

I N T R O D U C T I O N

The *European eCompetence Initiative* set out to explore common problems faced by those working in academic staff development in this age of eLearning. In particular, we have sought to map how these challenges have been addressed by colleagues across Europe (and beyond) and to collate illustrative examples of emerging practice, with a view to identifying success factors at both the individual and strategic levels.

Our first task was to seek clarity in the term “eCompetence” itself, developing a mutually agreed definition which would embrace the layers of meaning and variety of expression captured by that deceptively simple word. Through discussion and debate we came to a distinction between how the term applies to the description of the developing competencies of an individual academic staff member and the collective and systemic application to an institution as a whole.

But, as any multi-national and multi-lingual venture often finds, there is a range of perspectives and nuances implicit in the use of any specialist terminology, much of which fails to translate adequately from one cultural context to another. The word “competence,” for example, has quite different connotations in different national systems. In some countries it tends to be mostly associated with further (as opposed to “higher”) education and skills training and is not often evoked in discussion of advanced forms of knowledge construction and professional practice. For such a readership, therefore, we are keen to stress that our approach to competence is to see it as operating on a number of levels. It is not, simply about technical skills, but, rather, embraces deeper level aspects of critical thought, reflective practice and professional judgement.

These issues of definitions, frameworks for understanding, and of approaches to identifying the components of eCompetence form the subject of the first section of this collection.

In the second section, we turn our attention to institutional policies and frameworks that attempt to address eCompetence on a larger scale by developing strategic programmes and providing organisational leadership.

Concrete examples of real world practice are always demanded by those whom we have to convince of the merits of our arguments and proposed strategies. The third set of articles, therefore, reveals the approaches taken in various institutions to develop the eCompetence of individual members of staff with descriptions of courses and training programmes that have succeeded, as well as lessons learned from those which have not.

Finally, in the last set of articles we provide an overview of the case studies and example practices collated via the European eCompetence Initiative project itself, with some indication of the types of analysis undertaken and conclusions reached.