

# Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) Usage

## Initial Report - UK

<b>National context</b>
All UK higher education institutions have responded to government initiatives to develop the use of electronic communications and media delivery systems for open and distance learning, to enhance quality of provision and ensure adherence to principles of inclusiveness and equity. Many universities used in-house developed VLEs on an ad hoc basis when the technology first became available. Most have now adopted a proprietary system (Blackboard and WebCT are the most common) in order to achieve a unified approach across faculties, and a flexible, reliable platform. There have recently been some high profile UK based evaluations of VLE usage in the Further and Higher education sectors commissioned by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) and FERL (Further Education Resources and Learning – a subsidiary of BECTa which is the British Education Communications and Technology Association. Both JISC and BECTa are government funded organizations providing a forum for practitioners, managers and policy makers to explore issues concerning information and communication technology usage in education. These reports can be found at <a href="http://www.jisc.ac.uk">www.jisc.ac.uk</a> and <a href="http://www.ferl.ac.uk">www.ferl.ac.uk</a> .
<b>Institution</b>
University of Huddersfield
<b>School/division/faculty</b>
School of Education and Professional Development
<b>Current VLE</b>
Blackboard Enterprise Edition 6.5
<b>Any other VLEs in use</b>
No
<b>Selection and Implementation history</b>
<p>The Blackboard VLE was selected by the university to be its sole VLE in 1999. Prior to this a number of different systems were in place and trials of other VLEs had been conducted. The School of Computing and Maths had a VLE programmed in house called Workspace which was successfully used for many years, but it had limitations, particularly in the upload of material, which had to be done via FTP (File transfer protocol), and required expert knowledge from instructors. Also individual student log ins were not supported and only generic log ins by course were allowed. The tool had only limited CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) functions and it was becoming costly to maintain and develop. A competing system called ELEN (Extended Learning Environment Network <a href="http://www.hud.ac.uk/hhs/teaching/elen_hud.htm">http://www.hud.ac.uk/hhs/teaching/elen_hud.htm</a>) had been developed by a consortium of Northern universities. This was used by some areas of the university prior to Blackboard, but the funding of further developments was problematic and the system was dropped in favour of Blackboard.</p> <p>Blackboard was selected by the Learning Innovation Centre which was a university wide unit charged with developing and implementing new technologies for learning.</p>

Blackboard was adopted because of its growing reputation as a stable and extendable environment with good user support.
<b>Funding arrangements</b>
Blackboard is now funded from the university's top slice, which is money paid by all schools to support the central functions of the university. This money pays for the hardware to run the system, the software licensing and the technical support for the systems.
<b>Hardware</b>
The system is now housed on two servers and the university has recently spent some significant amounts of money upgrading hardware to cope with increased demands on the system. There is also an improved backup system to store data in the event of a system failure.
<b>Technical Support</b>
Technical support for the system is provided by Computing Services who maintain the server and associated hardware. There is an addition a Blackboard technical support office who oversees batch uploading processes and maintains student and staff accounts.
<b>Extent of Usage</b>
The current system at Huddersfield now has approximately 15,000 students enrolled and has 1600 courses with approximately 1000 staff engaged in teaching using the system, although not all of these users are active. Not all of these students are based on site as the university has a number of franchise arrangements, both within the UK and abroad. Blackboard is proving to be a useful tool in communicating with these groups although pure distance courses using Blackboard are still a rarity within the university. Most courses still have extensive face to face teaching with the BLE being used to enhance and extend learning opportunities rather than provide core experience.
<b>Integration with student records</b>
The enterprise edition of Blackboard is designed to interact with other databases, and at the university of Huddersfield the system is linked to the student record system. Student log ins are created at enrolment and usernames and passwords are created which match the student log in details for workstations and email. This is to simplify the number of passwords students have to remember and make maintenance of user accounts easier to carry out. Students enrolled on modules are now automatically attached to the corresponding course in Blackboard which is created from records on the system. This process is now semi-automatic and lecturers do not have to add students manually or create accounts.
<b>User authentication</b>
All users have unique usernames and passwords. This allows the system to identify each individual using the system and tailor the workspace to their personal configuration. Once logged on, users are given a list of all courses they are enrolled on, and they can enter each course space with a single click. Announcements from any of the courses they are enrolled on are collected on the initial log in screen to save each course having to be opened in turn to collect information. Users can move from one course to another without having to undergo a reauthentication process.

<b>Hardware and software requirements for users</b>
Blackboard uses a standard browser for almost all of its functions. Users do not need to download or install additional software to use the system. The synchronous chat facility requires the download of a JAVA based applet, but all other functions are realised through HTML and can be supported in most common browsers.
<b>Uploading of content</b>
Blackboard supports the uploading of assets in HTML form and its derivatives, most common image and sound formats (gif, jpeg, wav), Microsoft Office Applications (Word, Excel, Powerpoint) and embedded media assets (Flash, Shockwave, Authorware).
<b>Pedagogical Support</b>
Pedagogical support for the system is carried out by a number of electronic TALES (Teaching and Learning Electronic Support staff) who work within each school. They provide advice and guidance for staff wanting to use the system and carry out training and consultancy to allow lecturers to use the system for maximum benefit to students.
<b>Usage within the faculty / school / department</b>
The school of Education and Professional development has been one of the most proactive users of the VLE since its inception. Almost all courses within the school now have some presence in Blackboard and some courses, for instance the MSc Multimedia and E-learning use the system extensively to support and enhance learning opportunities. New foundation degrees are currently underway and these are basically distance learning courses which are making increasing use of the VLE facilities.
<b>Staff Development</b>
Staff development in using the system is taken care of in a number of ways. The staff development unit run courses which staff can take. These range from introductory courses in using the system to more advanced courses which cover student assessment using the system and the uploading of advanced assets. The TALES also work with staff at school level to give staff development in using the system and getting the best out of it. Staff are not currently required to use Blackboard or have knowledge of it, and usage is therefore largely voluntary and left to the professional judgement of teaching staff. The system is being more and more widely used though and many staff are signaling staff development requirements as a result of this.
<b>Student induction</b>
The induction of students and training in using the system is devolved to each individual course using the system. Most courses within the school have a Blackboard induction session as part of the more general induction into the university's electronic resources.
<b>Quality control</b>
Quality control of material on the system and the regulation of content is decided at course and school level. No university wide recommendations on quality are currently in place and each course sets it own criteria for quality and can carry out inspections and audits as necessary. Increasingly external examiners, who have a great deal of influence on quality issues, are scrutinising the usage of Blackboard as part of their remit to look at the whole of the student experience. External quality

bodies such as the QAA (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education) now frequently also look at VLE usage when assessing the quality of courses within Higher Education.
<b>Policy</b>
The university's 5 year plan makes provision to increase the amount and scope of electronic learning being undertaken in the institution. This policy is general. The school has a more detailed Electronic Learning Strategy, which lays out in more detail the policy of the school towards VLE usage. This strategy requires that each course within the school has a Blackboard presence on at least one of its modules (courses typically consist of between 5 and 25 modules), although this requirement is for material to enhance learning rather than provide core support.
<b>Support for assessment (formative and summative)</b>
Currently within the school only one course uses the VLE for summative assessment. This is the MSc Multimedia and E-learning which uses a discussion group where contributions are marked for their academic content. Other forms of assessment are carried out in an ad hoc form (mostly formative multiple choice quizzes), but do not contribute to any formal assessment strategy.
<b>Summary of usage within Vocational Teacher Training</b>
<p>The teacher training courses run at the university are modular in nature and many other courses at the university have individual modules within Blackboard corresponding to taught units. However a different approach was adopted for the vocational teacher training Blackboard presence and a single module corresponding to the entire course was set up (often called a "bucket" module). Within this single module all content for the course which has been created resides which has the advantage that students can easily find material.</p> <p>The system's main use is as a repository for teaching materials and documents relating to the course. These include: module specifications, pathway handbooks, assignment specifications and reading lists. It is rarely used at the moment for communication either between staff and students or between student groups. This is because most staff and students choose to use their existing email accounts and distribution lists which are separate from Blackboard.</p>