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VLE Procurement

There is no VLE that suits all colleges and universities. This paper hopes to suggest how organisations can choose the right system to suit their course and learner profile.

What is VLE Procurement?

Procurement is the process of choosing and purchasing a VLE. A single set of guidelines for making a procurement decision cannot be applied to all organisations. Colleges and universities must examine their requirements in the light of their own student profile, teaching style and technical infrastructure. Larger organisations may require wholly different functionality or style to smaller, more specialised organisations.

In essence, colleges and universities must:

- Involve a range of staff from all areas of the college in the procurement process
- Define the users of the VLE
- Define the courses and the style of learning support to be implemented using the VLE
- Ensure that the technological infrastructure exists to support the VLE
- Determine whether the VLE is to be hosted internally or externally

A simple checklist can be used to make comparisons of similar functions between different products. However, it is advised that the contents of any checklist are drawn up in the light of the bulleted points above. Your checklist must identify issues that are important to your organisation's strategic objectives and technical infrastructure.

Suggestions for a more detailed view of pedagogic issues can be found under Further Information at the end of the document.

What systems do we evaluate?

This document does not discuss particular vendor's products but we suggest that you look for a browser-based system, ie a VLE that works over the Internet or an Intranet.

Remember the basics

In amongst the pedagogic issues your choice of VLE should in part be based on the usual considerations for purchasing application software. As well as money issues, investigate the technical infrastructure required to support the VLE. Consider the vendor's support options and track record.

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<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/mle/>

Aspects to Consider

For a detailed list of VLE functionality consult some of the references supplied below. Some aspects of VLEs that your organisation may wish to consider include:

- Will your users, both tutors and learners, find the software simple to use?
- Will the VLE work in tandem with your Management Information System? Does your organisation require such an interface?
- Existing learning materials could save your organisation a great deal of preparation time prior to going live with a VLE. Do such materials exist for your vendor's product?
- Examine the VLE's student tracking facilities and consider how they would be used within your environment. Do they include the information that you need for funding purposes?
- As courses develop there will be a need for constant refinement. Some security needs to be present so that only appropriate tutors can change course content. Ensure that your vendor offers security measures that suit your organisation
- Investigate the flexibility of a VLE in terms of how to add or amend learning materials to suit a learning situation
- Compare the communications facilities on offer (such as message boards or email). Are such options important to your learners?
- Instructional Management System (IMS) Standards have been recommended by the LSC and MLE Steering Group and are detailed in the briefing paper in this pack entitled Why IMS Standards? Although no current VLEs meet all the published standards, ensure that your vendor is working towards IMS compliance

About the Author

Nav Chohan manages Learning and Technology at Leeds College of Technology. His role involves both the technical and academic use of IT and he took a leading role in the College's purchase of a VLE in early 2000. The College now offers VLE support for six substantive courses with some 700 learners enrolled. It is expected that all major full- and part-time courses will involve some form of VLE support for the next academic year. Previously, Nav worked as an Information Systems Project Manager for NHS in Scotland and before that as an IT Consultant.

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What if We Get the Wrong System?

Be aware that any future change of vendor will require significant resource to reconfigure learning materials and courses.

The emerging use of the IMS specifications should simplify cross-use of VLEs and reduce the effort required to change vendors or platforms.

Further Information

A Framework for Pedagogical Evaluation of Virtual Learning Environments: A substantive paper. Sandy Britain, Oleg Liber, University of Wales at Bangor, November 2000.

<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/jtap/htm/jtap-041.html>

Effective Learning and the Virtual Learning Environment. Mark Stiles, Staffordshire University, April 2000.

<http://www.staffs.ac.uk/cital/poznan.html>

Requirements for a Virtual Learning Environment. MLE Steering Group, November 2000.

<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/pub00/req-vle.html>

VLE/MLE Case Studies: various dates. See the FERL Web site, under 'Learning Technologies'.

<http://ferl.becta.org.uk/>