Seb Schmoller combines half-time employment as Executive Secretary of ALT (http://www.alt.ac.uk/) with work as an independent consultant. He is the author of Fortnightly Mailing (http://fm.schmoller.net), a blog with a focus on online learning and the internet which summarises and comments on resources and news that he finds in the course of his work. It is one of the four I follow. I provided Seb with a list of questions reflecting the U.S. interests in the U.K. experience. The views below represent Seb’s personal views, rather than those of ALT. Footnotes in normal font are mine; with those in italics offered by Seb.

Q. As the participation rate in higher education increases—a goal of both U.S. and U.K. governments—the additional students are generally less prepared, less motivated and often limited by work and family obligations. To succeed, these students may need more than average resources. In the U.S., colleges and universities have had to reallocate resources to provide these services or reduce the quality of teaching and learning. Will this be true in the U.K. in order to move the participation rate from 43% to the 50% goal?¹

A. UK universities are actively encouraged to take in students from disadvantaged backgrounds through the Office For Fair Access (OFFA)², and it is likely to a certain extent that funds will follow students from poorer backgrounds³. In the U.K. institutions are constrained by labour-market regulations that are common across Europe in their employment of part-time adjunct faculty on a temporary or casual basis (although there is nothing to stop them from making it a requirement for post-graduate students, research assistants, etc to undertake some teaching duties, at a lower cost per taught hour than for lecturing staff). So, if expansion in provision takes place it will in general be by taking on more permanent staff, or by changing the mix of staff involved in delivery, by cutting the taught hours of courses, or by increasing group-sizes (the latter three have the effect of increasing the ratio of permanent students to permanent teaching staff [SSR]), rather than by increasing the proportion of the teaching being done by part time adjunct faculty with no job security. Note also that there has been a steady increase in the SSRs in most universities, much of it taking place during the big expansion in UK HE during the 1970s and 1980s. Furthermore, the recent introduction, in England at least, of tuition fees, has resulted in an increase in HE funding that has allowed universities to expand without further reducing the spending per student.

¹ Prime Minister Tony Blair, 14 January 2004. 82% of UK students complete their degree compared to 66% in the U.S. See Thomas Weko, “New Dogs and Old Tricks: What Can The UK Teach the US about University Education?” Higher Education Policy Institute, Oxford, March 2004
² The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) is an independent, non departmental public body which aims to promote and safeguard fair access to higher education for under-represented groups in light of the introduction of variable tuition fees in 2006-07. http://www.offa.org.uk/about/
³ See, for example, “Cash may follow poorer students” http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6168606.stm
Q. What is the perception of the benefits of educational technology—specifically eLearning—in UK universities?

A. eLearning is getting attention in U.K. universities, partly as a result of the 2005 HEFCE e-learning strategy[^4], with equivalent approaches being taken or soon to be taken in Scotland and in Wales, and with extensive UK-wide effort by JISC and the Higher Education Academy. But that said, the e-Learning Benchmarking Exercise[^5] that is being organized across the whole of U.K. HE by the Higher Education Academy seems to be revealing quite a mixed picture, with some institutions embedding e-learning across their whole operation, but with a much patchier position in many others. For example, whilst most institutions have learning systems such as Blackboard or Moodle (in HE the former predominates), the way in such systems are being used and the extent to which use is central to the student experience varies widely.

Q. What are the roles of DfES (Department for Education and Skills) and Becta (British Educational and Technology Agency)?

A. DfES is the Government Department responsible for education in England (and to a lesser extent Wales). Between 2003 and 2005 DfES was developing a “Unified e-Learning Strategy”, under the stewardship of Diana Laurillard[^6], who headed the DfES e-Learning Strategy Unit. The strategy eventually issued by the DfES in March 2005 was called an e-Strategy[^7]. In about mid 2006, responsibility for the Strategy was transferred from DfES to Becta[^8], which issued a Harnessing Technology Delivery Plan in January 2007[^9]. This attempts to cover the whole spectrum from Children’s Services to Higher Education (for example it includes as an Appendix the HEFCE e-Learning Strategy), but it has to be said that the principle focus is on K-12, and, to a lesser extent on Further Education[^10]. Government is often keen to see faster change than can reasonably by achieved, and the Becta plan suffers from this[^11]. Furthermore some people argue (I am one!) that for e-learning to work cost effectively, scale economies are needed that are hard to achieve given the small size of many of the entities in the system, and given the current policy drive to delegate as much control in education to local level. For example providing English primary schools, as the DfES has done, with earmarked budget to buy a learning system might result in many small learning-system implementations, a lot of

[^4]: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/HEFCE/2005/05_12/
[^5]: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/benchmarking.htm
[^6]: Diana was PVC at the OU, and is author of the influential “Rethinking University Teaching” http://tinyurl.com/26c24u. She is now Professor of Learning with Digital Technologies at the Institute of Education http://ioewebserver.ioe.ac.uk/ioe/cms/get.asp?cid=12330&12330_0=12562
[^7]: http://www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/e-strategy/
[^8]: Becta, a “non-departmental public body”, is the Government's lead partner in the strategic development and delivery of its e-strategy. http://about.becta.org.uk/display.cfm?page=1749
[^9]: http://publications.becta.org.uk/display.cfm?resID=28223
[^10]: K-12 us a U.S. term including kindergarten, primary, middle-school, and high school; 12 years of required schooling plus kindergarten.
[^11]: In writing the plan Becta may even be considered to have ignored the advice contained in research it has itself commissioned. For example its “e-Strategy Implementation Review” which concluded that i) change will be slow; ii) the focus of change needs to be on people not technology”. For more on this see http://fm.schmoller.net/2006/12/educational_cha.html
fragmentation, and run counter to the “publish once, use many times” dictum concerning online learning materials.\textsuperscript{12,13}

Becta is currently working on benchmarking processes for schools and colleges using various flavours of “maturity model”. In Scotland, a baseline study of e-readiness is underway in Scotland’s Colleges under the auspices of the Scottish Funding Council, using a revision of Stephan Marshall’s eLearning Maturity Model (EMM).\textsuperscript{14,15}

Q. What is Becta’s view of open source and Moodle [learning system]?

A. BECTA is willing to support the deployment of open source software if it can demonstrate lower Total Cost of Ownership (TCO) and, implicitly, acceptable risk. The question is not Moodle, but the availability of established firms to provide support and, for some schools and colleges, software as a service.\textsuperscript{16,17}

Q. What is your assessment of Bodington, Sakai, and the forthcoming product that merges the two?

A. Bodington has always been viewed as a somewhat “eccentric” (which is not to say ineffective!) learning system developed at Leeds University, and supported and extended by Oxford University and the University of Highlands and Islands Millennium Institute.\textsuperscript{18} Sakai is seen as having strong support among the major research universities for collaboration.\textsuperscript{19} Thus the product merger is likely to do Bodington good. Notwithstanding this, my own experience of using Sakai (to support the ALT Research Committee, and as

\textsuperscript{12} “A recent survey of FE [colleges] practitioners found that e-learning was reported to have a positive impact on student motivation, retention, attendance and attainment.” The Becta Review 2006 Evidence on the progress of ICT in education, 28 April 2006, page 5, see also page 40.
\textsuperscript{13} For more on the issue of doing things at scale see http://fm.schmoller.net/2006/11/chair_of_bectas.html
\textsuperscript{15} For details of the Scottish Study, see http://www.sero.ac.uk/sfc.html.
\textsuperscript{16} MoodleRooms, a Baltimore, Maryland USA firm, is attempting to provide both in the U.S. by teaming with current Moodle partners that tend to be very small firms or individual consultancies. The firm’s business model was presented at MoodleMoot Albuquerque held 16 February 2007. Presentation sides and podcasts are expected to be added to the Moot’s Website within the next few weeks.
\textsuperscript{17} See http://www.becta.org.uk/corporate/press_out.cfm?id=4681 for an overview of Becta’s approach.
\textsuperscript{18} The “eccentric” tag may have come from the use of the building and room metaphor. im+m’s Justin Tilton explored whether the metaphor could be changed to department and school (within a college or university) at a JISC sponsored meeting of developers 20 November 2002. He was advised only a change in a table was required. His motivation was possible use of Bodington in U.S. community colleges. See “Notes from a Trip to the United Kingdom,” Jim Farmer, instructional media+magic, 1 December 2002.
\textsuperscript{19} Because Sakai did not support drill and practice, assessments for learning, or sequenced instruction, while at Sakai Partners Programs I used the term ‘collaborative learning environment” so Sakai partners would be aware of this focus. Foothill College, under a Hewlett Foundation sponsored project, developed some of these capabilities in a learning system called Etudes that used and may now be integrated with Sakai technology.
an ePortfolio application) emphasizes that Sakai is more a virtual research environment than a learning environment; and that it is not a straightforward system to adapt around the using organisation’s own requirements. Within Further Education colleges, there is enthusiastic uptake of Moodle20.

Q. What is the impact of Open University’s choice of Moodle?

A. The Open University itself is well known and well respected and its experience will influence decisions. People in the know are of course aware of the OU’s decision. But information of this kind travels quite slowly to decision-makers. For example, the fact that the University of Glasgow is a heavy Moodle user21, with multiple implementations, is not well known in UK HE, [possibly because of decentralization within the university] and Glasgow is a much more typical university than the OU, so its use of Moodle is rather more relevant.22

Q. Has the Blackboard patent done any damage to their marketing efforts?

A. Because of the high cost of switching, and the duration of typical license agreements, it will be several years before it will be clear if Blackboard has harmed itself with its patent.23

Q. What is the date of your next conference and the themes?

A. ALT-C 2007 will be held 4-6 September in Nottingham, and we are taking bookings. Dr Michelle Selinger, Education Strategist, Cisco Systems, Dr Peter Norvig, Director of Research, Google, and Professor Dylan Wiliam, Deputy Director of the Institute of Education, recently back from a three-year stint in the US as Research Director with ETS. The main themes are “Learning and internationalism”, “Learning technology for the social network generation”, “Designing learning spaces”, and “Large-scale implementation”. For more on ALT-C see http://www.alt.ac.uk/altc2007/.

Notes reviewed by Seb Schmoller, 19 March 2007

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20 See for example the OSS Watch 2006 survey at http://www.oss-watch.ac.uk/studies/survey2006/
21 See http://moodle.gla.ac.uk/moodle/
22 I commented UCLA’s (University of California at Los Angeles) choice of Moodle was an endorsement recognized by research and teaching universities; the implementation at Open University—though much larger and more extensive—would be viewed as a “special case” not relevant to universities.
23 I asked the same question at site visits in the U.K. Several referred to universities that had made a decision to replace Blackboard, but would not make that decision public until they had completed plans for replacement and communicated with faculty and students. Those commenting about future plans were not those who later would be making the decision. According to a recent Blackboard presentation at the Thomas Weisel Conference, Blackboard’s renewal rate has gone from 90 to 91%; of those using the WebCt product, from 88% to 91%.

Jim Farmer, instructional media + magic, inc. 4 11 March 2007
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