

## **1 Introduction**

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The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) has 2 main sites, separated by about ½ mile – one in Bloomsbury, off Russell Square and the other in Vernon Square.

The School has over 4000 full time equivalent students (including distance education students), and about 600 core staff of which 250 are full-time academics bolstered by anything up to 500 hourly-paid staff during peak teaching periods. The School has a high proportion of international students and an increasing number of part-time students in specific subject areas. Students come from all over the world to study at SOAS, annually attracting students from nearly 100 countries and many part-time students are also busy professionals in such fields as economics, management, international politics and diplomacy.

Twelve years ago, under the umbrella of the University of London External Programme (EISA), a group of academics in SOAS developed a structured distance learning MSc programme in financial economics, and later diversified this by introducing a Postgraduate Diploma programme in Economics, an MSc in Financial Management and an MSc in Development Finance. Subsequently another group of academics produced an MSc distance learning programme in Public Policy and Management, also presented through EISA (the External Programme). At this stage, programmes were presented in paper-based form (often summarised as the 'course in a box' mode) pioneered by the Open University, where many of these academics had worked for a number of years. All these programmes are now based in the Department of Financial and Management Studies.

In 2000, the then Centre for Financial and Management Studies (CeFiMS) obtained External Programme funding to develop a new MSc programme, Finance and Financial Law, including funding to present the programme using web-enabled methods and using electronic resources. EISA subsequently decided to centralise the provision of new technology for the web-enabled programmes it was funding for development, including CeFiMS' Finance and Financial Law programme.

EISA decided to offer these centralised resources in the form of a centrally-provided VLE (provided by the External Programme of the University) and undertook (in 2001), a selection process in which it trialed several VLEs; but found their functionality lacking and licensing arrangements expensive. EISA eventually chose a Lotus Domino/Notes environment, because this offered most flexibility in customising a centrally-provided environment for use by different Colleges and Schools of the University of London, many of which already had installed different on-campus VLEs (though SOAS had not).

Another reason for choosing Lotus was that EISA had already funded a trial development of a Lotus VLE at Wye College, so that a version of the environment had already been programmed.

CeFiMS asked to run a pilot of their extensive existing programmes on this existing Lotus environment, though the new generic Lotus VLE was still under development by EISA. Through the pilot, they wanted to offer added functionalities to the paper-based courses, namely:

- 1) electronic resources access through the University Library;
- 2) electronic assignment submission, marking and feedback,
- 3) electronic query function for technical, administrative and academic queries.

The pilot began in January 2002, gradually being offered to more students so that, currently, they have 777 live registered users on the old version of the VLE.

## **2 Current state of play**

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CeFIMS expects to move to the newly developed version Lotus VLE in January 2004 and the dedicated CeFiMS E-learning Developer is currently assessing it from the CeFiMS point of view. Development of both versions of the VLE has been undertaken centrally by EISA.

From CeFiMS point of view, the roll-out of a pilot version of the Lotus VLE has enabled them to see, to a certain extent, how moving to a web-enabled technology affects our pedagogy, students, part-time tutors, administrators and administrative processes. Further changes especially to the latter, will be needed when moving to the new version of Lotus.

EISA is also developing a new External Programme student database which will link to their VLE. This will also be an issue for CeFiMS and SOAS student database links.

SOAS has had an existing student record system for some time and are now in the process of procuring a new system – part of the specification is capability of integration with other administration systems and a VLE.

As part of the selection process for the new student records system the School has run a number of presentations by commercial vendors of which they have publicised widely and have had some success in attracting academic staff to attend. They have also undertaken surveys of the academic staff to get their views on administration system functionality. They recognise there is a problem to overcome, in that academic staff generally do not associate student record or administration systems with VLE/MLE development. Cultural change remains a big challenge from all points of view.

A new Curriculum Advisor joined SOAS in late 2002 and, through giving workshops identified a 'champion' to begin to raise awareness of the potential of VLEs for learning and teaching, through a series of workshops and presentations for academic and support staff, specifically focusing on the use of Blackboard. These events were well attended (2 presentations by the champion were attended by just over 70 staff including senior management and the School's Director and Principal) and interest began to build across a range of subject areas.

The 'champion' had developed one course module on Blackboard (in Linguistics) to support her MA students, which ran from January 2003 and has been evaluated through student questionnaires using the Blackboard assessment area.

On the strength of this initial experience in Linguistics, the decision has been made to run a series of VLE 'case study' pilots using Blackboard throughout the academic year 2003/2004. A 'call for proposals' to academic staff, following the presentations elicited an excellent response and 6 pilots have been selected from short-listed proposals, among which are Aspects of Japanese Culture (with interesting implications for use of fonts), Quantitative Methods for Economists (chosen in part for

the large range of electronic resources available), Introduction to South and Southeast Asia (with considerable interest in the area of digitising images) and the MA in International Studies and Diplomacy (to help support part-time professionals). The case studies selected reflect the distinctive expertise of SOAS. The piloting of the VLE is not seeking to replace traditional teaching in the School but will hopefully be shown to enhance it, by taking advantage of new content and delivery technologies to enable learning.

To run these pilot studies SOAS has obtained a license to use Blackboard experimentally for 15 months from a Blackboard agent in the UK, which will also provide technical support to the pilots. The agent will set up the Blackboard site and run the pilots from its own server, which will enable SOAS to gain maximum benefit from the pilot but at low risk and without interfering with existing in-house IT provision. This also provides a cost-effective alternative to a full license which is usually targeted at bigger clients than SOAS in this pilot stage.

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

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The main drivers for the CeFIMS initiatives was the improvement of access to learning for distance learners, and the collaboration with other Schools and Colleges under the University of London's External Programme.

The principal driver for the current development of an internal SOAS VLE has been the existence of a committed local champion (the Curriculum Advisor) in the first instance, and the involvement of a member of the academic community as a champion.

Student expectations are also identified as a driver for MLE development more generally – students from the USA in particular have high expectations of IT in learning, teaching, information services and remote access to resources. On the other hand, many students coming from less developed countries arrive with little or no experience of using computers.

The need for access to learning by part-time and off-campus students are also drivers – SOAS students, in common with other University of London schools and colleges, tend to live further away from the School, and look for 'IT solutions to remote access.

Another factor driving VLE development is the importance of good communications between students and their teachers – many academics travel widely for their research and are not on-site all the time and it is expected that the use of discussion forums and bulletin boards in improving communication will be an important feature of the pilots to evaluate.

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

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The development of the VLE in SOAS has so far been a 'grassroots up' initiative, although the catalyst could be said to be the 'top-down' appointment of the Curriculum Advisor.

There is great enthusiasm among many academics to get involved in developing pilot VLE modules for their courses – no other motivation has been required apart from awareness raising, workshops and demonstration of the initial Linguistics module.

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.

## **5 The implementation process**

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MA student responses to the Linguistics case study pilot in academic year 2002/3 include:

- Some surprise at how valuable and enjoyable as a learning experience using the VLE was, though the general consensus was that it remains necessary to 'print everything out rather than read on screen'.
- Assumptions that using a VLE would be distance learning for international students, where one 'could miss lectures and still find out through the VLE' were quickly abandoned: the VLE was a different learning experience which 'enriched' the lectures, gave answers and insights into and from other fields.
- The VLE was valuable if the student was experiencing low motivation, frustrated with books etc. They could 'get on the computer and do something interactive – quizzes, etc.', and then get re-involved in the subject and regain focus.
- Students on the course noticed that the number of questions declined over the year during lectures and they wondered if the VLE was partly responsible. They agreed that it 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'.
- Students also emphasised how the VLE could help 'test' learning by facilitating discussion online with others, which was seen as very helpful for exam preparation once face-to-face classes had finished.
- The use of the VLE helped students to exploit the existing electronic resources in the SOAS Library more fully.
- Student access to the VLE from their accommodation was severely limited, forcing students to queue for access to a computer on the SOAS network. This placed them under time pressures and restricted use of VLE facilities. Though some parts were downloadable/zipped, it was not possible to do that for everything. Also some SOAS computers don't all have same programs, and students couldn't open all documents at all terminals.

Academics who have put up proposals to be involved in the forthcoming 15 month pilot have a number of expectations and concerns, which include:

- One lecturer emphasises flexibility and accessibility for the majority of his students who are full-time professionals, so he cannot guarantee 100% attendance at lectures. His students 'take their laptops everywhere', so the VLE would be tremendous bonus.

- For CeFIMS staff it presents an opportunity to bring together two modes of teaching in future: on campus and distance learning – ‘mixed mode’.
- A way of building a student community among large 1<sup>st</sup> year undergraduate classes (in economics), with students who don’t talk to each other much. The lecturer is concerned at the high drop out rate and has invited students to come and talk to him but they don’t always come forward. He hopes the VLE may improve the teaching & learning experience, and help to improve computer and IT skills amongst students, which is challenging given the large numbers and huge range of skill levels.
- An opportunity to explore networks for developing content, sharing resources and building libraries across courses. The lecturer in question had raised the idea of using the VLE at a departmental meeting, but felt that it provoked some suspicion from senior staff. They appeared to assume the initiative would be aimed at cost cutting. His conclusion is that skill levels aren’t a problem but overcoming suspicions about introducing IT into teaching and concerns about the impact on the teaching environment could be.
- Everybody is concerned about excessive demand. SOAS is a research-based institution so everyone is rather worried about the impact on their research work. They recognised that there will be a need for additional hours of computing support, many more computers in the School, and, perhaps most importantly, a support network for sharing experience of content development and VLE use.
- It is extremely valuable to accumulate case studies, in different subjects and disciplines, to show other people the possibilities of the VLE, such as, how do other staff use discussion boards? How do they motivate students?

## **5 The future**

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Within SOAS it is felt that the pilot will need to demonstrate the possibilities of the VLE for improving learning and teaching in order to make a case for financial support.

The School envisages possible collaboration on VLE development and use with other ‘Bloomsbury group’ institutions of the University of London.

SOAS, as essentially a research-oriented institution, also wishes to place emphasis on integration with Library and external electronic learning resources – ‘scholarly development’ has to be part of the VLE package ultimately’.

In addition to the 6 case studies the School is going to enrol all incoming first year students onto a VLE site, which in collaboration with the faculty administrators, the Student Union and Student Services and the Library in particular, will explore its possible benefits for socialising students into higher education and improving the School’s retention rates.