

Guildford College of Further and Higher Education

1. Introduction

Guildford College is an FE and HE institution in Guildford, Surrey. The college amalgamated with Merrist Wood College, also in Guildford, on 1st August 2003 and is now split over two sites: Stoke Park and Merrist Wood. It has around 4000 FTE students, of whom around 200 are HE. There are 450 teaching staff. It runs courses for a wide range of students including undergraduate, professional, vocational, sixth form and adult learners. It runs undergraduate business courses for nearby Surrey University, but its closest academic links are with the universities of Kingston, Portsmouth and the South Bank.

The Director of Learning Technology Services was appointed in 2002 and is responsible for the development and implementation of the college's e-learning strategy. She moved from a college which had successfully implemented Blackboard software and is a qualified and experienced FE teacher.

2. Current state of play

The college has an e-Learning strategy, which was initiated by the Director of Learning Technology Services and agreed by the Executive Team, the college's senior management body in January 2003. There is commitment at all levels to develop the role of e-learning and an update on the e-Learning strategy was presented to the College's Management Team in December 2003. Blackboard 6 software was installed and configured in December 2002 and in its first phase has been used mainly by staff teaching on HE programmes. An E-Learning Unit was established in March 2003 to offer technical and staff support, initial training, materials development and project management. There are two full-time staff members in the E-Learning Unit and three e-Learning mentors, who are also teachers. Two e-Learning Zones have been established in the Learning Resource Centre and an HE Zone created from an existing HE study area. The HE Zone is equipped with ten new PCs and study spaces for students to work individually or collaboratively.

A calendar of Blackboard training events was agreed in February 2003 - including awareness-raising activities such as Blackboard breakfasts; presentations to the Executive Team and Heads of Schools and training events such as overview training courses and workshops on specific Blackboard applications. Since September 2003, three staff have been allocated time on their timetable to offer Blackboard support. They offer workshops and drop-in sessions.

3. Drivers of MLE Development

The key driver for Guildford College has been government policy and the increased strategic importance of e-learning in Further Education. The College's e-Learning strategy update document quotes key passages from *Get on with IT!*, the *post-16 e-Learning Strategy Task Force Report* and *Towards a unified e-Learning Strategy*, the DFES Consultation Document published in July 2003. The strategy update document outlines a vision for Guildford College which emphasises the importance of pedagogical considerations: "the college needs to plan for and implement effective ways in which new technology can enhance the quality and experience of on and off-campus learning." Economic drivers are also important – the business of getting more for less – as are curriculum and technology drivers. Lastly, the College has a

history of using IT for learning and some of the 'static' precursors of Blackboard had been widely used in the past.

Within the college, flagging e-learning as a separate strategic initiative was felt to be a more effective way of securing funding than it being 'buried' within existing programmes.

4. Consultation and Strategy Development – the process

The E-learning strategy was developed by the Director of Learning Technology Services and presented to the Executive Team and the IT Strategy Group in January 2003. There was consultation with the core ILT champions, who were already in post when the Director of Learning Technology Services arrived, and who represented five curriculum areas. The considerable experience of using IT for learning meant that there already was an impetus to move forward. Ongoing consultation mechanisms include an IT Strategy Group and an IT Users Forum. Informal consultation and feedback is planned through events such as the Blackboard breakfasts and designated e-Learning weeks. An e-Learning week took place between 1-5 December 2003 and included two Blackboard breakfasts, at which staff demonstrated their own uses of Blackboard to others in an informal setting. During that same week the College also played host to the first national Blackboard FE Conference, initiated and co-ordinated by the Director of Learning Technology Services. An e-Learning forum with student representatives is on the wish list for 2004.

Before the Director of Learning Technology Services came into post an earlier version of Blackboard had been purchased but not fully implemented. The college's technical infrastructure was in need of upgrading and the first task identified in the strategy was to address the technical infrastructure. This led to the replacement of 200-300 PCs; the connectivity to JANET being upgraded and an upgrade to Blackboard version 6 .

The second task in the strategy was to develop a project plan to implement Blackboard 6. This included technical milestones – installation, configuration and testing – and a staff development programme. The formation of an E-learning Unit in March 2003 enabled the plan to be taken forward in an integrated way

5. The implementation process

After the installation and testing of Blackboard, implementation went ahead according to the project plan. This had a start date of 1 January 2003 and an end date of 31 December 2003, with key milestones identified. The first milestones were technical and included: agreeing technical requirements; having an inaugural project Team meeting; installation; testing. Weekly staff awareness-raising events were scheduled between March and June 2003 and support mechanism implementation for July-August 2003. The Blackboard Learning System was scheduled to become available across the campus for teaching on all full-time courses from 1 September 2003. Staff training and development were scheduled throughout. All the college modules were uploaded into Blackboard as 'blank shells' but the adoption of it for teaching purposes has been phased, with the Phase 1 curriculum areas being chosen in response to take-up of staff development. Uptake has been strongest amongst HE tutors, where there is a considerable degree of enthusiasm and the clientele is largely external, providing further impetus. Project Evaluation was scheduled for December 2003.

The philosophy behind implementation has been very much to encourage and show by example. Care has been taken not to raise staff expectations too high and to allow a naturally progressive take-up. Staff are introduced to Blackboard rather than told to use it. It is recognised that different staff will have different motivations in using Blackboard and it is seen as important to tap into those motivations, and into existing structures and hierarchies, rather than impose from outside. It is anticipated that events like the Showcase breakfasts will move naturally from 'how to' type discussion into more reflexive debates about how individual and group teaching is changing.

There is interest from staff in using NLN material, but this is being discouraged until some technical issues have been addressed and also until there is pedagogical coherence – an example was given of an interactive learning object on airports and their codes for use with tourism students, but until this could be embedded logically within the course there was no pedagogical coherence in its use.

The project is being evaluated by means of a questionnaire to staff, who are also being asked to nominate students for their input.

6. The future

The emphasis for the immediate future is on consolidation, of both the merger with Merrist Wood College and the Blackboard implementation project. The merger with Merrist Wood offers opportunities for development, for example in video conferencing and other means of communication between the two campuses. It is planned to develop the E-Learning Unit to include six E-learning mentors and two E-learning zone assistants. A new Information Services Manager is scheduled to be in post from early 2004 and this will have implications for development. A further factor to impact on development will be the results of the Blackboard project evaluation which is taking place in December 2003.

Specific areas for development from January-April 2004 are:

- Blackboard and e-tools workshops to be offered during Merrist Wood staff development week
- NLN materials to be rolled out
- The College e-Learning Strategy to be updated
- Support provided for phase 2 curriculum areas, which were to be decided at the e-Learning Forum
- It is planned to set up student email accounts in summer 2004

The vision for the future, expressed in the Strategy update document, sees e-Learning as a normal part of the college experience, complementing traditional methods.

7. Staff Development

(Observation of a staff awareness-raising session)

During the designated e-Learning week at the College two Blackboard Breakfasts were organised and the second of those was observed. The main aim of the session was to raise awareness of Blackboard amongst teaching staff by showcasing some of the ways in which other members of staff were using it. The session promoted use of Blackboard, acted as an incentive for staff to attend inductions and workshops and also provided a forum for practical skill-sharing. It was held in the meetings area of the Learning Resource Centre and was fairly informal, with coffee and croissants on offer. Fourteen staff had signed up and they logged on to PCs in front of them, while six presenters took it in turn to demonstrate ways in which they have been using Blackboard. The session was facilitated by an e-Learning mentor, a member of staff who has time allocated on her timetable to support other staff with Blackboard. At the end of the hour-long session, staff appeared enthusiastic and several said they were keen to sign up to inductions to enable them to start using Blackboard.

The six Blackboard demonstrations were:

- An induction package for the library, consisting of an interactive quiz. This was a pilot and the evaluation showed that most students did well on the quiz and enjoyed it. Comments from participants in the room included one on the fact that the quiz was very text based – “a lot of words in it” - engendering doubts about how less able students would cope.
- Course content for a Registered Care Managers course. The students come in once a month so the aim is to support their learning off-campus. The students who have used it like it – “think it’s great”. Some have not used it at all. There was a short discussion amongst participants about the resulting need to duplicate preparation.
- Using PowerPoint as an interactive learning tool. There was a lot of interest in this and the session facilitator agreed to put it on to the Blackboard Basics community – an internal electronic forum.
- Material for a webmaster course. This is an evening course and students attend once a week. The teacher always has more material than she has time to give the students and encourages them to use Blackboard to work through the extra material. Her students tend to complete one level then wait a few months before doing the next level and Blackboard offers her a way of keeping in touch with them during intervals. She explained why she preferred pdf files to other types (they open into a new window) and why she splits them into manageable chunks (download time). She has set up a discussion board but none of the students are using it yet.
- Material for a Tourism course. This included an interactive map and an assessment cover sheet. The teacher had conducted an Induction Week survey electronically, which meant that he got the results much more quickly (previously, the survey was given to someone else to analyse and the results took time). Session participants agreed that there was potential for using the results more generally and – despite current technical problems - for copying/adapting the survey for other courses.
- A module for an IT course on getting started in PowerPoint. The teacher (also an e-Learning mentor) commented that it was incredibly easy to set up – “just takes a few minutes”.

Comments paraphrased from short discussions with those attending the session:

- Time is a major factor. One teacher, also involved in staff development and an ILT Champion - now an e-Learning mentor - said that time was the biggest issue. She tries to persuade colleagues not to think in terms of getting everything perfect – but “to give it a go”. Another member of staff commented that it would be good to have time allocated e.g. an hour every Wednesday morning when all staff worked on Blackboard – “it would work in our department”.
- For one teacher, 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. She also gave a caveat, however, in that not all students have access at home, so she needs to give out material on paper as well.
- One teacher not yet using Blackboard is planning to start using it soon. She liked that fact that it seemed ‘safe’ and ‘accessible’.
- One teacher was also studying a distance learning course on e-learning, using WebCT, and was finding the student perspective insightful.