

**Managed Learning Environment Activity in  
Further and Higher Education in the UK**

**A Supporting Study for the Joint Information Systems Committee  
(JISC) and the Universities and Colleges Information Systems  
Association (UCISA): Case Study Commentary**

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## Introduction

As part of the study on Managed Learning Environments in UK Further and Higher Education, the research team conducted a total of fourteen case studies. The aim of the case studies was to explore MLE development in a range of institutions in more detail than the survey allowed. The purpose of this commentary is to complement the study report [link to web page] and to highlight the key issues which emerged from the case studies, particularly those aspects which reinforce or challenge the findings of the study overall. Each case study report is also available as a separate document [link to website].

## Methodology

The survey data from the quantitative study was used to identify the case study subjects. The basis for the selection of the initial eight case studies was the relative level of integration of systems. A matrix was devised which plotted the range of institutions in the survey against the levels of integration. Those respondents willing to take part in case study research were assigned to a category in the matrix below, using their derived integration score.

	<b>Low systems integration</b>	<b>Medium systems integration</b>	<b>High systems integration</b>
<b>Sixth Form colleges</b>			
<b>FE colleges</b>			
<b>Post-1991 universities</b>			
<b>Pre-1991 universities</b>			
<b>HE colleges</b>			

The matrix and integration score are discussed in more detail in the Research Methodology section of the study report [link to website]. The institutions involved in the first round of case studies were:

- Calderdale College
- Norwich School of Art and Design (NSAD)
- School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
- Tower Hamlets College
- University of Birmingham
- University of Brighton
- University of Dundee
- University of Wales Institute, Cardiff (UWIC)

For the second phase of case studies, it was decided to concentrate on those institutions which had a higher integration score and which could therefore offer a deeper insight into the issues around MLE development. Institutions with medium to high integration scores from a range of sectors were therefore approached. The second phase participants were:

- Brockenhurst College, Hampshire
- Guildford College, Surrey
- King Alfred's University College, Winchester
- Lauder College, Fife
- University of Kingston
- University of Northumbria

The case study visits were carried out in two separate phases: May-June 2003 and November 2003 – January 2004. Each case study institution was visited by one or two members of the research team, the visits being typically conducted over one day. The researchers interviewed key members of staff individually or in groups and facilitated roundtable discussions where possible. Participants in the interviews and discussions varied from one institution to another but included key implementers, teaching and support staff and students. The researchers were dependant on the institutions concerned to find participants and are indebted to the key contacts in those participating institutions for their willing co-operation.

It is worth noting that ascertaining the views of 'ordinary' teaching staff – rather than those who were 'champions' or otherwise key in ICT implementation – was not always easy. This is not to imply any deliberate blocking by institutions but a combination of logistics and an implicit desire on the part of institutions to present as positive a case as possible. It proved difficult also to obtain the views of students – which was also partly logistical, but reinforces the findings of the study on the lack of effective consultation with students. In one institution, the case study visit itself acted as a catalyst.

The Head of Learning Technology at **King Alfred's University College Winchester** listened in to the student discussion and found it very valuable. The students present expressed willingness to form the nucleus of a student user group. The group has now been set up and one of its first tasks is to provide feedback on the design templates for the new portal. Those keen to make a longer term contribution have been invited to join the Creative Development Group for the portal project.

## Defining a Managed Learning Environment

A key focus for the study overall was to 'provide a definition or set of definitions of what constitutes MLE activity'. Within institutions, systems are considered primarily from a functional perspective, often within the broader context of an institutional intranet or the information and learning technology (ILT) strategy, for instance. In discussions at institutional level, researchers found that the term 'MLE' is rarely used, although a general and shared understanding of its definition is common. In the case study discussions participants tended to return to the institutional VLE and the impact it was having on teaching and learning, even when non-academic staff were involved in the discussions. The tangibility of the VLE appears to make it easier for staff to talk and get excited about, while the MLE remains a more implicit concept.

## Management of MLE Development

The report notes that the strategic management model adopted by institutions is a critical element in development and take-up. The importance of commitment at the strategic level is clearly evident in the case study institutions.

The Director of IT Services joined **Tower Hamlets College** in 1998. On a strategic level, he became a member of the College Directorate and has been able to ensure that ILT and IT have a higher profile within the organisation than was the case prior to his appointment.

Most case study institutions have adopted a clear organisation-wide framework for MLE development, through technical and support infrastructures combined with strategies endorsed by senior management. The strategy documents themselves vary enormously in terms of approach, complexity and detail.

At the **University of Birmingham**, the Information Services Strategic Plan states that "Information Services will support flexible learning, in accordance with the institutional Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy, in particular through the creation of an online learning managed environment accessible at the user desktop (on and off campus)".

At **Lauder College** an ICT Pervasiveness Strategy sets out a framework of strategic directions, objectives and targets to govern ICT development over a three year period. The strategy dovetails with the institution's Learning and Teaching Strategy, Access and Inclusion Strategy and overall Strategic Plan.

**Guildford College of Further and Higher Education** has an e-Learning strategy, which places e-learning at the top of the teaching and learning agenda. Flagging e-learning as a separate initiative was felt to be a more effective way of securing funding than it being 'buried' within existing programmes.

Those institutions with a formalised strategy, agreed by management, understood by all staff, and with clear targets and responsibilities appear to have a clearer focus and impetus than institutions which do not. This may also be a reflection of other processes at work, such as the existence of strong champions at senior level.

A realistic level of devolved responsibility also appears to be a key for success. Several institutions spoke of the importance of bottom-up initiatives, where the developments had begun with small groups of innovators and evolved upwards and outwards.

At **King Alfred's University College Winchester** the bottom-up pilot process is seen by the key staff as a major contributing factor to the success of the VLE and its quick adoption by other subject groups. The phased approach brings in new people as part of the process and 'experts' work with subject staff to share expertise... The academic staff feel that because they have played an active part in constructing the VLE, they are confident that pedagogy, rather than systems thinking, has driven their thinking.

Other institutions have deliberately fostered devolved responsibility – for example Lauder College implemented secondments from the teaching staff in subject areas to e-learning co-ordinator posts, which helped embed expertise and encouraged appropriate. However, elsewhere, devolved responsibility has led to patchiness across subject areas and sparked questions about whether a more mandatory approach would have worked better.

**Calderdale College** launched an 18-month Curriculum Innovation project (CI) in 1999, establishing Curriculum Innovators in all subject areas... One weakness of the subsequent CI Project was that some staff really took ILT on board and some did not – there was no uniformity across the curriculum.

## Collaboration

Work in areas pertaining to MLE development has led, in many cases, to novel or strengthened partnerships and collaborations. The nature of the collaboration varies widely across the sector, from sharing knowledge and experience through discussion and meetings, to collaborative development of actual applications. The case studies revealed collaboration at national and regional level.

At national level, JISC is seen as key and those institutions which participated in JISC or related collaborative projects found them to be of great practical benefit.

At **Lauder College**, connections with the wider academic world, through JISC and CETIS, helped smooth the implementation process, for example in the up-skilling of technical staff.

At the **University of Brighton**, external consultation was key, notably through the JISC Strategy and JISC work in this area. Speaking to staff in other institutions was also important. Both the Director of Information Services and the Learning Technologies Group Manager are interested in MLE developments and so had access to a network of interested people and informal sources of information.

There were also cases of individuals instigating collaborative events at national level.

At **Guildford College** an e-Learning week took place between 1-5 December 2003 during which the College played host to the first national Blackboard FE Conference, initiated and co-ordinated by the Director of Learning Technology Services.

Regional partnerships have capitalised on opportunities to improve learning provision through MLE infrastructures. Such partnerships are particularly suited to the delivery of blended learning where co-operation can bring economies of scale whilst still allowing partner specialisation.

**Kingston University** collaborated with St George's Hospital Medical School to provide a Joint Faculty of Health and Social Care School, extensively building on the opportunities provided by Blackboard Enterprise.

One regional model encountered was that of the 'hub/provider' with 'clients', for example a VLE hosted by a regional 'leader'.

**Kingston University** provides an interesting example of the 'hub' model through its regional Blackboard hosting facility, which is used by 8 – 10 associated colleges<sup>1</sup>

**Northumbria University** takes the 'hub' model a step further through the creation of a wholly owned subsidiary 'Northumbria Learning', exploiting the university's expertise to commercial advantage and to the benefit of other organisations.

Kingston has also developed partnerships which aim to provide 'learner progression', working with feeder schools towards more seamless integration of administration data and learning materials.

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, it has been offered to 11 Secondary Schools as well, but in late 2003 this still seemed a step too far.

Through its New Technologies Institute, **Kingston University** works with at least 7 associated colleges to provide a range of HE feeder, 2-year foundation, work-based, degrees. This scheme is supported by one dedicated Blackboard application, separate from that used for Kingston's own courses.

Close collaboration with system suppliers is also common.

The **University of Dundee**, for example, is currently working closely with Blackboard testing the latest software developments prior to implementation.

Most of the partnerships encountered were based on existing collaborations, but the institutions have been able to extend the width and depth of joined-up activity through the use of the MLE infrastructure. Operational MLE components that allow the required sharing of information between the partners at all levels - from institutional to individual - are a pre-requisite to make such collaborations an effective reality.

## Operational models

Many institutions are currently facing choices over whether to proceed with updating existing systems or to switch over to new systems which offer better integration. Typically the trend is towards further standardisation and integration even where this means that, however valuable, outputs from previous work have to be reworked or phased out. It seems that institutions, confronted with the need to balance the advantages of further integration and harmonisation with the pressures to capitalise on existing investments, opt for the former. However, institutions differ in their approaches to the adoption of new systems. The most common scenario is one where uptake of 'preferred systems' is implicitly encouraged by a combination of awareness-raising and the provision of central support and resources for only those platforms.

At the **University of Brighton**, for example, it was agreed in 2002 that a centrally supported system was the only sustainable way forward. Awareness raising events, training workshops and discussion seminars have grown in prominence alongside a gradual withdrawal of support for one-off systems.

In some cases where specific legacy investments are seen as particularly valuable, 'one-off' support is provided for conversion activity. In other cases where the specific needs of groups are currently better met – or perceived to be better met – by the non-supported systems, decisions on migration strategies are deferred.

**Birmingham University's Medical School** were early adopters of a separate web-based learning and teaching platform but some staff then moved over to the centrally supported VLE. Issues surfaced of what to do with the legacy investment in expertise and existing content. As this could not be immediately answered, a strategic study was commissioned to take this forward and arrive at a plan for action.

It has been suggested that the problems related to system migration are likely to be of a one-off and transient nature for three reasons:

- Early systems and content were typically not based on interoperability standards, which made migration and sharing of resources difficult;
- Many early efforts were based on specific common interests and have created strong, relatively close-knit communities of early adopters with a detailed understanding of and firm commitments to their products;
- First versions of 'central' alternatives were seen to lack the sophistication and flexibility to provide viable alternatives to the highly customised solutions offered by more tailored 'in-house' systems.

Whilst there are still problems, the advances in the concepts and technologies that underpin the components of managed learning environments are being incorporated in off-the-shelf systems. A key challenge is to maintain the enthusiasm of early adopters and pioneers, build on their experience and maximise the return on previous investments made by them (individually and collectively), while moving towards a centralised model and framework.

For the future, most case study institutions are adopting a pragmatic approach, emphasising the need for consolidation – of their pilot projects, existing systems and strategies. Most are working towards further systems integration, seeing this as the way forward. A few participants spoke about the need to assimilate new technological advances, such as in mobile and wireless technology, mainly because of student expectations. Several HE institutions indicated that their future path was towards portal development.

**At King Alfred's University College Winchester** the key development for the future is a learning and information portal, which will integrate the VLE, the intranet and management information systems. The proposals for the portal have been agreed and piloting and testing are due to begin in Spring 2004. Users will gain access through a personal web page available from the College website. Academic staff will be able to update content through the use of style sheets, which will allow flexibility within a common framework.

Portal development does not feature so strongly in the FE case studies, reflecting the survey finding that FE overall is far more cautious about integration and access in MLE activities where students would benefit from personal guidance and counselling, such as course enrolment; module selection; academic teaching/guidance; fee payment online; tracking students' attendance; and monitoring students' use of online resources.

## Teaching and Learning

The report discusses the way in which investments in VLE and MLE development are forcing institutions across the sector to address the issue of pedagogy and the relevance of existing curricula, methodologies and approaches. The first round of case study interviews and roundtable discussions with staff showed that the use of new technology, and VLEs in particular, was beginning to influence approaches to teaching.

To begin with I was just slapping existing material onto the VLE – now it is forcing me to think about how much, what kind of deliverables, a materials overview and how students learn.

Academic staff and ILT champions now understand that the VLE forces teachers to rethink the structure of their courses and their approach to the curriculum.

The follow-up case studies appeared to indicate that this trend is continuing and that addressing issues around pedagogy is moving up the agenda. One particular FE college, Lauder, is embracing change in a very definite and proactive way, making concepts such as the 'individual learner' a reality and 'flexible learning' a mainstream approach rather than a sideline.

**Lauder College's** teaching and learning ethos centres on the concept of the individual learner and support for the individual learner is paramount. The college promotes and practices innovative and flexible approaches to teaching and learning, and the VLE plays an important support role in this.... Flexible learning is now generally seen as integral to the teaching process, rather than as an add-on. Each curriculum group is responsible for its mode of delivery and staff are given the elements they need to mix and match to achieve the most effective teaching blend. New technology has played a key part in this process and the VLE is an important support tool.

**King Alfred's University College Winchester** is committed to staff development and publishes an annual training programme called *Staff Development Opportunities*. In this document the challenges inherent in using new technology and the opportunities offered by e-learning are explicitly recognised and the programme offers a variety of training sessions on specific aspects of ICTs and learning. These include half day sessions on subjects such as 'Getting started with e-learning', 'IT and resource-based learning', being an e-tutor and computer-aided assessment.

Some staff spoke about a new and healthier relationship between staff and students and a re-defining of the whole learning activity. This was echoed by students, notably those on part-time courses. Other teaching staff showed an ambivalence about the extent to which technology is a driver, preferring to see it as an enabler for new approaches to teaching. Several people said that technology was not changing the way they taught so much as altering the classroom interaction between themselves and students.

For one teacher at **Guildford College**, asked about the impact on teaching, it was not so much changing the way she teaches as giving her more time in the classroom to deal with the problems, because she is encouraging her students – all part-time - to work on the material outside college.

Many participants were agreed that the big difference with a VLE is less about pedagogical change and more about giving students access to considerably more material. While this was viewed as mainly positive, some staff expressed concerns over the down-sides such as information overload, a sense that the VLE can foster unreal expectations, fears that students can 'get it all' without having to attend lectures and accusations of 'spoon-feeding'.

From the student perspective, it was evident that those doing part-time and off-campus courses were considerably more enthusiastic about their VLEs than the full-time campus-based students. Part-time students felt that the VLE allowed them to feel less isolated, get more individual attention, work at their own pace, manage their time better, have easier access to tutors and share views with other students. Full-time, campus-based students tended to take their VLE systems for granted and were more critical of technical failings and what they regarded as inconsistent usage amongst staff. All, however, appreciated the 'anywhere, anytime' availability.

Likewise, the communications aspect of the new systems was generally praised, being held up by many – staff and students alike - as the key benefit, the "real value". The case studies echo the report findings around the importance of improved communication channels and discussion groups.

At the **University of Dundee** the new system allows much better communication between staff and students and students can also communicate with one another much more easily.

Staff at **King Alfred's University College Winchester** commented that ... use of the forum can impact positively on the quality of teaching. For example, tutors access online discussions, pick up key points, feed those out to the students and invite further responses.

Students at the **School of Oriental and African Studies** agreed that [the VLE] was good for people who don't feel comfortable asking questions in public (for personal, cultural or language reasons) – 'particularly in foreign languages, it takes time to frame your question, by which time the moment has passed in a spoken environment'.

The study report identifies resistance to culture change as the second most frequently cited problem associated with MLE development. Resistance included concerns among staff about their aptitude and inclination to engage with technology in their teaching, as well as more general concerns about the impact of MLE development on the institutional culture. However, the later case study evidence points to significant levels of cultural change in certain institutions, where senior staff are consciously addressing the issues around cultural change in relation to new technology.

At **Lauder College** there was a recognition that putting the technology in place was “the easy bit” and that culture change was the biggest challenge. The college invested in managing the change - from conventional classroom teaching to more flexible methods – but it was a slow process. They adopted a learn-by-example model, building on existing flexible and team practice and concentrated on a ‘what’s in it for the lecturer’ approach.

Lauder has complemented its ‘learn-by-example’ model by more explicit measures, for example by only granting funding for new courses to those staff prepared to investigate new modes of delivery. There is recognition that the change in culture and in approaches to teaching has not been easy.

For some teaching staff in **Lauder College** this change in approach has been a frightening process. Those working in learner bases talked about missing the ‘buzz of performance’ aspect to teaching and also to having experienced feelings of being de-skilled. On the other hand, new multi-tasking skills are required along with the ability to deal with a diversity of individual questions and needs. It was “harder work” because it means switching from one person to another and dealing with hugely varied levels of knowledge and skill concurrently. Although formal lesson plans are now redundant, there is perhaps more of a need to be organised and to co-ordinate – ‘you can’t be a loose cannon’.

The role of technical support staff and other (traditionally) non-teaching members of staff has become an increasingly important indicator and driver of cultural change. In FE and HE alike, there is increasing recognition of and support for the growing role of academic-related staff in relation to learning and teaching. There is a move away from traditional input providers towards ‘hybrid professionals’ who can be proactive in supporting, organising and facilitating learning processes. In Lauder College, for example, a new post of Learning Systems Developer was created to build a bridge between the technical and academic staff and the position was filled by someone who had a combined teaching and technical background and who ‘could talk both languages’. In other institutions change is being facilitated in a number of ways, including accredited courses.

The **University of Birmingham** facilitates and supports the growing role of academic-related staff in relation to learning and teaching, away from traditional input providers towards ‘hybrid professionals’ by offering an ILT accredited Associate Pathway Module “eLearning in HE”.

The work of technical support staff is changing, in some cases drastically so.

At the **School of Oriental and African Studies** IT staff started to work closely with colleagues to provide support to the pioneering pilot courses.

At the **University of Brighton** implementation of the University’s MLE is the lead responsibility of the Learning Technologies Group, which forms part of the Information Services Department.

Some key implementation staff expressed optimism and relief that the need for academic and technical co-operation on systems development was healing years of division, when technical staff saw themselves as support for administrative systems only and academic staff developed

their own, separate systems. On balance, technical support staff feel that MLE involvement enriches their work and increases their status, but there are significant worries about the formal recognition and rewards they are able to obtain, within the traditional career progression pathways and pay-scales.

As regards library staff, the evidence from the case studies shows that they are involved in MLE developments.

At **Lauder College**, where teaching is organised around curriculum clusters, each cluster has an e-learning co-ordinator, a learner assistant and a member of the library staff assigned to it.

At the **School of Oriental and African Studies**, an informal, internal support group of about 7 people from across the School is on hand to provide support to the pioneering pilot courses: the group is drawn from the Library, internal IT staff and from academics with prior experience of using communication and information technology.

However, although library staff are being given the opportunity for involvement, the overall impression was that they tend to be only peripherally involved, that there are often issues – with attitudes or systems - and that they must grasp the nettle if they are to be influential in developments.

At **Tower Hamlets**, although the Head of Programme – Learning Resources is on the IT Strategy Group, there is very little integration of library resources and services with other ILT developments. For example, the ILT Leaders in two of the programmes spend a considerable amount of time searching for relevant resources, assessing them for quality and relevance and organising them on ‘Curweb’. Library or Learning Resource skills or expertise is not utilised.

At the **University of Brighton** there were ... issues with the library staff, particularly around quality e.g. of course reading material and resource links, which are yet to be fully addressed... Deeper integration with library services and resources is being implemented, along with greater use of librarians’ professional information skills.

For administrative staff, the wider MLE development and implementation agenda is having significant impact, both in central departments and within the schools and faculties.

At the **University of Brighton** the [implementation] process has brought transparency to administrative data processes and staff working behind the scenes are able to see why their information needs to be up-to-date and accurate. This has brought about a culture change in this area – from wanting to “bury” bad data to a willingness to co-operate for quality improvement... Administrative and Support staff are finding that they have a new and unprecedented communication channel for reaching students.

Attitudes towards change differ with different groups of staff and any benefits associated with integration can initially be obscured by significant system and process upheaval. It was clear from the case studies, however, that effective communication, consultation and the establishment of ‘bridging’ posts are the key to changing attitudes. This typically leads to more effective routine collaboration between staff groups which had hitherto operated independently - and thus to significant cultural change within the institution.

## Conclusion

The report concludes that there is, overall, a sense that MLE development is ‘a good thing’ and a consensus that MLEs are the way forward and will provide long-term advantages. It also notes a suspicion that “because everyone else is going down this road, institutions must follow

or be left behind” and that the MLE is not as yet fully embedded in the institutions’ strategic and operational frameworks. Evidence from the case studies suggests that some institutions **are** addressing this issue and that they **are** embedding MLE development into their strategic and operational frameworks. In some cases there is considerable assessment of the benefits and constraints of particular MLE development for the future stability and success of their own institutions – although the implicit assumption remains that MLE development is the way forward.

The report also concludes that while ‘enhancing the quality of teaching and learning’ is the key driver for MLE development, pedagogical issues appear to have been of secondary concern. It notes the reality of the student **experience** being enhanced through improved delivery of teaching materials and course announcements, improved access to learning resources and better communication. The case study evidence generally reinforces this finding although the later case studies point towards an increase willingness within institutions to address and discuss pedagogical issues.

While the report found that resistance to change was a major constraint, the later case studies – particularly - show evidence of cultural change and a growing realisation that such change much be consciously managed. The scale of the task remains daunting to most institutions and not easy for the staff involved, although some are beginning to report success and benefits.

In general, the case studies visits revealed great variations in the ways in which institutions are planning for, developing and implementing MLEs. Institutions adopt approaches which fit their own ethos, culture and purposes. However, many of the issues and challenges they face are similar and institutions benefit from collaboration and the opportunity to share their experiences and learn from each other.