

# Anglia Ruskin University

## Tailoring a bespoke Virtual Learning Environment with the support of the JISC e-Learning programme

### Context

Anglia Ruskin University is one of the largest universities in the East of England, with a population of 28,000 students. It serves a wide variety of learners, is a large provider of part time courses and supplies a significant numbers of nurses and teachers to the professions. It offers undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, professional qualifications, plus a range of programmes aimed at meeting the needs of a knowledge-based economy.

While the University's main campuses are located at Cambridge and Chelmsford, it also has a regional presence through its links with a number of further and other higher education institutions. The University's extensive network of contacts with institutions throughout the world enables it to deliver courses in countries such as Malaysia and Trinidad.

In 2005, the University determined to renew its Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), which was felt to be in need of updating and was infrequently used. Lecturers at the University with an interest in technology-enhanced learning had begun to use externally provided Web 2.0 applications, such as blogs and wikis, and external influences were also encouraging a move towards technology-enhanced learning: factors included the rising expectations of new students joining the University from secondary education plus the imperatives of government initiatives regarding integrated digital technology.

### The challenge to deliver a new VLE

**Uwe Richter, Associate Director for Learning and Teaching Development**, took on the responsibility for the review of the existing VLE in collaboration with his colleagues from the INSPIRE team at the University (INSPIRE is a centralised support unit driving initiatives associated with curriculum development and the enhancement of students' experiences across the institution). Together, they were tasked to gather information about staff and student experiences and to map user expectations regarding the use of technology-enhanced learning. They also identified and evaluated candidates for the new VLE and used staff and student online surveys, plus a staff focus group, to gather data.

### Making the most of resources from the JISC e-Learning programme

Uwe and his team received key support information relating to potential VLE outputs and required resources from the JISC e-Learning programme, accessed through the local JISC Regional Support Centre (RSC Eastern). Uwe used resources from the e-Learning programme (and a previous JISC online survey: Student Expectations Study, JISC, 2007) to assist his own review of student expectations in relation to technology use at Anglia Ruskin University. Uwe was also able to triangulate the findings from his research with the findings from 'In Their Own Words' (JISC, 2007) to provide a comparative context.

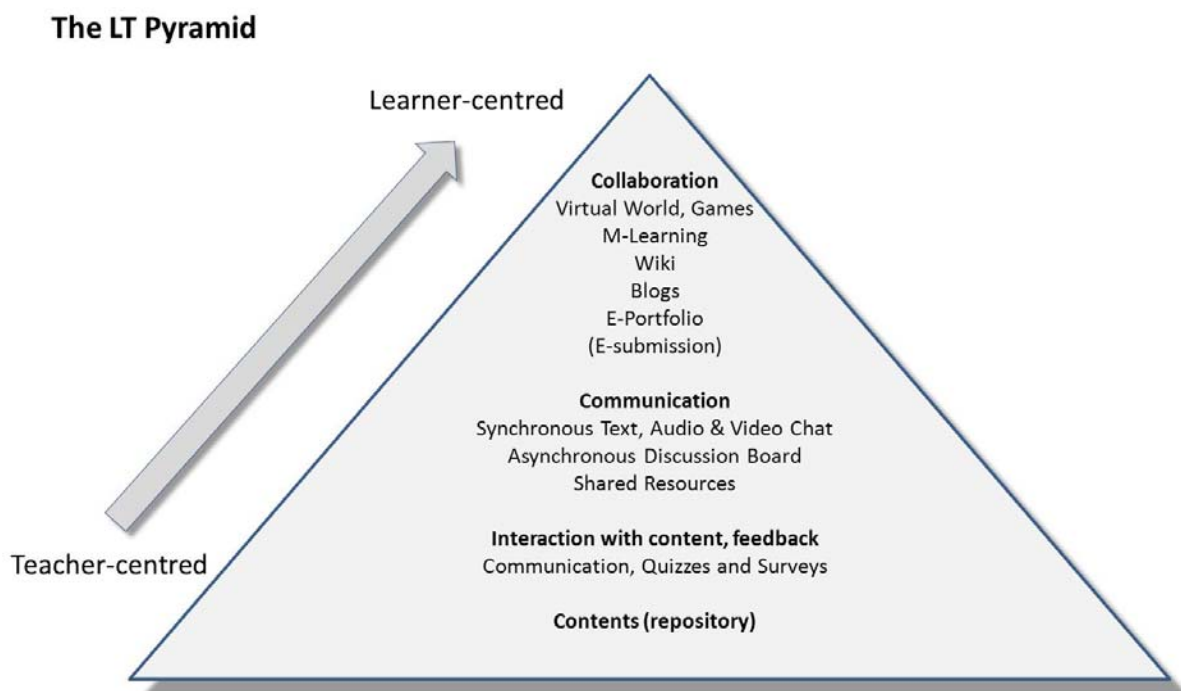
‘Besides the information available through the JISC-HE Academy Benchmarking (The JISC-HE Academy Benchmarking of e-Learning in UK Higher Education), the materials provided by the JISC e-Learning programme, gave us the best means to compare my institution’s performance with the sector and use the examples of good practice to advance the adoption of learning technologies in learning and teaching’. **Uwe Richter, Associate Director for Learning and Teaching Development**

## Transforming practice

Students at Anglia Ruskin perceived a variety of advantages and disadvantages associated with technology-enhanced learning:

- They enjoyed the flexibility and speed of access to a range of information and the ease of contact with fellow students
- They felt technology-enhanced learning could address different learning abilities
- However, they had encountered problems with accessibility; for example, when infrastructure systems failed, or when tutors/peers were slow to respond
- They stressed the need for support and training in technology-enhanced learning, in order to benefit fully from available resources

The University’s review also concluded that Anglia Ruskin used VLEs in a similar way to other institutions within the sector. Uwe composed a pyramid model (below) which reflects his findings: an understanding that the most frequent use of VLEs is as a “filing cabinet” into which teachers “drop” content. The review identified some cases of true learner-centred technology-enhanced learning, but these were rare.



**The Learning and Teaching Pyramid, from ‘Introduction to our new and evolving VLE’, Uwe Richter, Anglia Ruskin University**

The advice, guidance and supporting case studies available within JISC publications, such as ‘Effective Practice with e-Learning’ (JISC, 2004), ‘Innovative Practice with e-Learning’ (JISC, 2005)

and 'Effective Practice in a Digital Age' (JISC, 2009), supported the conclusions reached within the review.

'JISC's research and publications support our view on the value of getting staff and students involved. Our staff and students' views on e-learning and teaching and learning practices through e-learning have been an asset for the development of our new VLE.' **Dr Berenice Rivera Macias, Researcher, INSPIRE, Anglia Ruskin University**

The key challenge for Uwe and his colleagues was to develop a VLE which enabled a move from simple teacher-centred resource storage into true learner-centred collaborative space. After considering several "off-the-shelf" VLEs, the team felt that none would give students enough freedom to manage content, such as discussion forums, wikis and blogs, or would allow users to share files effectively. They recognised that many user-generated sites already existed as part of 'the cloud' (remotely located sites accessed via the internet) and felt that the best way forward would be to develop their own VLE, which could incorporate links to such resources.

Anglia Ruskin's bespoke 'VLE + cloud' has been in development since 2008 and is designed to evolve continuously. Synchronous and collaborative communications have already been enabled, together with a media server to manage large audio and video files. Information sessions with senior management staff responsible for curriculum development have taken place: during these, staff have been able to explore the resource and evaluate its possibilities. This has, in turn, influenced institutional strategy and also encouraged staff to work together, rather than relying solely on module leaders to take responsibility for the development of e-resources.

## **Key lessons for effective practice**

The sharing of examples of effective practice, including those provided by the JISC e-Learning programme, has been found to encourage take-up of the VLE.

"People ask, 'What is the difference between a blog, a wiki, a forum' so you need to show examples." **Associate Director for Learning and Teaching Development, Uwe Richter, Anglia Ruskin University**

Unreliable technology can create a barrier to the uptake of e-learning. Fortunately, the institution has committed to re-equipping with new technology, with the goal that lecturers can walk into a lecture room, switch on a computer and access the VLE, immediately.

"The VLE should be an integrated delivery mechanism." **Associate Director for Learning and Teaching Development, Uwe Richter, Anglia Ruskin University**

Uwe has also benefited from the support of a committed team of colleagues focused on the development of technology-enhanced learning.

## **Future developments: the evolving VLE**

The focus for the future is to develop strong assessment and e-portfolio elements for the VLE. Uwe intends to draw from the good practice contained in the relevant JISC guides, 'Effective Practice with e-Assessment' (JISC, 2007), Effective Assessment in a Digital Age, (JISC, 2010) and 'Effective Practice with e-Portfolios' (JISC, 2008).

Anglia Ruskin is committed to widening participation and there is the ambition that technology-enhanced learning can help a wide variety of stakeholder groups, including mature and part-time students. Work-based learning is another key area of development for the University and it is hoped that the VLE can help to bridge the gap between real-world practice and institutional training.

The VLE is being evaluated currently via e-surveys among staff and students to assess how it is being used and to provide feedback on usability. Focus groups are also planned to gather more detailed responses from VLE users.

“It is important to incorporate a structure of constant review regarding the operation of the VLE in order for it to truly evolve and reflect developments in e-learning.” **Associate Director for Learning and Teaching Development, Uwe Richter, Anglia Ruskin University**

## The value of the JISC e-Learning programme

The JISC e-Learning programme has proven to be a valuable resource for Uwe and has played a major and extremely beneficial role in the development of the University’s teaching and learning environment.

‘The information (from the JISC e-Learning programme) has a very good fit with our needs, and is used in a variety of different ways.’ **Associate Director for Learning and Teaching Development, Uwe Richter, Anglia Ruskin University**

## Links

Introduction to our new and evolving VLE, Uwe Richter, Anglia Ruskin University  
(<http://www.inspire.anglia.ac.uk/assets/Uploads/Publications/Policy--Strategy/Introductionnew-VLE290110.pdf>)

Student expectations study (JISC, 2007)  
<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/publications/studentexpectations.pdf>  
Summarised in the briefing paper, below (JISC, 2007)  
<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/briefingpapers/2007/studentexpectationsbp.aspx>

Effective Practice in e-Learning (JISC, 2004)  
[www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/publications/effectivepracticeelearning.pdf](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/publications/effectivepracticeelearning.pdf)

Innovative Practice with e-Learning (JISC, 2005)  
[http://www.jisc.ac.uk/eli\\_practice.html](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/eli_practice.html)

In Their Own Words (JISC, 2007)  
<http://www.jisc.hosting.eduserv.org.uk/en/whatwedo/programmes/elearningpedagogy/intheirownwords.aspx>

Effective Practice in a Digital Age (JISC, 2009)  
<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/practice>

Effective Practice with e-Assessment (JISC, 2007)  
<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearningpedagogy/assessment>

Effective Practice with e-Portfolios (JISC, 2008)

<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/elearning/eportfolios/effectivepracticeeportfolios>

Effective Assessment in a Digital Age (JISC, 2010)

[www.jisc.ac.uk/digiassess](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/digiassess)

JISC-HE Academy Benchmarking of e-Learning in UK Higher Education

<http://elearning.heacademy.ac.uk/weblogs/benchmarking/>