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 services to support their learning.

Survey design

The survey design was based on the 2014 instrument and aimed to elicit information about students’ experiences using Yorkshare and Replay in support of their learning. 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 165 students responded to the survey over the summer term (academic year 2013-14), of whom 156 gave their consent for their responses to be used in this report. The greatest number of responses was received from students registered with the Department of Physics (19%), followed by Economics (9%) and then History and Psychology (both 8%). The majority of respondents were undergraduates – 63% were students in their first or second year.

Key positive issues

- 85% of respondents agreed that the use of Yorkshare had complemented their class-based learning. Respondents highlighted the value of having all study resources in one place and the support this gave to independent study and flexible learning approaches.
- 85% students who had received some form of training to use the VLE agreed that the training had been sufficient.
- 70% of respondents confirmed that lecture recordings had been made available to them by their department. A range of benefits were associated with access to recordings, including the opportunity to check for understanding of key concepts and improve the quality of their lecture notes. Respondents also valued the opportunity to review lectures when researching for essays or revising for an exam.

Key areas for improvement

- Respondents commented on the confusing layout of some VLE module sites, which can make it difficult to locate information and to navigate around the system.
- Not all teaching staff use the VLE effectively and there can be a level of inconsistency between staff in the presentation of module sites and the availability of study resources for students to use.
- Some respondents commented on the need for Yorkshare’s mobile app to be improved.
Use of Yorkshare

Training

46% of students had received training to use Yorkshare. Of those that had, only 9% (n=4) felt that the level of training that they had received was insufficient to meet their needs. A number of respondents commented that the VLE was easy to use and that formal training was not necessary.

“No training required. VLE is very self-explanatory.”

Some first year students had struggled to start using the VLE and appeared to be unaware of the Help tab and the ‘Getting Started’ video guides that explain how to use the core tools within a module site.

Contribution to learning

Respondents valued the easy access to a wide range of learning resources, which are located in one place to help them prepare for lectures and seminars.

“easy access to lecture notes and additional materials; videos for practical (very helpful); pre-lab tests”

(Chemistry student)

“For most modules there was access to notes, extra resources and learning materials which were useful to either supplement lectures or to help if you have missed one due to illness.”

(Physics student)

Comments also focused on the value of student forums and student / teacher feedback channels, as well as facilities such as online submission for assessed coursework.

Helpfulness of the tools in supporting your learning

Students highlighted the value of the VLE in supporting flexible learning practices.

“The VLE offers much greater flexibility than conventional learning environments in terms of the time spent on particular aspects, when and how I engage…”

(History student)

“Allows me to effectively catch up if contact hours are missed due to illness or other unforeseeable circumstances”

(Language & Linguistic Science student)

Maintaining the trend of previous surveys, an increased percentage of respondents (85% as compared to 71% in 2014, 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.

Disadvantages associated with the VLE

Criticisms of the VLE focused on site layout and the inconsistency in which the VLE is being used across some taught programmes by teaching staff, as well as challenges using the VLE’s dedicated mobile app.

Confusing layout of some VLE module sites

“Some of the sites are organised in ways which means it is difficult to quickly find out which information relates to which teaching week.”

(English student)

Not all teaching staff use the VLE effectively

“Not always used to the best extent by lecturers – some don’t put their notes / lectures online so can’t rely on VLE to supplement learning”

(Chemistry student)
Yorkshare’s mobile app needs to be improved
“…the app sometimes doesn’t work”
(Economics student)

Use of the Replay lecture recording service

Benefits to learning associated with the use of Replay
70% of respondents had been able to view recordings of lectures, which had been made available to them by their departments. A range of benefits were associated with access to recordings.

Checking understanding of key concepts / improving the quality of lecture notes
“Listen to lectures again to check and improve my notes (being able to adjust the speed means I can fit the lecture to my note-taking pace)”
(English student)

Catching up on missed lectures
“Catching up on missed lectures and replaying lectures where I didn’t fully understand the content the first time.”
(Chemistry student)

Researching for essays or revising for an exam.
“I have found this an extremely helpful resource as things you miss in the face-to-face lecture can be better understood and used to further research the subject which enhances understanding of the subject being taught.”
(Environment student)

Impact of availability of recordings on lecture attendance
64% of respondents confirmed that the availability of recordings had no impact on their attendance at lectures. 30% noted that it had ‘to some extent’ and 4% (n=3) confirmed that it had ‘to a great extent’.

Interest in extending lecture recording service
Students from departments which had not made lecture recordings available to them were unanimous in their wish for their departments to make use of the service.

“Yes please. For all lectures”
(Education student)

“Yes, I think it’s baffling that the department resists adopting it when other departments do.”
(Electronics student)

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, Google Drive and Google Docs. Drive is used to produce and save work and Scholar is being used to find academic reading material. The Library’s website was also mentioned as a useful channel to access reading material (journals etc.). YouTube, Wikipedia and Investopedia also offer good introductory material to topics. A few educational/learning enhancement websites were also referenced including Wolfram Alpha, Kahn Academy, Duolingo and Quizlet. Even Facebook and WhatsApp were mentioned as a means of communicating with peers.

Suggestions of additional services / tools to support learning

The most common suggestion focused on greater use of electronic submission for assessments.

“I have already been using electronic submission for this year – it’s easy, simple, quick so I would definitely want it for all assessments.”
(English student)

“E-submission for all assessments would be fantastic.”
(Electronics student)

Another common request was for greater use of on-line quizzes and tests to support self-study and in-class engagement.

“I would definitely like to see more online quizzes as these really help me to see whether my knowledge of a subject is up to scratch.”
(Biology student)
"More in-class polling, especially mid-lecture so the lecturer knows whether we’re all understanding or not. ”

(Physics student)

Repeating the message of the 2014 survey, respondents highlighted the need for more lectures to be recorded – although the proportion of comments advocating this improvement was much reduced, as a greater number of recordings are being made available now to students. Finally, one student requested an upgrade of the Replay system to a superior and more usable alternative system – a change which we have in fact made for this new academic year.

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 improving our 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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