Introduction
The purpose of this survey was to investigate the experiences of students using the University’s centrally supported virtual learning environment (VLE) Yorkshare and Replay lecture recording service to support their learning. In this short report we will focus on the responses that students gave to the first set of survey questions, dealing with their use of the Yorkshare VLE. The summary of key findings on the Replay lecture recording system will follow in a separate report.

Survey design
The survey design was based on the 2012 instrument and designed to help the University to learn about the current usage levels of the VLE by students, as well as to identify key requirements for the future in the way that the VLE is supported. The aggregate feedback will be used by the University to help inform recommendations on the development of both of these services and the levels of e-learning support provision that are needed across taught programmes for both students and staff.

Response rate
A total of 628 students responded to the survey over the summer term (academic year 2013-14). The greatest number of responses was received from students registered with the Department of Physics (8%) and the Law School (7%). Students from the departments of Biology, Economics, Chemistry, Environment and Theatre, Film and Television also responded in large numbers. The majority of respondents were undergraduates – 58% were students in their first or second year – although an increased number of postgraduate taught students (20%) responded this year. 62% of students were under 22 years old. Most respondents (93%) declared themselves to be full-time students.

Key positive issues
- 73% of respondents agreed that their department clearly explains how the VLE will be used to support activities for their study programme.
- 77% of respondents agreed that the VLE is being used extensively on their study programme to support learning and teaching activities.
- Compared with results from the 2012 survey, an increased number of respondents (71%) felt that the use of Yorkshare had complemented their class-based learning.

Key areas for improvement
- Respondents again highlighted the inconsistent use of the VLE by teaching staff across study programmes, repeating the observations recorded in the 2012 survey.
- Criticisms were made of the organisation of module sites and the time it takes to navigate some module sites to find information and study resources.
- Some students are experiencing access and performance problems when connecting to the VLE. This appears to be affecting students with slower internet connections, as well as some students using mobile devices. However in the latter case, the responses may reflect a lack of awareness of the VLE’s dedicated mobile app, which is freely available to help optimise the mobile user’s experience when accessing and using the VLE.
Training

Only 43% of students had received any training to use Yorkshare. Of those that had, only 4% (n=15) felt that the level of training that they had received was insufficient to meet their needs. Suggested areas for training focused on the discussion board, Turnitin originality checking software as well as better guidance on library services hosted within the VLE. One respondent noted the value of an annual refresher session, which could focus on the location of study resources within the VLE and any new tools which students would be expected to use. However, the most common free-text response was:

“I found Yorkshare accessible without special training”.

Use of Yorkshare

Departmental use of the Yorkshare VLE platform

73% of respondents agreed that their department clearly explains how the VLE will be used to support learning activities on their study programme, but 19% (n=94) disagreed. A slightly higher margin of respondents (77%) agreed that the VLE is used extensively on their study programme to support learning and teaching activities. 43 respondents disagreed with this statement. Where gaps in VLE provision occur, students noted that they related most commonly to a lack of learning materials (reading lists, lecture slides etc.) which impact on self-study and the ability to prepare for seminars and assessments. A delay in uploading materials to a VLE module site was also mentioned by respondents:

“If lecture slides or indicative reading lists are not uploaded in good time, planning for termly assignments and exam revision becomes a lot more difficult - ideally, all materials should be available from the beginning of each term…”

Contribution to learning

Maintaining the trend of previous surveys, an increased number of respondents (71% as opposed to 69% in 2012, 68% in 2010, 63% in 2009 and 57% in 2008) felt that the use of the VLE had complemented their class-based learning. Indeed a slightly higher margin (76%) agreed that the use of the VLE had benefited their learning on their study programme.

“Most of my private study involves Yorkshare in some form or another.”

Helpfulness of the tools in supporting your learning

Access to course resources (lecture notes, videos and podcasts, reading lists) were most frequently mentioned in terms of helpfulness for learning, which is unsurprising given that this is the most common way in which the VLE is being used to support student learning.

“Access to seminar programmes, lecture resources, etc., mostly ahead of time and useful to plan reading, writing, etc.”

Students also highlighted the interactive value of the platform to communicate with peers and lecturers:

“Being able to use the blog to ask questions both before starting my course and during my first year.”

Access to lecture recordings, online quizzes, past papers and academic integrity support were also referenced as being helpful in supporting learning.
Useful modules in supporting learning

185 respondents identified modules that had been particularly helpful in supporting their learning. A selection of some of the comments recorded here includes:

"Practical Chemistry - Year 1. This is useful as it has videos of key lab techniques that can be watched to help you feel confident in what you are required to do in the labs."

"Using Maths in Economics - John Bone was extremely helpful with the discussion board, and had the UME organised very well. Intro to Political Theory - all documents and information needed for seminar preparation was easily accessible."

Academic skills tutorials such as ‘academic integrity’ and skills-based tutorials such as the Careers Service’s employability and CV guide tutorials were also picked out by student, but most commonly students pointed to an equal value for all the VLE module sites that they were using:

"Yorkshare is vital for all modules"

Disadvantages associated with the VLE

Respondents reported fewer overall disadvantages (n=176) than advantages (n=207) to their learning with the use of Yorkshare. The disadvantages again echo the comments raised in the 2012 survey, namely:

- Poor interface / difficult to navigate: e.g. "It can be quite clunky and disorganised. It doesn’t have a very clean & sleek look and a lot of the time is needlessly difficult to navigate."
- Inconsistent and limited use of VLE by teaching staff: e.g. "The usefulness differs between each module, whilst some are kept up to date with useful information, some are minimal in their information and therefore unhelpful."

Technical challenges in accessing and using the platform were also mentioned:

"Slow login process; not integrated with other software used by UoY"

"Heavy pages that have not loaded on slower connections"

Criticisms were also made of the user experience when attempting to access the VLE using a mobile (android) device, although this category of responses may reflect a lack of awareness of the VLE’s dedicated mobile app.

Other tools that are used to support learning

Students were also asked to identify other web-based tools which they had used to support their learning. The most common responses included Google Scholar, Web of Knowledge, Wolfram Alpha and Wikipedia. A variety of online libraries and repositories were mentioned, ranging from Evernote, JSTOR, BMA Library to the BBC and YouTube.

In terms of tools to manage their learning, Google docs and Drive were common responses, along with Dropbox and references to different types of online dictionaries. Surprisingly there was little mention in this year’s survey of Facebook as a collaboration tool.

Suggestions on how Yorkshare could support your learning

The most common suggestions focused on greater use of recorded lectures and more e-books and key texts from reading lists being made available to students. Other suggestions ranged from the inclusion of a search bar for content to a better level of integration with Google Apps and the timetabling system.

Repeating the message recorded in the 2012 and 2010 surveys, respondents highlighted the need for staff to make more use of the VLE to support their teaching, as well as to improve module site design and navigation for users.

"Tools’ to me seem irrelevant, we have the infrastructure in place, lecturers just need to utilise it more."

In a separate question, 76% of respondents agreed that they would like to see an online submission option made available for all assessed work that needs to be turned in to their department for marking.
What happens next?

The results from this survey will be presented in the annual VLE report to University Teaching Committee. Discussion will focus on a series of recommended actions for the University, addressing the training provision, site design and usability issues, as well as issues around consistency in VLE uptake and usage by teaching staff that have been raised by respondents in this survey.

Get involved

Help inform the future development of the Yorkshare platform! The E-Learning Development Team would like to hear from you if you would like to join a focus group to test out new releases of software. Please register your interest by contacting the E-Learning Development Team at the following email address: vle-support@york.ac.uk

And finally..

Many thanks to all of you who took the time to feed back your views on your experiences using Yorkshare. Your feedback, comments and recommendations are greatly appreciated. We will keep you informed on how we are responding to your feedback in developing the Yorkshare platform and improving e-learning support provision.

For more information, contact the VLE Service Group Leader (Richard Walker x1138; rw23)

E-Learning Development Team
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