if it was known that an operational MLE was in place. This could also lead to further funding opportunities from bodies such as the JISC, or BECTA, who are interested in exploring benefits of and possible enhancements to MLE provision. • De Montfort University's Managed Learning Environment Project (14 August 2002) suggested that an MLE may lead to lower drop−out rates (for the reasons noted above under pedagogic). • A fully operational MLE would send a strong signal that e−learning (or at the very least ICT) was not peripheral to the institution. • An MLE might allow easier access to the distance learning market, or attract non−traditional clients. • If set up correctly, an MLE could provide an easy and applicable introduction to technology reducing apprehension about ICT amongst staff. • Overall an MLE might be of benefit when facing such things as an institutional audit. Jefferies and Waterhouse (2002) note 'it would also be desirable for any MLE to provide evidence of the university's performances for QAA and other audit and assessment exercises. These QAA exercises and audits impact directly on student recruitment and the ability of the university to attract funding from industry'. The same might apply to OFSTED inspections in FE. • City University found that their e−learning initiative 'brought questions about the future of many of these developments, processes and systems to the fore and assisted in raising awareness of the importance of a coherent university vision'. • City College Manchester found that the external value of being able to provide robust managment information was confirmed during a recent Ofsted inspection process. • A key driver for Coleg Llandrillo was the growing need for robust data to facilitate the reporting requirements of a complex organisation dealing with multiple external agencies.
Other	• This is left up to you. There could be a range of reasons particular to your institution that might provide impetus behind MLE implementation. Consider, for example, why you are reading this infoKit. Is it just out of interest or were there specific reasons for you beginning to look at MLEs?

It is notable that the above discussion does not touch on the costs or problems associated with implementing an MLE. Undoubtedly the financial burden in attempting to introduce such a system can be large and there are numerous technological hurdles not to mention political issues. These are all discussed in later parts of this section, and throughout the infoKit as a whole.

Summary

In this section we have established some of the main advantages offered by an MLE. You should now have a clearer idea of which ones are most applicable to your situation. Try extracting the key points for your institution and matching them to real−life examples (such as published strategy reports, comments by senior managers, emerging systems within your college).

In the next part we consider how other institutions have gone about addressing this question in a local setting.

Follow this link for key resources for this section (these open in a new window)

2.3. How might an institution approach answering this question?

The issue of an MLE has cemented itself in the minds of the planners and managers in your institution. They are looking for clear guidance as to how they can begin to answer the question of whether they need an MLE. You have been asked to suggest possible methods they could use.

We'll now go on to look at how other institutions have begun to answer the question 'Do we need an MLE?', and the processes and methods they have adopted. As was noted in the overview this should happen right at the start of any MLE implementation. [N.B. This whole area is also explored in the section 'Finding and using information'.]

The initial impetus behind why your institution might be considering an MLE can be varied. It might be as a result of seeing other institutions demonstrating their MLEs, or reading case studies, or seeing project funding from JISC, or being told to do this by a Senior Manager. In fact any of the reasons outlined in the previous section could initiate investigations into MLE implementation.

What methods then, have others adopted to start to tackle the issue? The first thing to understand is that there is no need to be alarmed. The methods adopted do not involve any radical processes and are the same tried and tested practices most FE or HE institutions are used to. In short institutions have adopted the following practices:

1. They have charged a single individual to simply investigate the area and provide an answer. This person may be a member of staff or possibly an external consultant, although the latter is rare.
2. They adopt a committee approach by either:

    - using an existing group already working in the area. For example FE/HEIs often have in place ILT groups or appropriate senior management committee which could be charged with this, or
    - creating a new committee charged specifically with assessing the benefits of an MLE (which in most cases becomes the committee charged with implementing the MLE)

In many cases it is not just one single committee that is given the task. De Montford University, for example, set up a three−committee structure involving a management group, a steering group, and an interest group. In cases like this you need to ensure the lines of communication are clear and effective.

The main discussion on stakeholders is in the section 'Gathering Requirements' and later we will look at the focus of the committee(s) and systems which can assist them. For now though, it is worth noting some key points that are continually in the support studies:

1. You need to be clear whether the group is a decision−making body and, if so, its reporting structure; or alternatively is it just there to offer advice and share information.
2. You need to make sure that all stakeholders are represented and in the case of split−sites all locations and institutions are a part of the process (see the next section).
3. Groups will often have to work both horizontally and vertically (using the terminology of the MARTINI project). For example a stakeholder will have to work vertically within their own unit (such as a department), whereas the horizontal activity of the group will cut across units in such areas as data provision.
4. It is advisable to set a defined date for the groups to finish, complete their work, or to review their progress.
5. Any such groups will need to work within the existing committee structure and this will need to be defined.

6. The group needs to be wide in its focus. Boys (March 2002) concludes that it must have the willingness to possibly rethink processes. It should be 'problem−seeking' rather than just seeking solutions, and to consider all 'visualisations' of what an MLE could be. As the TeRG project noted 'even where specific groups or individuals have been established to manage this process, there have been charges that they have focused narrowly on either the technology or the teaching or the learning.'

Boys (March 2002, p.3) notes that two views often emerge early on when forming these groups. The first is that implementing an MLE is fairly straightforward process that simply needs technical solutions. The second is that MLE development is so wide−reaching it must be seen as a major managerial exercise in change. Boys recommends that the latter is the correct approach.

It is natural to link this kind of process with 'established' methods suggested elsewhere for groups engaged in the process of discussing, evaluating, and implementing major ICT initiatives. Therefore as part of the JISC Building MLEs in HE programme two projects (one at Sheffield−Hallam University, the other at Queen Margaret University College Edinburgh) investigated the possibilities of using the material coming out of the American Association for Higher Education, Teaching, Learning and Technology Group and in particular their 'roundtables'. These are groups working to accepted practices aimed at moving forward ICT initiatives.

Details of the Roundtable projects can be found in the key resources section. However, it is worth summarising some of the key points that have emerged in the analysis of how 'roundtables' might be applicable to the UK.

Roundtables are designed to collect data, assist in decision−making, disseminate information, and facilitate structural change. Moreover they are intended to be flexible and to change. They, or something similar, could assist in:

- using IT strategically to meet initiatives and develop goals,
- co−ordinating integration of ICT into departments, schools, and the syllabus,
- overcoming individualistic approaches by departments by raising awareness, facilitating training and support, and
- developing a communication structure − providing input into the decision making process, sharing information, providing informed debate, and bringing together those resistant to change with those who have experience of technology

Mistry et al (2002, p. 39) note that many roundtables started as groups '[needing to] choose an appropriate VLE' and suggested that this particular focus on a single topic will increase their chances of success. They also observed that roundtables tended to vary in format ranging from a highly structured body, to a much looser approach. They noted that the former stood a better chance of success in smaller institutions, whereas bigger organisations were less receptive to prescriptive recommendations and a more informal approach did not 'usurp anyone's authority' (Mistry et al 2002, p. 51). At the same time a 'talking shop' without any leadership, remit, or line of authority will probably not be well received (Mistry et al 2002, p. 65). Roundtables might provide a framework to bring stakeholders together and a structure to work to.

Yet although roundtables sound like they provide an 'off−the−shelf' solution to assessing the benefits of an MLE, there is a decided lack of enthusiasm for them in the UK studies. For example, Mistry et al concluded that 'it is our view that (roundtables) are neither a new nor an effective way of managing technological change for a whole community.' (p. 8). They also noted (p.38) that the majority of F/HEIs have an IT committee in place that looks at teaching and learning and could perform the role of analysing the potential of an MLE without the need for using roundtables (though they did note that many of these committees were recent phenomena (p.39)).

Regardless of whether you wish to pursue roundtables or not, it is likely that one of the first steps you will take when assessing the potential benefits of an MLE is to form a new group, or use an

existing one, charged with this responsibility. The alternative is to put this into the hands of a single individual (or consultant), but this is not recommended. It is possible to elect a 'champion' who will take the initiative forward on a voluntary basis but it is recommended that they are part of a wider group. Ideally resources will be found to support the group and the champion even to the point of funding an FTE (or part thereof) to concentrate on this task. Boys (August, 2002), for example, warned that many projects in the Building MLEs in HE JISC initiative failed to meet early timetables because there were not sufficient staff in place to move forward. Champions are often self−selected but this may cause problems if the person does not wield sufficient authority or respect within the institution. The champion will need to be motivated, have some knowledge of technical, administrative, and support issues, and the needs of teachers and learners. Moreover they must be perceived as being unbiased, and at the centre of existing networks (this is especially important in FE where one might be dealing with split sites). Many of the JISC projects lacked a champion from the outset which impacted on their ability to proceed.

Follow this link for key resources for this section (these open in a new window)

2.4. Who should be involved?

Scenario: It has been agreed that a committee or working group should be formed to tackle the issue of the institution's MLE. You have been asked to outline who should be invited to attend these meetings.

In this section we will look at the people who might be involved in the group. We term these people 'stakeholders'. The stakeholders involved in the group should also:

1. have something to contribute to the topic
2. be most affected by the implementation of an MLE
3. have the time and focus to concentrate on the MLE issue. As De Montford University noted 'There should be a dedicated team of people having the MLE development as their main (only) function. This should include the following skills: Project Management and Promotion; User Requirements and Evaluation; Technical Development; Design; Educational' (DMU Project 'Management Issues' Briefing paper)

The issue of stakeholders is one which runs throughout this infoKit, as a common theme of involving the key people (decision makers and users) in the formation of the MLE. Readers then should also consult sections 'Understanding your organisation', 'Gathering Requirements', 'Technology Options', and 'Implementation'. For more information follow this link to Stakeholders.

The goal of E. Mumford's ETHICS system nicely summarises this in that you are trying to establish 'a value position in which the future users of computer systems at all organisational levels play a major part in the design of these systems' (Mumford, 1983). The key is to choose people who are representative of their units, constituents, etc, and at the same time overcome the key difficulty of identifying and addressing the needs of an enormous range of stakeholders in a complex organisation (Jefferies and Waterhouse 2002).

In later section of this infoKit (Gathering Requirements) there is a more thorough analysis of how these stakeholders might be identified.

You should also note that although the roles and responsibilities outlined below may be fairly common across FE and HE, the structures of your institution will also influence the membership of the group. For example, your institution may be split over several sites, have several awarding bodies, be associated with other affiliated institutions and regional projects and initiatives. These views will have to be represented somehow, as well as the technical/administrative/academic input outlined below.

It is crucial that the people with the power to take initiatives forward are also brought in.

There are different approaches that you could use to assemble the stakeholders. The MARTINI project began by dividing stakeholders into data providers and data users and then selected from each group (on average their committees were between 13 and 25 members in size (p. 44)). Jefferies and Waterhouse (2002) differentiated between 'internal' stakeholders (managers, lecturers, students, etc) and 'external' ones (society, business, government, standards agencies, vendors, academic theorists, and other institutions). They then analysed each of these with relation to their source of power based on Pfeffer's 1981 study, and drew conclusions as to how this may assist in listing stakeholders. We must also recall that some projects elected for more than one group and thus different stakeholders were required for different purposes. A good example of this is De Montfort University's Managed Learning Environment Project which set up three groups 'one for Strategic Direction, one for Implementation, and the other for Management of Progress, defining the communication network between all three' (see the MLE Corporate Implementation Group paper for item 1, meeting 11 Feb 2003).

It is worthwhile summarising who you should be looking to include, or more importantly, what communities should be represented. The following list is a collation of all of the stakeholders identified by other projects. It is worth reading through these to get a feel for how many different types of people might be affected by an MLE. Many of the titles or positions may not be appropriate to your institution but you should consider if anyone else fulfils a similar role. It may well be the case that several of the roles are performed by one person, or in the case of split sites, a single role may be performed by several people across the different geographical locations.

The Stakeholders are divided into four categories. You are trying to get representation from all the people who will have input into the MLE, or will be affected by it, and especially all of the data owners who will be providing the 'content' for the system(s). Above all senior management with power to progress the initiative must be included. These could be drawn from any of the four categories or may include a senior member for each. The importance of this cannot be overstated, and if these senior representatives are unable to attend it must be made clear that they are supporting the initiative.

Satisfying all their aims in order to facilitate collaboration can be extremely problematic and a considerable amount of time can be spent in simply reaching shared understandings (Mistry et al 2002, pp. 18−19). Holyfield (2003) noted the issues associated with bringing so many different experts together 'different perspectives, different vocabularies and tools, different roles and authorities, and so on. This problem can be exacerbated if the members are dispersed across various physical locations.'

There are also issues of personalities. If your stakeholder group is not selected well they may focus too narrowly on the technology rather than the wider issues. Moreover many of the people who will be expected to use the MLE might be inherently resistant to change, or even worse staff may feel that the MLE might lead to job losses or downgrading. Addressing the problem of participation is clearly an expensive process and costly in time but if it's done well it leads to maximum levels of success.

Stakeholder Type	Function	Represented by
Academic − teaching staff whose views and input will need to be taken into account.	Their activities will need to be part of the overall planning into how the system operates and interacts with the end user.	Faculty or Division Heads/Deans, Heads of Departments, and Heads/Deans of Research.
Administration − these form some of the main data owners and data users as the types of	Administrative representatives will be able to advise and outline existing core practices and a policy level view. Further more Jenkins et al (2001) noted	Finance Division, the Registrar, Human Resources, and Accomodation.

systems typically described as marking up an MLE underlie many of the core administrative functions of an institution.	that generally such central services have often taken decisions on choice, funding, and installation of VLEs in the past, so there may be an existing pool of expertise to draw on.	
Support	These are the key services that will be charged with making sure the various components of the MLE continue to work, as well as providing the ancillary support which will arise (i.e. training, facilities, etc.), or can lend specific expertise related to other services within the instition.	IT support and/or MIS which manages the infrastructure, Library staff, Directory of Audio−Visual Services, and the Disability Unit.
Other	There are also various other representatives that may be viewed as potential stakeholders and included in the group. Projects studied have included the following: Students via Union representatives (e.g. Boys (March 2002, p. 3)) notes that the lack of student involvement is one reason why many implementation projects in HE fail); an expert in Intellectual Property Rights; and a representative of any commercial vendor.	Projects studied have included the following: Students via Union representatives (e.g. Boys (March 2002, p. 3)) notes that the lack of student involvement is one reason why many implementation projects in HE fail); an expert in IPR; and a representative of any commercial vendor.

Summary

In approaching the question of whether you need an MLE we recommended that some form of group or committee is established and we have now considered who might be invited to join. Look again at the categories above and think of who from your institution would fall under each heading. Who should be brought in? If you are a multi−site institution how will you tackle this?

The next section identifies some of the preliminary discussions the group might have.

Follow this link for key resources for this section (these open in a new window)

2.5. What are the Key Questions?

Scenario: Your institution's MLE Working Group is about to meet and you have been asked to put together an agenda and a discussion document to focus debate.

In this section we address some of the key concepts that will allow your stakeholders (and thus your institution) to get to a shared understanding of what an MLE is/can do, and start to indicate how you can make this happen. The general discussions in sections 'Understanding your organisation', 'Gathering Requirements', and 'Implementation' may also be of interest in guiding your thoughts.

In order to answer the question 'Do we need an MLE?' there are some basic issues that should be discussed. First and foremost there is the question 'What is an MLE?' or 'What would an MLE mean for us?' Answering these questions should enable the institution to come to an overall 'vision' and a shared understanding.

The next task might be to consider what each of the stakeholders will want out of the MLE, in both

the long and short term. This does not necessarily mean a formal process of gathering requirements more a general discussion by the stakeholders of how the MLE might change their work. Some preliminary questions you might wish to discuss are:

- What do we hope to gain from an MLE?
- What might we have to change to make it happen?
- What could we lose?

Each of the stakeholders should initially focus on these from their own perspective. They should then attempt to draw these together to form a consensus and understanding of the possible impact of an MLE across the institution.

This will lead naturally onto discussions of how big the project might become. For example, are you looking for a far−reaching holistic solution or is this unrealistic? Boys (March 2002) identified four possibilities re MLE deployment which could be considered at this initial stage breaking them down into comprehensive, additive, parallel, and autonomous (in decreasing order of cross−institutional remit). Boys, however, noted that many people start by attempting the approach of implementing a portal but this is merely targeting the access point not the interoperability of the underlying systems. Ravensbourne College began with a modular design in mind (i.e. not a single monolithic system) that 'could easily inform the different levels of interoperability through progressive stages of integration and development; [and] one that allowed flexibility reordering priorities without loosing [sic.] control of the rest of the components.'

The background to this is the systems that are already in place. Technical, political and social systems can determine failure or success. Boys (August, 2002) noted that one of the key findings from the JISC projects was exactly 'how little institutions know about what already happens in terms of either data flows or organisational relationships' ... 'the enormity of these tasks alone should not be under−estimated.' One tip might be to take the student−centred approach and to consider all of the processes that he/she might go through from enrolment to graduation. For detail on Process Review, visit the JISC infoNet Process Review infoKit.

Then there are the issues of the surrounding infrastructures and support services. The overall complexity of the environment you operate in will be a key determining factor in the ultimate success of the MLE (Jefferies and Waterhouse (2002)). Moreover existing technical systems which might be in place already are notoriously lacking in interoperability and integration features and this severe limitation should be recognised from the start.

Once the background has been established there are some specific issues you will need to raise. Collated from the case studies reviewed these boil down to:

- Local support issues (e.g. do you have sufficient network capabilities to host an MLE, or a support infrastructure to cover maintenance, and training?)
- Management issues (e.g. are the managerial structures in place to make an MLE realistic, are there any dysfunctions in the current system that might need to be tackled, and what will be the costs for all of this versus the benefits?)
- Political issues (e.g. does this tie in with your institution's mission and strategies, is there sufficient support at a high level, are all stakeholders on board, what are the current attitudes to e−learning in your institution, and what are your competitors doing?)

Depending upon the remit of your group and the expertise of the stakeholders you may allocate each of these areas to specific people to tackle. It is common to use various approaches to gather information about requirements (e.g. the CoManTLE and the SMILE projects both used interviews and surveys). You can, of course, draw on previous experience. It may be the case that you have already implemented a VLE and if so this may provide useful information and answers to the above. Similarly there may already have been reviews of business processes which could provide very useful information. However, in all of this it must be noted that you are moving on from

answering the question 'Do we need an MLE?' to the next stage of 'Could we actually implement one?'

The CoManTLE project chose an interesting approach to this by looking at the possibility of adopting a systems analysis stance, employing such approaches as the Soft Systems Methodology (SSM), and Beer's Viable Systems Model (VSM). Although this may seem heavy−handed to those who may wish to adopt the more informal approach of simply getting together and thrashing out the issues, the project concluded that 'we see SSM as providing a methodology for collecting the raw data needed for constructing a useful VSM of the University in the context of MLE development.' (Britain, 2001)

There are formal and informal approaches which could be adopted in guiding the group with its preliminary questions and activities, and underlying these are some fundamental questions and issues that will need to be raised early on. Whichever approach is selected the group should set itself up with the knowledge that they will be involved in 'a lengthy iterative process' (MARTINI Project Plan 1.5, 2002, p. 9)

Summary

We have begun to look at the issues and methods your group could adopt when beginning the process of analysing the potential of an MLE. At the root of this is the need for all stakeholders to agree on the following:

- What an MLE will mean for the institution
- What it will mean to all the stakeholders (it is essential that everyone understands the impact it might have on themselves and others)
- What does everyone want to get from the MLE
- Whether the institution is ready for an MLE (discussed in the next section)

If you feel that you have achieved this level of understanding then you are ready to proceed to the next stage.

Follow this link for key resources for this section (these open in a new window)

2.6 Other Issues

Finally, before moving onto the next major section of the MLE infoKit, it is worth noting some of the recurring themes that appear in the reviews and case studies written about MLE implementation. In a sense this is a 'taste of things to come' as these lead well into later sections (notably 'Understanding your organisation' and 'Embedding') and will be discussed in more depth there. However, they are worth raising now as they will soon arise in any initial discussions.

The most fundamental issue is that of change − namely the possible levels of change you will be requiring of the various units and stakeholders within your institutions should you wish to implement an MLE. Even at this beginning stage you might wish to ask whether you feel there are the structures in place to cope. As Mistry et al (2002, p. 15) state 'Change is uneven: it is continuous: its pace is increasing: [and] there are several causes and commentators [who] advise that it needs to be addressed continuously; and 'endured''. Change management is therefore a key issue that will need to be addressed (and is discussed in the next section) but Mistry et al (2002, p. 16) argue that 'there can be no such thing as 'change management' if, as is commonly held, the nature of change is 'unknown and unquantifiable' and 'seventy per cent of all change initiatives fail' (citing studies by Pugh, and Beer and Nohira). Boys (August 2002) also notes that 'Universities and colleges in the UK do not commonly have in place explicit management of change models or processes.' How to approach this is discussed in later sections, but for now the guidelines proposed by E. Mumford in her ETHICS system are worth considering.

Finally, there is the general problem of discussing something which will be, for the most part, in the abstract. This not only means a need to carefully balance what is desirable with what is possible, but, more importantly, it will require efforts to keep everyone on board and creative. Real−life examples (either local or elsewhere)should be studied as soon as possible.

Follow this link for key resources for this section (these open in a new window)

Section Editor

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