

Making informed eLearning decisions

Unless you have unlimited funds to spend on Education Technology (ET) and you don't care if learning happens, you need to examine your ET options and make informed choices. At FuturEd, we have been helping the education and training community to make good decisions with “consumers guides.” We have framed the questions you should ask and we believe that you should expect tangible and intangible returns for your investment in ET.

Let's start with eLearning – a concept that includes both learning courses and programs aimed at students **and** the ET industry that makes that possible. In this article, I will focus on the former.

*Scenario: You have decided that you want to take an online course to improve your professional skills. You don't have time to drive and park and take night classes... you want to spend your weekends with your young family....you would like a promotion and you know more education is the answer. You go to the Internet and there are **thousands** of courses that interest you, **hundreds** of institutions offering online programs. How do you choose?*

To begin with, you need to be clear about your needs, expectations and abilities – what **you** bring to the decision-making process. Ask yourself:

- What is my purpose for taking this course? Do I know what I want or need to learn?
 - This helps you match to course outcomes or objectives for a good match.
- Do I need a credit or certificate when I finish it, or do I just want to know more?
 - This matters if you plan to use the course for credentials or for lifelong learning.
- How much can I afford to spend? How much time can I invest?
 - Some courses are free, some very expensive. There is no relationship between cost and quality. Expensive doesn't mean better.
- What hardware and software do I have, and is it enough?
 - This is a big challenge for everybody with the continuous change in computers and computing, but you don't always need the biggest and the newest.
- Where will I access the Internet, what will it cost, and how convenient will it be?
 - It is pretty standard now to need high speed access to take advantage of the typical features of eLearning like video streaming.

- Are my computer and Internet skills good enough for the course I have in mind? Will I need technical help?
 - It's okay to expect help – good eLearning providers will help you upgrade your skills.

Answering these questions first helps you to realize that you are a unique individual, so the course for somebody else won't necessarily be the one for you. That means looking at your options carefully. But it also means that the advantages of eLearning really apply to you:

- eLearning is typically available to you at your convenience – times and places that you choose.
- eLearning provides huge choice – you should be able to find exactly what is right for you.

Scenario: You are the Minister of Education for an important Middle Eastern country. You are aware that ET can provide huge advantages to the students, teachers and society you serve. One eLearning company after another tells you how excellent its products and services are. You begin to see the similarities and differences between them, but you wonder if they're as good as they say. You think: do we create our own? How do I make the best investment with our education budget to see that our students are prepared for the 21st century? How do we decide? Slightly modified, the same questions apply to you. You need to be clear about purposes, costs, return on investment.

Once you have established your circumstances and expectations, you begin to look at the wide variety you can choose from. You will need a lot of information to make an informed choice. This is almost a test of your eLearning and research skills! According to international consumer-based eLearning quality standards,¹ good eLearning products and services will provide you with written information and a “demo” to help with decision-making.

¹ The Open eQuality Learning Standards – OeQLS – available at http://www.lif-fia.org/en/documents/OeQLsMay2004_001.pdf

Suppliers of all eLearning products and services should tell you IN WRITING	Ponder these questions.
1. Exactly what you are going to learn – the “intended learning outcomes”- and entry level knowledge or skills necessary for your success.	Is this what I want or need to learn? Do I have the entry requirements so that I stand a reasonable chance at success?
2. What you get when you finish and who it is recognized or awarded by – e.g., a college credit, completion certificate or professional designation	Can I do anything with this course? Will it be recognized by an education institution or by an employer? Is it a good investment of my time and money?
3. How skilled you need to be at reading, taking exams, managing your own time – the learning skills you need for success	Do I have the preparation to do work at this level? Can I get help in this course/program if I need it?
4. The type of material you will cover, why it is important and where it has come from.	Is the content current and relevant, either to real work or advanced education? Is it well-organized, credible and complete?
5. How you will learn – the format for instruction and assessment – e.g., individualized or in a group	Can I learn this way? Would I prefer to learn on my own or in a group? By reading or by listening?
6. Who will be teaching and assessing you – if actual people are involved (e.g., sometimes the instruction is imbedded in text and exams are computer-marked)	Is the instructor / assessor qualified and credible? How important is it that I have a person to communicate with?
7. How you will be assessed – how you will demonstrate your achievement, e.g., a multiple-choice test, a demonstration, a paper	Is it clear how I will be tested and can I perform my best that way? Are there options? Do I know what is expected for success?
8. When you can expect to complete – mandatory and/or flexible timelines	Does the timeframe and schedule work for me? Do I have the flexibility I need to do the work and to finish?
9. What you need in terms of minimum computer and operating system requirements – with options where they exist	Do I have the equipment and software I need? Am I willing and able to buy more?
10. What you need to be able to do – your technical competence	Do I have the skills to use the computer and Internet? Is there an orientation to get me started?
11. What you will pay in total – registration, tuition, books and materials, equipment, other	Can I afford it? Exactly how much is this going to cost? Is everything included, like access to technical assistance?
12. How credible the product / service is – the qualifications of the content, design and delivery personnel and objective evaluation reports	Does this supplier have a good reputation? How do I know? What do other students think? Can I see an objective evaluation report?
13. How to get started and connect with the supplier – complete registration procedures and services	Is it easy to get started? Do I need transcripts or pre-tests? Is the registration process clear?
14. How to get help – contacts for technical assistance and content expertise	Is assistance available 24/7? How do I access technical and content assistance?
15. How to get out if you're not satisfied – policies for withdrawal and refunds	Can I get my money back if this doesn't work for me?

If your answer is NO to any category of questions, consider moving on to another eLearning options, because you can! The Internet is literally littered with eLearning options for you.

These are the basics of your eLearning choice. If you are satisfied at this level, you can move on to ask very specific questions about good design and delivery of eLearning – including:

- Navigation and technical reliability
- Organization and presentation of materials
- Actual personnel involved as teachers, mentors, markers, tutors
- Synchronous and asynchronous availability
- Prior learning assessment and appropriate placement
- Instructional approaches and assumptions
- Demonstration and assessment of learning
- Communications with teachers and other students
- Completion requirements

All the questions you should ask are available in the interactive Consumer's Guide for eLearning available from FuturEd².

Choosing good eLearning is complex and it takes time. If you don't have the time, you should look for a consumer-based quality mark like the eQcheck³. It will tell you whether the eLearning course has achieved objective, professional quality certification for all elements of the product or service.

Scenario: You are an established company or college marketing eLearning in the Middle East. Online, you know you have serious competition from around the world. How do you create competitive advantage? One way is to take this consumer-based approach – have the answers ready when customers ask. How do you create new products and approaches that meet consumer-based quality standards? By answering these questions in the design phase, you know you will.

² Consumers Guide to eLearning is available online at <http://www.futured.com/pdf/ConGuide%20Eng%20CD.pdf>

³ For more information, go to www.eQcheck.com.

At FuturEd and eQcheck, we will give you the tools to make better use of educational technology by becoming an informed consumer. With comments or questions, you can contact Dr. Kathryn Chang Barker at kbarker@eQcheck.com.