

King Alfred's University College Winchester

1. Introduction

King Alfred's College has over 5,500 students, (3,000 full-time and 2,500 part-time). There are around 500 staff in total, equivalent to approximately 250 FTE. The Undergraduate and Masters programmes span the humanities, arts, performing arts, social sciences, teacher education, business, health and applied social studies. Founded in the 19th century to train teachers for church elementary schools, the College remains one of the country's largest providers of primary initial teacher training and supports a wide range of routes into the profession.

The post of Head of Learning Technology was created in 1995 and the post holder is responsible for the development of the college's e-learning capacities. He also co-ordinates central support for learning and teaching across the College. The post holder is a qualified teacher with wide-ranging experience, including the commercial production of open learning material.

2. Current state of play

The college developed its VLE in-house. It was launched in August 2000 and is now on Version 4, with an estimated 70% of the institution using it for teaching purposes. Students have one log-in to the VLE, which authenticates their access through Registry data. The college also has an Intranet, called Campus Net, which has been developed separately and runs alongside the VLE. Present development is focused on a portal, which will integrate the VLE, the intranet and management information systems.

A key feature of the VLE is the forum area, which offers flexible tools for online discussion. This was mentioned repeatedly by both staff and students as an important communication and learning medium.

Since early 2001, the VLE has been supported by a specialist member of staff. The post was initially part-time but the College has used HEFCE Learning & Teaching Strategy money to establish it full time until summer 2005. Continuity beyond this point is seen as key for the maintenance and development of e-learning services.

3. Drivers of MLE Development

- The VLE and the forthcoming portal are important strands in the College's strategic vision, specifically supporting the drive to increase distributed delivery
- The College's Learning and Teaching Strategy emphasises active learning, open access and wider participation – all of which are supported by the VLE and portal
- Student recruitment and retention. The VLE can help meet the needs of geographically-dispersed learners. By offering contact with part-time students during critical periods, such as between registration and first attendance, it is making an important contribution to retaining new groups of learners.
- Quality enhancement and the contribution made by the VLE to successful subject reviews have helped broaden e-learning initiatives
- The development of the college's IT infrastructure has supported the expansion of blended learning, and the appointment in 2001 of a new

Principal with research interests in virtual learning has been crucial to “opening doors”

- Individual champions within the staff – support staff and teaching staff – have been enormously influential
- Its use and potential as a tool for communication and for shaping learning have made it attractive to academics and administrative users

4. Consultation and Strategy Development – the process

The seeds of the VLE development were sown in the late 1990s when the Head of Learning Technology introduced the First Class conferencing system to support electronic discussions in Music and Business. Results were favourable but First Class was not listed as a core application in the institution and proved difficult to support. Shortly after this, a small number of academic staff began to experiment with the Public Folders tool in MS Outlook. This technology was text-based and more cumbersome to use but staff found it to be a useful resource for sharing files. As part of the college’s core applications, it offered a sustainable springboard for the VLE development.

The VLE project itself began in January 1999 when the Head of Learning Technology brought the two development paths together and presented a paper to the Learning and Teaching Committee, of which he is a member. This outlined current technological developments and recommended developing a web-based learning environment. As a result of this, a pilot project was initiated and the first phase of the pilot ran throughout the second semester of 1999-2000. The pilot was externally evaluated with very positive results and extended into other subject areas.

An initial pilot group, which included a range of stakeholders, consulted with the academic community through a series of fora and drew up a wish-list of requirements, which were assessed and prioritised. Key ‘champions’ demonstrated aspects of the VLE – such as the electronic forums - to staff in their departments and this proved to be a key motivating factor for other staff. By seeing for themselves how effective the forums could be as a communication tool, they were keen to join in. From the initial pilot group, a VLE Steering Group was established in late 2000 to “ensure the [VLE] project meets the long-term needs of the College community”. Key development staff estimate that overall it took around two and a half years to get momentum going in the college as a whole.

Ongoing consultation is maintained through discussion lists and the informal “constant conversation” , which is possible in an organisation still small enough for those implementing the VLE to share what is happening. An informal newsletter, *VLE News*, is produced by the VLE development team on an ad hoc basis. Initially devised as a way of keeping the pilot group informed, it is now used to communicate information about technical innovations and offer group members the opportunity to pilot software in areas such as computer-aided assessment and electronic feedback.

Efforts to involve students at the developmental stage have proved less successful and consultations have tended to be mediated through staff. However, detailed discussions with the first cohort of students on the new flexible PGCE course have worked well and have helped develop the way the college supports off-campus learning. Student comments were taken on board and acted upon – which not only tackled the problems being experienced but made the students feel that their contribution was valued. The process has helped develop a framework for dealing

with the potential problems of new groups before they begin their academic programmes.

5. The implementation and development process

The implementation process began with the pilot demonstration project. Academic staff in six pilot subject groups worked with the Head of Learning Technology to build and demonstrate the in-house VLE. After the positive evaluation of the pilot six more teaching groups were added and it is estimated that 70% of subject groups are now using the VLE. Non-participating groups are largely drawn from programmes with specific organisational requirements or those which aspire to alternative pedagogical approaches.

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. This process - whereby subject staff work closely with the VLE developers - has been positive and there is a view that if an off-the-shelf package had been purchased this would not have worked so well. 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.

The system has been upgraded several times since the original and is now on Version 4. New features have been added and continual progress made towards integration of college systems. This will culminate in the introduction of a portal in 2004.

A move to purchase an external system was mooted in 2002 but by 2003 the view from within the college had changed and it was decided to remain with the in-house systems, with proposals for upgrade in line with emerging international standards. The reasons for rejecting a commercial system were:

- Lack of emergence of a sector standard.
The proliferation of diverse platforms was seen as a drawback, with a lack of consensus on quality and value for money
- Pedagogical constraints.
Commercial systems were seen as potentially limiting to the evolution of a distinctive online pedagogy, while at the same time offering a number of administrative functions which the College did not need.
- Maintaining user familiarity
It was felt that a move to a new system might interfere with the model of incremental development that had secured the widespread involvement of the academic staff
- Costs
The cost of purchasing a new system would have been significant and there was a concern about continued support for smaller platforms from leading suppliers
- Collaboration with a range of partners
It was felt that adopting a single platform might pre-determine patterns of collaboration and the capacity to bid for VLE-related funding in partnership with a variety of institutions.

The option to purchase a commercial product at some stage in the future is still available.

6. Staff Development

In the early days of the VLE development there were subject-based Staff Development Days at which 'expert' members of staff would demonstrate applications and share knowledge. The college is also committed to staff development and publishes an annual programme of 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 feel that the VLE makes a difference to the way they teach certain courses and encourages them to think more about the **learning** interface as opposed to the teaching interface. Where time is at a premium staff are continually looking at alternatives to face-to-face for communication, such as the forum. Furthermore, 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. Involvement in one course which makes substantial use of the VLE can make staff question their practice on other courses, particularly around face-to-face delivery versus self-learning, the extent of collaboration with students and student-student interaction.

7. The future

The key development for the immediate 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 by Academic Board and the basic architecture has been completed. Piloting and testing are due to begin in early summer 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.

Steering groups have been established to ensure a variety of user communities are involved in the portal development. The groups are:

- Web Services Steering Group, which will shape policy, support college strategies and provide budgetary guidance
- Networked Learning Group, which will bring together those involved in distributed delivery and support the development of an e-learning strategy
- Creative Development Group, which will bring together staff and students to provide creative input
- Specialist User Communities, to enable the dissemination of good practice.

It is proposed that the post of VLE Specialist is made permanent and embedded in the staffing establishment of the College. This would allow continuity in the level of support deemed necessary for the future.

8. Using the VLE - Staff Views

Staff from a range of disciplines gave their views about the VLE in a round-table discussion. They were all using the VLE in their teaching to varying extents, but did not regard themselves as 'champions'. Some were using the VLE alongside web

pages, while others had been used to using Web pages and had migrated to the VLE.

Most staff found that the VLE was particularly useful for certain aspects of teaching, including:

- Summaries of work done in class
- Pre-seminar discussions
- Seminar notes
- Allowing home access for part-time and distance students
- Delivery of certain types of material e.g. pictorial material
- To relieve pressure on library books
- Question and Answer type exercises
- PowerPoint presentations, including staff and student presentations.
- The forum facility. This is useful, for example, as a vehicle for responding to student questions on assignments and distributing the answers to all students.
- The ability to email all students or target particular groups, depending on the need

Some general points arose in the discussion, as well as points specific to a particular subject or perspective. The following paragraphs summarise the key points but do not necessarily represent consensus.

The VLE is changing the way that some staff teach. For example those involved with the flexible part-time PGCE students now view the computer as a partner. Also, the ability to access VLE material from schools means that staff – and students – do not have to take all their material with them.

The VLE is not so much changing the way that staff teach but allowing students access to more material. This can lead to false expectations from students, who, for example, have begun to demand full lectures on the VLE rather than notes. Furthermore, some students assume that they can simply download lecture slides as an alternative to attending lectures. One teacher deliberately makes his slides difficult to understand on their own to encourage lecture attendance.

The balance between central and devolved services is important. Some staff built their departmental web pages in the past and now welcome the fact that preparing material for the VLE is more of a shared activity. Similarly, because academic staff can set things up for themselves they are no longer so dependant on IT staff, which avoids unnecessary delays. For this system to work, staff must – and do- have confidence in the technology and the way it is being developed.

Access to materials and the implications for subject identity are live issues. There is a debate within the institution around the extent to which access should be open or tailored. It is being argued that use of XML in the portal will offer a technical and creative solution, allowing materials to be positioned either side of the firewall, as required. Some concern exists about the extent to which the range of requirements will be met.

Some staff believe that the VLE is constraining, because its architecture defines decisions and there are some teaching activities which do not fit easily within those confines. They felt that the technology does not always change fast enough to enable them to do what they want..

There are inconsistencies in staff use and approach even within subject disciplines although minimal standards are emerging. Some staff may use the VLE in a minimal way – partly because of varying IT skills - others spend a lot of time and energy preparing material for the VLE. Some staff see the VLE as a solution to the pressures of teaching; others see it as a problem.

Historically, online discussions have not worked well but this is changing. The current 3rd year History students, for example, have seminars based around primary documentation, run by the students themselves. They have been putting the basic background information on the forum, which means that less time is wasted in class. This works well. However, subject staff felt that the 2nd year students lack enough confidence in seminar working for this to work and the 1st year students sometimes struggle with IT skills.

The School of Education differs from other schools, because it offers a wide range of courses and student numbers and subjects to be covered on its core programme are particularly large. The VLE is used mainly by the flexible PGCE course, which is relatively small. However, work is being undertaken to pilot the VLE with teachers doing CPD courses and this should help address the the difficulty of securing access to the VLE for students on teaching practice in primary schools. Each course within the school grew up with a particular target audience in mind and each has its own specific requirements. This illustrates the difficulty of determining an overall approach to the VLE by any School and, while the portal will enable better integration, a lot of work remains to be done on the underlying issues.

Staff were cautious about high expectations surrounding e-learning in the future and well aware of the possible constraints.

There was a general consensus about the importance of technical and financial support to underpin future developments. Staff will not all need to acquire IT skills – as long as the expertise is there to be tapped. Technical support and the speed of response from the Helpdesk are crucial. Limited resources were cited as being responsible for current technological constraints - such as an insufficient number of data projectors - and this would impact on future aspirational work in areas such as video conferencing, simulations and the use of artificial intelligence technologies.

Staff could foresee more use of existing technology, such as video, laptops, docking stations in classrooms, wireless local networks and flexible access to external data sources. They also saw a need to take on board existing models of communication behaviour such as texting.

For some subjects, for example, Archaeology, a key aspect of teaching and learning is dealing with physical material, which is a challenge for the VLE., Because of this, there will never be a substitute for work in the field, although electronic services like the Archaeology Data Service are useful. Likewise, Music does not lend itself to e-learning. In Education, government requirements will continue to dictate curriculum content in undergraduate and CPD to a large extent.

All future developments will have to take account of students' own equipment and skills.

9. Using the VLE - Student Views

Students from a range of courses gave their views about the VLE in a round-table discussion.

In general, the part-time distance students (flexible PGCE) were much more familiar and more positive about the VLE than the full-time campus-based students. The PGCE students were also more mature, which may be a factor, and they had done degrees several years ago. They reflected on the comparative differences between 'then and now' and felt that the current focus was more individual, describing this as "my learning". The other side of this coin was getting the balance right between being completely left to get on with it (old style) and the danger of spoon-feeding (new style). They praised the discussion forum and its usefulness for inter-student discussion and tutor-monitored discussion. The particular advantages they reported included:

10. They feel less isolated
11. They have information at their fingertips and don't have to wait
12. Tutors are accessible
13. They feel that they get more individual attention
14. There are big time-saving advantages
15. Sharing views with other students and looking at other students' work is useful
16. Controlling their own pace of learning

All students – both part-time and full-time – commented favourably on the convenience of the system for:

17. Its use as a depository e.g. picking up notes
18. Revising
19. Printing off rather than having to take copious notes
20. Checking important course notices and email

The drawbacks students reported included:

- Not yet used to using interactive or collaborative facilities (1st year students)
- Access to the Internet off-campus can be slow and difficult
- Some students do not have effective access from home
- The system is sometimes slow, and some of the technology is cumbersome
- Multiple logging in is tedious
- Navigation difficulties. Some sort of flagging is needed to distinguish different material e.g. what's new, what's been accessed already
- Inconsistency amongst teaching staff. The usefulness of the system depends on lecturers putting on content or setting up facilities, which varies from one member of staff to another. There was agreement that advance copies of lectures were useful and that – contrary to the argument expressed by some staff – this did not deter students from attending lectures
- Feeling also amongst undergraduates that not all lecturers are yet convinced of the value of the VLE
- Feeling amongst undergraduates that other groups might 'steal' their work if access is not properly controlled
- Students feel they have little power to influence developments and are dependant on academic staff as intermediaries.

All saw a key role for continuing face-to-face lecturing in the future.

Campus-based undergraduates (in particular) spoke about aspects of the VLE that they were not familiar with. They did not realise, for instance, that there was a Help service and support staff and suggested that those services should be better publicised.

The Head of Learning Technology 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.