

The state of play E-maturity – a progress report



Towards consensus

Becta has reached a crucial stage in the development of a tool capable of assessing and improving the use of technology across the entire FE and Skills sector. A common framework for all providers – including colleges, work-based learning organisations and adult and community education centres – is now out for consultation.

The aim is to reach a consensus by March 2009 on a single framework that will enable organisations to:

- assess their current state of e-maturity¹
- diagnose and prioritise key areas for improvement and
- take appropriate action, drawing on the relevant research, support and resources.

The completion of what Becta describes as a 'common framework – providing a range of outputs relevant to the various user needs' will grow out of an extensive programme of consultations. This will continue until early 2009. The launch of the revised version, as created by partner organisations and stakeholders, is scheduled for March 2009.

The initial model is built around four levels of maturity:

- beginning
- developing
- performing
- outstanding.

Becta wants to see rapid progress to the point where all organisations in the sector reach a consistently 'performing' level. Emphasis throughout the consultations and implementation will be on self-assessment and self-improvement work. This is crucial if the providers are to take ownership of the framework.

A Design Authority has been created to lead developments over the coming months. Chaired by John Stone, Chief Executive of the Learning and Skills Network, it has representatives from across the sector to make sure the resulting framework reflects the needs of everyone.

The Design Authority leads on consultations at a number of levels:

- Extracting from the learning and skills community examples of effective practice in the deployment of technology and the latest thinking.
- Building in the ability for standards to be refreshed, for people to use them flexibly.
- Engaging people in the continuing process, knowing they have sufficient knowledge and are being helped in building that knowledge.

¹ Becta defines e-maturity as 'the capacity of a learning provider to make strategic and effective use of technology to improve educational outcomes'.



Need for common e-maturity measures

The benefits of a consensus model are clearly understood. Strategic and effective use of technology has proven direct and indirect benefits to learners. There is potential too, in well-deployed IT systems, for big reductions in bureaucracy and staff and management workloads, with greater efficiency, cost-effectiveness and easier, more reliable, channels of accountability. This programme is not about jumping hurdles or struggling to reach milestones; it is about seeing where technology can help eliminate difficult, time-wasting and unduly costly chores. The Bureaucracy Review Group recently described the e-maturity framework as having 'an anti-bureaucracy motivator'.

Across the sector, organisations have told Becta it is 'pushing at an open door' in its efforts to craft an initial framework aimed at reaching a consensus.

Change is needed now because recent reforms and new policies have made the existing e-maturity measures virtually redundant. The early model was based on the needs of standard FE colleges and before current policies on demand-led and personalised learning were agreed and in place. The objective now is to develop a framework and tool which is aligned to the Common Inspection Framework and the Framework for Excellence, within the overarching National Improvement Strategy.

In particular:

- to help you benchmark with providers of similar kinds
- to understand better the training challenges
- to develop new kinds of roles in the workforce
- to deliver on environment and sustainability.

It's the improvements that count

Many providers have voiced concerns over the amount of 'jargon' that gets in the way of the central message, which is about the need for greater efficiency and effectiveness. The whole purpose of the framework is to increase what providers, at whatever stage they have reached, can do for learners, not to have a discussion about technology.

The framework everyone eventually agrees to should, therefore, meet three criteria and be:

- simple
- fit for purpose
- introduced in stages.

But even when a consensus is reached, the framework must remain subject to constant review if it is to be sustainable. If the new standard were to become too rigid, it would be unable to adapt to rapid technological change and become an irrelevant burden rather than a support for progress.



What is to be done?

The model will be sustainable and open to change because it will focus not on the technology but on the educational priorities – strategic leadership, learning and innovation, informed demand, equitable access, proactive support, tailored content and resources. These are the issues staff and managers know and understand because they are relevant to recruiting and retaining students, engaging them and preventing many from dropping out or becoming disenchanted.

Although investment in technology across the system has been significant, investment in its effective use has been less thorough. The overriding issue facing Becta, therefore, is whether the users are able to access, exploit and make use of technology. It follows from this that use of technology should not only become part of the self-assessment process, but should do so in a way that is open and encourages people to move on.

A changing landscape for standards

How will the new standard compare with the existing criteria? A 'performing' organisation will be one that is coping well and making an impact on learning outcomes and management. This is broadly the 'good' category from where providers can move to 'outstanding'.

There are parallels between 'performing' institutions under the new framework and those judged 'e-enabled' under the current system, but direct comparisons would be misleading.

'Performing' and 'e-enabled' are defined against different frameworks but otherwise are on a par. Parallels can be seen in the examination system. A 70 per cent mark ten years ago and the same percentage now are roughly parallel but reflect different demands and content. Similarly, the e-enabled concept was not created for the demand-led and personalised learning era, so there is a danger in making exact comparisons. Moreover, there have been significant changes in the technology: for example, from Dialup to Broadband and from wired up and centralised to wireless and increasingly remote.

This means that the new framework, even after March 2009, must be under constant review to keep up with technological change and opportunity, such as the development of smaller, more powerful hand-held devices and the growing availability of wider and faster access.



Next stage

The launch of the new framework will be more like a process of osmosis than a 'big bang' in order to allow for wide consultations. The aim is to engage the sector in the process, not to sell it a finished product.

This will be achieved through conferences, workshops, one-to-one meetings, going through every issue with every partner and engaging with them – seeking to understand the pressures, demands and aspirations across the FE system. It is a process of increasing awareness, working with a wide range of people from across the sector, at all levels, those who are already advocates for the framework and introducing it to those who are not yet engaged.

The consultations will therefore:

- extract ideas from the community to get the best and latest thinking
- build in the ability for the standards to be constantly refreshed
- make sure people are able to use the framework flexibly and with sufficient knowledge of what's going on to feel they can engage with it and contribute to its improvement.

Technology is a big part of the solution

Leaders in the FE sector face challenging problems. Increasingly, managers are seeing that technology can be part of the solution; it can be used to complete a stock-take of the curriculum, for example.

Becta will promote good communications with all parts of the service – from the principal of a large college to someone running a dispersed adult education service in village halls, or a medium sized training provider – to involve the sector in the development of the framework.

What can you do to help?

If you would like to contribute further to this debate or have ideas for further improvements in the e-maturity framework, please contact: ematurity@becta.org.uk



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