

1 Introduction

The University of Brighton is a post-1992 institution with a total of 18,600 students. It is spread over five sites in Brighton and Eastbourne and has five faculties: Arts & Architecture; Education & Sport; Science & Engineering; Management & Information Sciences; Health. The University has also recently established the Brighton & Sussex Medical School, jointly with the University of Sussex, with the first medical undergraduate students due to start in Autumn 2003.

The Information Services Department was formed in summer 2000 and comprises Library Services, Reprographics, Administrative Computing, Academic Computing, Media Services and the Learning Technologies Group. Together they provide computing, networking, library, and media services in support of learning, teaching, research and administrative. Implementation of the University's MLE is the lead responsibility of the Learning Technologies Group, in association with the University's Centre for Learning and Teaching, under the auspices of the MLE Steering Group. The MLE Steering Group comprises a team of seven senior members of staff. Its remit is "to ensure that those involved in developing the MLE remain focused on what the University wants to achieve and avoid the key players getting lost in the implementation detail or becoming too technology focused."

2 Current State of Play

An institutional MLE, called Studentcentral, was introduced at the beginning of the academic year 2002/03. It uses Blackboard software and has been developed primarily by the Learning Technologies Group. The 2002/03 academic year has been the first year of rollout for Studentcentral and there has been widespread take-up. All faculties except Arts & Architecture have participated and within the participating faculties there has been widespread take-up. Total take-up is estimated at 30% of undergraduate modules, exceeding the first year target of 25%.

Students have a single sign-on and have access to course material, study management pages, student services, email and library services.

Staff and student evaluation of the system was deemed to be important in development of the MLE. In all, 990 students and 172 staff provided feedback through focus groups and on-line surveys. Initial evidence from students indicates that they are finding Studentcentral beneficial. They like having everything in one place and the convenience of the system. The biggest complaint is that there is not yet enough material on it. Staff find the system easy to use but time is an issue.

3 Drivers of MLE Development

- The need for a system which could be supported centrally in a sustainable way
- The need for a pragmatic, whole system approach
- Awareness of the potential benefits of MLEs through JISC activities and early VLE adopters elsewhere
- Senior Management Team commitment
- A means of encouraging academic colleagues to think about their teaching practices – (this has not been articulated specifically but is implicit in the Learning & Teaching Strategy)

4 Consultation and strategy development – the process

An MLE proposal document was presented to the Learning Resources Committee of the Academic Board in October 2001. It set out a rationale for “the provision of a centrally supported Managed Learning Environment (MLE)” and recommended the purchase of Blackboard software. The MLE was deliberately designed at the outset to be a “tight coupling” of a VLE, the digital library, the student records/ course module systems and other administrative systems containing information relevant to students. The existing situation was fragmented, with at least four separate departmental Intranet initiatives. The Intranets used different systems, did not link into the administrative system and did not support interdisciplinary working. It was accepted by the University that a certain level of central support was desirable and the go-ahead for an MLE, as outlined in the proposal document, was given in Spring 2002.

Important criteria for the selection of the product were: integration capability; potential for development; ability to deliver services to Windows and Mac clients; IMS compliance; interface quality; cost (initial and on-going); take-up elsewhere in the sector. The ultimate choice was between Blackboard and WebCT and the former was selected. In-house and open source options were considered but rejected because of the potential cost in terms of staff resources.

There was a consultation process which informed the MLE proposal. The Learning Technologies Support Officers (LTSOs) were key in this consultation process, talking to members of staff and giving feedback. There were also open workshops, the use of mailing lists, and the Learning Technology Network. Students were not consulted specifically although a user survey by Information Services had shown that students wanted all teaching material to be available online. 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. The Director of Information Services also had recent experience in another HE institution which provided a useful comparison.

5 Implementation Process

The “implementers” were the Learning Technologies Group, the LTSOs, Registry, Administrative Computing. Also involved, but to a lesser extent were library, Faculty administrative and academic staff.

The first priority during the roll-out phase was to ‘sell’ a package that worked; pedagogical issues were a lower initial priority. The aim of the first year was to achieve critical mass and therefore sign-up was a matter of choice. The only pre-condition was that the participating school made module data available on CAMS (Credit Accumulation and Management System) the University’s standard software for recording module-related information which is tightly integrated into the Student Record System.

The system was publicised through a series of workshops open to all staff and there were follow-up sessions for specific groups of staff. It was recognised that the biggest burden would fall on administrative staff and it was therefore stipulated that at least one member of the administrative staff had to be involved in those follow-up sessions. There were also separate sessions for administrative staff at which the key benefits for them were clarified and 575 staff attended training courses by the end of

the first year. Publicity to students was deliberately low key to prevent pressure from them on academics to make use of it in the first year. Students were informed about it during their library inductions and through leaflets in open-access computer poolrooms. It was anticipated – and this proved to be the case – that students would discover it through word of mouth and staff encouragement.

There were fewer problems than anticipated. Part of this was due to the care taken around how it was 'sold' to staff and students. For example it was important to stress to staff that the aim of Studentcentral was to support teaching and not a) to replace them or b) to shift the focus of the institution to distance learning. It was also felt to be important to not be "too highbrow pedagogic" about it and to accept that pedagogic concerns would come later. For students, the task was to manage the balance between expectations and ensuring that they all knew it was there.

There was an anticipated problem around the quality of administrative data, which was avoided because Administrative, Computing and Registry worked together to ensure that problems were ironed out. The 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.

Overall, there was far less resistance than anticipated – "people seemed to want to be involved". The exception to this was the Arts Faculty, who have been historically resistant to the modular approach adopted by the rest of the University.

However, workload and time are ongoing issues for academic staff, as are managing student expectations. There were also issues with the library staff, particularly around quality e.g. of course reading material and resource links which are yet to be fully addressed.

6 The Future

The immediate aim for the future is to increase take-up - the target for 2003/04 is 50% and 75% for the subsequent year. Migrating the remaining School Intranets into Studentcentral and plans for greater deployment in other Schools will help meet those targets. But Studentcentral will be 'pushed' more strategically to students. There is evidence, for example, that part-time students are currently less aware than full-time students and may have a lower level of IT skills.

A major challenge is to find ways to engage the Arts & Architecture Faculty.

Levels of awareness amongst academic staff are high and the next anticipated steps are that Studentcentral will begin to make them think about their future practice. This process will be reinforced by a 'best practice' approach – from other academics, for example through their LTSOs and Centre for Learning and Teaching (CLT) workshops. Specific pedagogic benefits are beginning to be identified. One member of staff has developed interactive spreadsheets to teach basic Excel and another has experimented with online discussion sessions moderated by students on a rota basis.

Administrative and Support staff are finding that they have a new and unprecedented communication channel for reaching students. This has been a quick change over the first year and has caused some problems e.g. information overload for students. But it is an area which will be developed for example by the Careers Service.

Community student discussion areas is another interesting area to monitor in future.

Deeper integration with library services and resources is being implemented, along with greater use of librarians' professional information skills.

There are disadvantages to using Studentcentral which need to be addressed. These include equity of access; ICT skill levels; inappropriate use; a tendency to think that simply posting teaching material is enough, potentially leading to a lowering of teaching quality. There is also a flexibility issue. The MLE will not satisfy everyone's teaching needs and there is a need to devise imaginative solutions – for example, using the software to integrate material from several servers.

For students, Studentcentral is moving towards an institutional portal. For staff, it is possible that the staff Intranet, Staffcentral, could be delivered through a portal like Studentcentral. Pressure for systems with a single access point is likely to grow.