

## **1 Introduction**

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Calderdale College is in Halifax, South Yorkshire. The College has approximately 3000 FTE students, with no distance learners at present. There is one main college campus and 3 community venues in which the college has made a significant investment, and which are in the College network. These community venues are used primarily for IT training.

In 1999 the College appointed a new Head of Computer-Aided Learning (CAL) to stimulate the use of information and learning technology (ILT). The College launched an 18 month Curriculum Innovation project (CI) in 1999, establishing Curriculum Innovators in all subject areas, and developed a College Intranet.

The objectives of the Curriculum Innovation project were

- 1 To ensure that the (Curriculum) Intranet is well managed and used as a whole college resource.
- 2 To ensure staff have the skills needed to take advantage of ILT opportunities
- 3 To integrate ILT across all curriculum areas where appropriate.
- 4 To evaluate & disseminate information
- 5 To lead the development of on-line & distance learning programmes across the curriculum

Simultaneously with the CI project, the College also participated with other Yorkshire & Humber Colleges and higher education institutions in the ELLEN Project (coordinated by the University of Huddersfield), which provided a free opportunity to trial a number of commercial VLEs. Through this process the College chose to buy Blackboard.

Consultation on the choice of VLE was largely internal. Blackboard was selected primarily for its simplicity and ease of use for tutors & students. Other IT system support (e.g. management information) was very poor in 1999/2000, so a choice was made to separate out the teaching and learning and focus on getting 'buy-in' from academic staff and students. The College has bought in external support from Fretwell Downing and MIS systems are now up and running but not yet linked to the VLE (see below). There are worries about how data-protection should be managed and the automated management of students e.g. for prolonged absences.

## **2 Current state of play**

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The College now has a functioning VLE. Recent outsourcing to Fretwell Downing of the development of administration and management information systems included no specific instruction on integration into a managed learning environment (MLE) of administrative, teaching and learning systems. No demand for such integration of systems exists to justify developments in that direction. Enrolment on the VLE is quite simple and at present only a small number of students are actively using it.

Take-up and use of the VLE is limited as yet. There is quite a high volume of material from across the curriculum now available in the VLE, and the quality is variable. Student use of the material is relatively low. Internal innovation funding

may be available to rewrite some of the material in a common style. Greater uniformity also needs to be introduced into descriptions of material.

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 – most people have so far used the VLE as a repository for module materials but have not thought about the learning process. They are now recognising that students are not using the materials and that they need to rethink and reorganise in order to engage students.

Head of CAL recognises the difficulties of ‘tinkering’ with existing material as opposed to a wholesale rethink. He sees it as ‘getting teachers to think about it as publishing’ in that one needs to get everything right before publishing it.

### **3 Drivers of MLE development**

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The key drivers for Calderdale College were equally:

- Enhancing the quality of learning and teaching – ‘really a Trojan horse’ to get teachers to rethink their materials and approaches, and to share materials.
- Formation of partnerships with other institutions / organisations – the ELLEN Project in Yorkshire & Humber.
- Improving access to learning for part-time students and students off campus.

### **4 Consultation and strategy development – the process**

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The development of the Intranet and the VLE is part of the College’s ILT strategy, underpinned by the appointment of the Head of CAL in 1999, and the clear commitment to ILT shown by the CI Project which was funded internally.

The process of consultation and strategic development was based on a model from Wakefield College, in which an ILT strategy was developed and widely promoted to staff (pre-1999). This process failed to get any real ‘buy-in’ from Faculty Heads, but a better response was obtained directly with staff. 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.

The CI Project built a strong network of ILT champions and curriculum innovators across the College, and these have provided most input into the consultative process leading to the purchase of the VLE.

There is still considerable dependence among teachers on ILT champions, and the College’s major hurdle is to ‘institutionalise’ the use of ILT, working with and through their VLE. Progress on doing this may have been faster had the College adopted a more prescriptive, mandatory approach with the academic staff.

The CI Project represented a significant investment to tackle the problem of staff take-up of systems by freeing participating staff for half the time to enable them to focus on their curriculum materials. Now that the (expensive) project is over, one of the unforeseen outcomes is that staff members do not perceive this work as being part of their daily routine, but as ‘special project’ work.

Mainly because of this, the VLE has been ‘on the back-burner’ for the past 18 months, without any real push to promote it. The CI Project (regarded now as a ‘first

phase' of activity in ILT) did much to raise teacher awareness, confidence and skills, and encouraged use of the Intranet across all curriculum subjects. During this 'free-for-all' (i.e. not focused on particular curriculum areas) phase, staff in teacher education, tutorials, computing and graphic design did a lot of work on the Intranet. Whilst some curriculum areas have moved their content to the VLE Graphic Design prefers to continue to use the Intranet because of the greater flexibility in design layout.

The CI Project was not rolled over into a second phase in part because it had revealed a range of issues around curriculum quality. Assumptions had been made about the quality of existing curriculum materials and their transferability into an ILT environment. Hindsight suggested these quality issues should have been addressed before the CI Project started.

Senior management 'buy-in' to ILT development in general has been positive and funding is not perceived as a problem. Time, in particular academic staff time, is much more of a problem.

## **5 Implementation process**

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Learning from the 'first phase' (the CI Project ended in 2001(?)), they now wish to focus effort on specific curriculum areas to build use of the VLE among staff and students; these areas will be chosen for specific reasons, for instance as part of a move to overcome weaknesses identified during a recent inspection. Some areas mentioned include Education, Computing and "Tutorial' in which staff have explicit interests, also Construction and Hairdressing.

The impact of the VLE on the institution as a whole has been limited to date, though practices are changing in some departments. Blackboard is seen as a vehicle to publish learning material for learners. However sharing lesson material is not easy. The College has shared network space for academic staff to share materials. There is no integration planned of this system and the VLE.

External collaboration and exchange of views continues within the region, e.g. a regional Blackboard user group of between 7 – 15 colleges. There is currently little collaboration across partners of this group on developing materials, though discussion is ongoing on sharing components in one area across 7 colleges. Getting commitment from everyone is difficult. There is, however, work within the region on a XML repository of teaching and learning materials, in which the College will participate.

## **6 The future**

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Rolling the development of quality curriculum materials out across the curriculum will take about 5 years, according to Head CAL's view. Student expectations will be an increasing driver, as more students come from the school sector where ILT is embedded. Evidence from Computing shows that once students get a taste of VLE-based courses, their expectations and awareness build rapidly.

Academic staff who are already working with the VLE see three broad desirable outcomes:

- Integration with administrative and assessment systems, enabling better and easier record-keeping by teachers;

- A lot more quality materials, including a tutorial system for students to pick up on better support;
- Teaching and learning that is nonetheless tied to, and retaining a focus on, classroom teaching and the face-to-face relationship between student and teacher.

The Head of CAL's wish list for the future includes:

- Everyone using computer-based testing;
- Greater sharing of materials and collaboration in development of materials;
- Introduction of distance learning.