Many tourists lost in the back roads of Ireland, on asking for directions to their destination, have been mystified by a response along the lines of “Well, if I was going there, I sure wouldn’t start from here.” In the case of this chapter, “there” is a situation in which anyone can access qualifications and courses regardless of where they are in the world; “here” is the world of traditional universities that mainly serve students who study on campus. The provision of flexible access and new pathways to higher education, made possible by distance and e-learning, is the goal of national and international lifelong-learning policies aimed at upskilling citizens and enabling them to contribute to and participate in the “knowledge society” (see Brown, Anderson, and Murray 2007). Yet often the reality at the local level shows that there is a confluence of factors that appear to conspire to limit the potential for responding flexibly to the lofty rhetoric of these expectations. From where we stand “here,” the pathway to “there” is strewn with many barriers, detours, and dead ends. So to what extent is it possible to actually get “there” from “here”?

As practitioners, we have over twenty years’ experience in designing and developing distance-education and online programs in Oscail (www.oscail.ie), the National Distance Education Centre based in Dublin City University (dcu; www.dcu.ie), a traditional campus-based university. Like other distance-education providers, for many years Oscail offered flexibility to students in terms of location, duration, timing, and pacing of study. Over the last decade, we moved from first-generation, text-based distance learning to e-learning and online pedagogies. Meanwhile, the “mainstream” university continued to focus on full-time students and on its research agenda. In common with most traditional universities, technology was introduced to improve the quality of learning for on-campus
students rather than to increase access and flexibility for students who cannot be physically present on campus (Blin and Munro 2008; Fox and MacKeogh 2008).

Here, we focus on the often-difficult path to implementing flexible teaching and learning approaches in traditional universities. Our attention was focused on this problem because of a disruptive event that threatened the future of our distance-education centre: our state funding was withdrawn. To say the least, this situation placed significant demands on the flexibility of the university to react in a way that protected the interests of staff and students, as well as its mission to widen access. There followed a period of uncertainty, which, as we write, has yet to be fully resolved.

One response of the university was to explore ways of merging Oscail’s activities and programs with those in the mainstream faculties, and we were given the task of developing a strategy for e-learning in DCU. This process involved identifying external drivers for adoption of flexible delivery of programs, including the European Union and national development priorities, as well as investigating the substantial barriers to implementation, including external funding policies, institutional supporting mechanisms, and skepticism about the quality of e-learning, combined with lack of awareness of its potential (MacKeogh and Fox 2008, 2009a, and 2009b).

Engaging with the wider university community proved illuminating to us, not the least in revealing widespread support for the rhetoric of flexibility and accessibility, combined with a deep-seated attachment to the traditional model of students sitting in classrooms listening to lectures.

SETTING THE SCENE

Before outlining our reflections on the journey that the traditional university faces in moving to a flexible, responsive organization, let us tell you, briefly, what the change in Oscail’s funding regime represented. Oscail was set up in 1982 and received funding from the Higher Education Authority (HEA) of Ireland to deliver distance-education programs to adult students, in collaboration with all higher-education institutions in Ireland. This funding was “ring-fenced”: that is, it could only be spent on distance-education programs and could not be used by the university for
any other purposes. Oscail developed a series of distance-learning undergraduate and postgraduate programs with, at one stage, over three thousand students and involving many hundreds of academic staff in the Irish universities and institutes of technology, who acted as subject leaders, writers, tutors, editors, advisors, and so on. In 2007, the HEA decided to review its funding for Oscail. The confidential report of the review panel described Oscail as “the driving force for open and distance learning in Ireland for a quarter of a century, bringing opportunity to thousands of students for whom traditional patterns of study were simply impossible.” However, despite these positive words, the bottom line was that the HEA would no longer fund Oscail, claiming that distance education had been merged into mainstream higher education in Ireland and that dedicated funding for one institution was no longer warranted. While the background to this decision may be the object of future scholarly research, the impact of the decision was to throw Oscail and its staff and students into a period of uncertainty. Since Oscail had a quasi-faculty status within DCU and its staff were DCU employees, the university was also forced to consider its options—one of which was to close the Oscail operation and wind down its programs (the HEA subvention amounted to one million euros per year, representing one third of our income). Fortunately for many, this option was not the path selected. Instead, the university asked us (Kay and Seamus) to develop a strategy for embedding e-learning into the mainstream university and to propose how Oscail’s expertise could be used to support the rest of the university in transforming their programs.

While the desire to secure the future of e-learning programs in DCU may have motivated the university in its response, its willingness to review its programs should also be seen in the wider context of the wholesale reform and modernization of higher education in Europe, which is driven by the Bologna process (www.ehea.info). Begun in 1998, this process now involves forty-seven European countries in a commitment to reforming higher-education degree structures, moving to a curriculum guided by learning outcomes as well as developing a transparent, flexible system that allows students to move between institutions and countries with a comparable system of qualifications. Flexibility has become a key word in all of this—as applied to learning pathways, duration of studies, and ways of designing the curriculum. DCU had actively embraced the
Bologna reforms and had embarked on a process through which all programs and module curricula were to be redesigned around learning outcomes. Flexibility was to be introduced in terms of pace and duration of studies, and choice of pathways.

Given the climate of openness to change in the university, it appeared to us (at first) that the time was ripe for the university to adopt e-learning and online learning as a key strategy in achieving the flexibility agenda. However, as we found, this was an unduly optimistic reading of the university’s readiness to mainstream e-learning at this time.

**INVESTIGATING THE ROUTE FROM “HERE” TO “THERE”**

From our analysis of the policy environment, we identified numerous international and national strategies for e-learning based on the need to upskill the population to meet the challenge of the information and knowledge society and the subsequent need for accessible and flexible access to tertiary education. We also identified the typical rationales influencing higher-education institutions to adopt e-learning, including enhancing reputation, developing information skills and literacies, widening access, increasing flexibility, increasing quality, and reducing cost and improving cost-effectiveness. In examining the internal DCU climate for adoption of e-learning, we held over sixty meetings and interviews with individuals and groups, and issued a questionnaire survey to all academic staff. Our findings form a useful counterbalance to the sometimes over-optimistic external rhetoric and suggest that there are many challenges to implementing fundamental change in how courses are taught in traditional campus-based universities (see the full report of our findings in MacKeogh and Fox 2008).

The qualitative consultation process identified mixed attitudes and awareness of the potential of e-learning. A small core of academic staff were enthusiastic and held significant expertise, while others were strongly skeptical, influenced by perceptions of poor quality, increased workload, loss of academic control and freedom, and lack of support from central functions. Concerns were expressed about the perceived lower esteem placed on teaching in comparison to research and the impact of lack of funding on quality. The quantitative survey was even more illuminating
Extrapolating from 139 responses (a response rate of 25.2%), DCU academic staff appear to accept the flexibility agenda, with almost three-quarters agreeing that the potential to reach students in different geographical locations and at different stages in their learning lives would motivate them to teach online. However, other findings do not bode well for a positive reception for e-learning. Over half (56.7%) prefer traditional face-to-face lectures, while only one third (33.3%) would like to teach as many of their courses online as possible. A creditable 93 percent believed that individual modules could be taught online, but just 12.4 percent believed that complete undergraduate courses, and 21.8 percent that complete masters programs, could be taught online. Some survey voices may illustrate the basis for resistance in terms of fears about loss of control of intellectual property, negative views about quality, suspicion about management motivations, and lack of support:

*Loss of control:* “Well I maintain a course webpage with course notes assignments etc. and provide continuous assessment results off that webpage. However I don’t provide for forum discussion, submission of assessments online or recorded lectures. I prefer to see students face-to-face during lectures. I do not want my lectures recorded passed around and passed to students not registered for my class etc.”

*Quality concerns:* “There is no replacement for face to face teaching for producing outstanding inspired graduates. e-learning will not produce high-calibre personnel needed for research or high end industry. . . . e-learning will only serve to . . . promote further detachment from college life. I believe e-learning should be confined to peripheral/support roles for traditional learning techniques i.e. face to face.”

*Types of subjects appropriate for online learning:* “Teaching online teaching and stuff that can be memorized that’s about it. The rest is perhaps better than nothing or an emergency replacement for real classroom work but it’s always far more time consuming, less effective, and rightly dismissed by colleagues and administration as generally useless, except at least in theory as a revenue stream. Thankfully I’m not in the revenue stream business.”
Reservations about university support: “Limited buy-in from top-management and teaching staff to online learning. Initiatives are at a low-level and not widespread; teaching/e-learning not aligned with core competencies of the university thus no strategic intent. Inadequate support structures no incentive for lecturers to change current teaching practices when emphasis for progression placed mainly on research.”

THE ROADMAP

Following our analyses, in July 2008 we produced a detailed report and recommendations for the university’s senior management group. We recommended that DCU should adopt a formal e-learning policy that would include commitments to the embedding of e-learning; the establishment of enabling, training, and support structures; criteria for program development; and targets and criteria for adoption. We also recommended actions to increase staff and student capacity for e-learning; such structures would promote, develop, sustain, and integrate e-learning in DCU. Finally, we suggested alternative ways of securing funding. While the senior management group accepted that a learning-innovation strategy was a priority, they avoided a top-down approach. This was not surprising, as our analysis of e-learning implementation strategies in a broad range of UK traditional universities had shown that, with the exception of the University of Bournemouth (Hanson 2003), all universities we had studied had adopted bottom-up strategies (see Fox and MacKeogh 2008). Our report was published, without the detailed recommendations, as a consultation and information document for staff (MacKeogh and Fox 2008). Senior management recommended that the e-learning strategy process should be rolled into the overall 2009–11 university strategic-planning exercise, that we should continue to work with colleagues who were interested in developing online programs, and that the university should integrate Oscail activities and staff more completely into the university structures (preface, MacKeogh and Fox 2008). In effect, while the university agreed that a fully flexible university was a good thing to aim for, it was not prepared to dictate a detailed road map of how to get there.
For the next six months, we engaged in a series of targeted workshops, working with small groups of interested colleagues. We demonstrated a number of online pedagogical techniques and managed to stimulate some greater understanding of the potential of e-learning. However, despite the interest, we cannot claim that a critical mass of flexible online programs and modules are being developed as we write. Indeed, some recent proposals for accreditation of new programs persist in the classroom-based mode, even where the potential for a wider audience exists if flexible online delivery or blended methods were to be used.

How do we explain this reluctance to adopt truly flexible and accessible education? Some answers are more obvious than others. One major barrier is the lack of structures, funding, and reward systems to support staff development and training. From interacting with colleagues, we know that there is little incentive for staff to take on the extra workload that would inevitably result from increased enrolments and the adoption of more innovative teaching and assessment methods. However, even were adequate support and funding available, there is lingering skepticism about e-learning. For example, the president of DCU, in his blog on 19 May 2009, commented on the “often strangely unsatisfactory” impact of e-learning programs offered by some institutions, suggesting a return to the drawing board where a “new form of elearning, based to an extent on the social networking experience, is the way forward.”

Some possibilities for future development may lie in the roll-out of the DCU Enhancement of Learning Strategy (Dublin City University 2009). Discussions on the strategy began in September 2008 with an advisory group comprising representatives from schools, faculties, and administrative units. With such a large group representing a range of interests, it is perhaps not surprising that a number of proposals that we had put to senior management failed to achieve overall acceptance. For example, we had identified a Deakin University policy which requires that all students take a minimum number of online credits as part of their program of studies (Armatas, Holt, and Rice 2004) and had made what we considered a relatively modest proposal that DCU adopt a similar policy. Instead, our colleagues rejected mandatory online modules in favour of a more evolutionary approach: “All programmes will be audited to evaluate the use of appropriate alternative pedagogical approaches such as e-learning,
collaborative learning, independent study and community engagement” (Dublin City University 2009, 14). However, we were somewhat more successful in persuading our colleagues to adopt a high-level objective of “advancing the flexible, responsive and accessible university.” This objective included a commitment to redesigning “progression structures with the aim of building in increased flexibility on progression pathways for full-time students, and opening up new routes for part-time and distance education students” (Dublin City University 2009, 15).

The strategy committed DCU to four initiatives to be completed by 2011—that is, four years after the withdrawal of Oscail’s funding:

- Identify existing or prospective DCU programmes that could be offered either fully or substantially online
- Analyse existing Oscail programmes with a view to integration into the Schools/Faculties of DCU and/or linked colleges, thus providing a critical mass of flexible programmes delivered online and aimed at off-campus students
- Procure an IT system designed to support non-standard progression routes and flexible programmes
- Establish a new institute incorporating Oscail, the Learning Innovation Unit and the education in the community element of DCU to spearhead the flexible delivery of programmes to a wider set of students. (Internal document, DCU Enhancement of Learning Strategy)

While this strategy has been agreed upon at a high level, the significant task of securing staff acceptance—even some enthusiasm—remains because without the co-operation and support of these academics and administrators, significant progress will be impossible.

**ARE WE “THERE” YET?**

Higher-education institutions are now being encouraged, or indeed forced, to adopt more flexible approaches in response to national and international policy agendas (see Brown, Anderson, and Murray’s 2007
analysis of national e-learning strategies). However, institutions may pay lip service to the flexibility agenda while signally failing to adopt any initiatives that might actually achieve such flexibility. As we have found, the pace of progress involved in changing a traditional university is slow: there are so many competing interests and traditions and so many levels of decision making. In the past, DCU, in line with many other universities, was satisfied to devolve much of its responsibility for flexible education to a separate unit while leaving the rest of its provision unchanged. However, the shock of losing funding for Oscail demanded a response from the university. That response could have included a decision to snap the connection; instead, the university chose to find ways of continuing to meet its commitments by involving the wider university community. However, after a year of consultation and capacity building, we’re by no means “there” yet. Certainly, if we (personally) were to design the truly flexible and adaptive university, we wouldn’t start with traditional universities, but given current funding and policies, establishing new institutions to meet new societal needs, while leaving universities to continue serving their traditional constituencies, is not an option.

There are, however, some potential positives on the horizon, perhaps stimulated by the cold economic winds affecting Ireland’s previously dazzling economic success as the Celtic Tiger. Following over a decade of record growth, virtually full employment, and large-scale in-migration, Ireland faces rapidly rising unemployment. Its higher-education institutions are being asked by the Higher Education Authority to prove their contribution to upskilling and reskilling people who are in the workforce, out of work, or in danger of unemployment. The impact of the global economic crisis that emerged in 2008 has also concentrated DCU minds somewhat: “The university must play its full part in upskilling the Irish workforce and, in particular, to address the skills needs of workers affected by the current economic crisis. DCU must move as quickly as possible to maximise the flexibility with which it offers its programmes so that they can be undertaken by students who are either fully or substantially off-campus for the duration of their studies” (Dublin City University 2009, 16).

As practitioners committed to the concept of flexible access to lifelong learning and with long experience of the impact such learning has on
the lives of our students, we sometimes feel like those travellers of old who have returned from far-flung shores with tales of wondrous things over “there” that those who have stayed “here” refuse to believe. As we write, Oscail’s programs are still recruiting students; we retain our faith in the potential of e-learning and continue to experiment with ways of improving our teaching. We are involved in various committees and working groups that, we hope, will eventually lead us to the goal of the open, flexible university, but we can only go at the pace that our colleagues are willing to adopt. It may indeed be better to travel hopefully than to arrive, but a few more companions on the rocky road would be welcome!

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kay MacKeogh has spent far too many years trying to change teaching and learning practices in higher education. Starting in the 1980s, she investigated the potential of distance education and new media, and how academic staff could be induced to adopt these exciting innovations. Almost thirty years later, she’s still trying to find out why academic staff resist pedagogies that will benefit their own practice as well as their students’ learning. She has developed considerable expertise in designing innovative programs and has published and presented many papers on pedagogy and policy. She escaped from the institution in April 2010, thanks to the Irish government’s early-retirement scheme, and looks forward to many years of research and teaching for whoever wants to make use of her talents.

Seamus Fox has worked in online and distance education for over twenty years. More recently, he has been academic coordinator of Oscaí’s BSc
in Information Technology program and has overseen its conversion into a fully online program. His main research areas are online teaching and learning methods that promote higher-order learning and educational policies that affect e-learning. He is committed to finding ways to extend flexible approaches to education, even though economic, political, and institutional circumstances conspire to frustrate these objectives. In 2010, he was invited to take over as academic director of Oscail and is currently involved in implementing e-learning across the DCU campus. www.dcu.ie/~foxs/