UNIVERSITY OF YORK

University Teaching Committee

Vision Statement for e-Learning

Background
The adoption of e-learning or technology-enhanced learning (TEL) across the University has grown steadily since the establishment of the E-Learning Development Team and a centrally-supported VLE in 2004.

The original objectives focused on helping staff to develop and embed online learning into their programmes and modules, and specifically on the development of the VLE as a core element of the supporting infrastructure. The aims for the VLE referred to providing support for a more diverse student body by developing more flexible modes of study, encouraging sustainable growth and coping with increased student numbers, delivering efficiencies in the management of learning and teaching and creating capacity for CPD activities.

The VLE Strategic Review (2008-9), and subsequently the Learning and Teaching Strategy (2010-2015), confirmed that the primary vision is to offer a student-centred approach in which TEL supports the provision of high quality, student centred and accessible learning. The majority of this learning will be campus-based, although the university also envisages modest and careful growth in distance learning.

Towards student-centred learning
The Learning and Teaching Strategy emphasises the importance of ‘supporting effective and independent learning and personal development’ (theme 3(b)). In the context of TEL, this entails the provision of excellent resources that the learner can explore, study and interact with, along with engaging facilities and tools that help to develop the student’s capacity to learn and enrich the learning experience.

Learner-centric design has been the focus of the University’s developing professional networks in learning and teaching and in the provision of central advisory support for departments. The approach highlights the development of material and activities which facilitate a student-centred approach to learning and teaching and greater flexibility in the accessibility of learning resources, such as through mobile devices. It also recognises that digital literacy is an increasingly important skill, not only for academic study, but also for graduate employability. Central to this approach is the emphasis on the use of technology to empower the learner, giving students more control of and responsibility for their learning and development.

At a national level, UCISA (2012) and the latest QAA Quality Code (chapter B4) expect institutions to “consider the challenges involved in communicating with students through increasingly electronic forms. …The development of digital literacy enables them to develop and thrive in the virtual environments made available by the higher education provider or that they seek to create for themselves”.

24 June 2013
The concept of TEL now embraces a much broader range of applications and services, including plagiarism detection, e-submission, e-assessment tools and e-portfolio, wiki and blog tools, and lecture recording. Institutions are looking to join up mobile and online services, responding to expectations from students for their devices to work seamlessly with university networks (UCISA, 2012). A key feature of institutional visions for TEL services now focuses on the interconnectedness of learning spaces, devices and technologies and modes of learning – recognising the changing nature of boundaries both within and beyond the institution.

The approach at York

The approach at York has been to facilitate developments by creating an environment which encourages and supports adoption and innovation. This involves both technical infrastructure (including a centrally-supported VLE) and the availability of dedicated expertise to promote good practice and help staff to develop an online teaching and learning presence.

There has been significant progress towards the adoption of our centrally-supported e-learning environment (the VLE) by teaching departments and this is reflected in current system usage statistics. 2481 module sites were created for teaching over the autumn and spring terms of this academic year (2012-13), accounting for over three-quarters of the total number of taught modules at the University and that number will rise over the summer term, with all departments now having a VLE presence on Yorkshare. The volume of students using the system also continues to rise, with an average of 9560 log-ins per day over the autumn term and 9200 over the spring term, with a peak of 14,833 logins recorded on 15th October 2012.

However, our ambitions for e-learning are not restricted to simple system usage for the VLE, nor adoption limited to just one platform. The intention from the rollout of the VLE in 2005 has been to offer e-learning support of programmes and modules in a rich variety of ways, from natural and elegant ‘information repository’ provision (e.g. giving access to course outlines, lecture notes, assignment briefs, videos, simulations), through to powerful learning support tools that are part of the VLE or embedded or linked through to the user interface from outwith the VLE.

Our approach has four characteristics of particular relevance to strategic development:

a) it is pedagogically-led, drawing on technology to enhance learning and teaching in the context of other developments and good practice, including processes for quality assurance and enhancement. This is also reflected in the organisation of central support for staff;

b) it aims to achieve genuine, cultural engagement and ‘ownership’ by staff and departments through facilitation, rather than trying to embed TEL through mandatory institutional policies. One of the main risks of a prescriptive model is that engagement may only be superficial to meet the requirements of the policy, and is less likely to stimulate the development of resources which genuinely enhance learning and teaching;

c) it aims to support the introduction of new learning tools and services in a managed and efficient way, with institution-wide solutions (including customising commercially-available software to the York context where appropriate) which are properly evaluated
before they are made available to staff and students. This minimises the need for localised or duplicated effort in departments and minimises the quality risk to students and staff of exposure to poorly trialled or supported systems;

d) it aims to achieve an effective and efficient balance between central and departmentally-based support provision for TEL services and the investment in staff resources.

Our approach does, however, mean that TEL will develop at differing rates across and within departments. This does not always sit comfortably with the aim of the Learning and Teaching Strategy, to achieve greater consistency in the quality of learning opportunities across the University. The third characteristic requires a challenging balance with the need to encourage innovation and experimentation, and with an increasingly personalised means of mobile access to learning tools and resources.

The next steps

TEL is now embedded to a significant extent at York. There are numerous examples of innovation and excellent practice across the institution and active networks for colleagues to share experiences and pool expertise.

However the pattern remains inconsistent across departments, notwithstanding the recognised needs and pedagogical differences between subject disciplines. There are opportunities for the University to exploit the potential of TEL more fully, to enable students to learn and staff to teach in more flexible, effective and efficient ways, and to enable a greater range of assessment and feedback methods to be used to support students’ skills development and the demonstration of achievement. We also note the increasing use by students of personal devices across the sector to support their learning, focusing on creative uses of technology to promote information and knowledge sharing, as well as networking activities (UCISA, 2012), which can also be exploited in our teaching approaches.

Our aim therefore is to inspire, encourage and incentivise staff to ‘design in’ to their teaching ‘participant-controlled’ learning activities which offer active learning opportunities to students. As Arenas (2008) has observed, through the use of learning technologies we may support students outside the classroom, helping them to develop their skills in planning, organising, self-monitoring, self-teaching and self-evaluating their learning. For this to happen there will be two key developments in the next few years.

First, we will move to achieve a more consistent minimum level of exposure to online learning in all our provision for all students. This will mean adopting a minimum set of requirements for e-learning support of all programmes and modules. This should be done in a facilitative way, continuing our existing approach, so that departments and individual academics are provided with guidance, tools and support for identifying, preparing and structuring engaging content and learning resources. The core VLE must be easy and pleasant to use as an author or editor, just as for a student user. Guides describing minimum expectations of content, the ways to structure material, linking expectations and so on, must be well-written, concise and full of clear exemplars. The repository facilities of the VLE should be structured so that authors see clearly how their work fits with others’, that they are collaborating in creating an integrated, consistent set of learning resources and are exposed to best practice and innovative uses that go beyond the minimum benchmark.
Second, we will continue to encourage innovation, experimentation, and support for academic staff to become proficient in the use of technologies to facilitate learning and will explore new approaches to foster the development of digital literacies for teaching and learning. As Laurillard (1998) has argued, educational technologies in the hands of expert university educators greatly expand the opportunities for students to rehearse and articulate their knowledge and support the development of lifelong learning skills. Our VLE platform will support our teaching staff in providing rich ways for students to interrogate material, interact and collaborate in learning.

The aspiration is to achieve this next step change in a way which maintains the York culture of seeking the genuine engagement and enthusiasm of staff and students. The focus on engaging staff and students in the development of their digital literacies will also inform our thinking and action planning for the next Learning and Teaching Strategy from 2015.

Enabling actions: future priorities

Support for staff

This encompasses both direct support and how the University’s policies help and encourage staff. The priorities are:

- to consider how departments can develop their own communities of teaching and learning to embed TEL more fully across the curriculum;
- to increase the advisory support for staff across the University within available budgets, to stimulate further adoption of more advanced TEL and to ensure that this provides the best use of resources at central and departmental levels;
- to consider the opportunities to extend the formal CPD opportunities for staff, to embed TEL developments as part of the standard expectations for professional development;
- to consider whether more can be done to incentivise staff engagement with TEL, in addition to the existing mechanisms such as the Learning and Teaching Strategic Projects Fund and the Vice-Chancellor’s Teaching Awards – for example at the recruitment stage, as set out in the Learning and Teaching Strategy;
- to continue to support networks and events to help staff to share good practice and to inspire innovation.

Technical infrastructure

Consultations with staff and students linked to the forthcoming tender exercise for the institutional VLE have confirmed the importance of maintaining the momentum of building engagement with TEL. As we progress from the ‘early adopters’ / enthusiasts in departments to the more embedded use of TEL across the University community, we need as far as possible to avoid introducing changes which cause a temporary reversal of this progress.

Nevertheless we need to focus on key areas for development, in line with the Learning and Teaching Strategy (in particular theme 4). The VLE tender in 2013 provides one opportunity to do this. The priorities are to achieve improvements in:
the user interface, to enhance the quality of its presentation to users, addressing recurrent concerns about ‘clunkiness’ which can act as a deterrent to further staff engagement in the development of online resources and to further student engagement with the online learning environment;

mobile accessibility, to enable increasingly personalised and mobile learning, supporting anytime and anywhere access to teaching and learning resources. 9% of our existing users are already connecting to the VLE using their own smart phones and tablet computers and we anticipate that the percentage of personal devices in use will rise in line with sector projections (EDUCAUSE, 2012; Horizon, 2013), thereby necessitating greater responsiveness of our systems to support their connectivity.

the integration with other University systems, such as online collaborative tools, the Digital Library, timetabling services and room bookings. This will deliver a more seamless user experience, providing an environment in which TEL can become a natural part of the teaching and learning experience. Central to the success of this approach is delivering improvements to the user experience in navigating between university systems, enabling staff to work within the browser as much as possible.

**Physical infrastructure**

As part of this review process there is also an opportunity to consider the impact of our use of learning technologies on the physical environment on campus – how we incorporate thinking on support for learning technologies in our planning of technology-enabled teaching and learning spaces. We may anticipate a future of more interactive face-to-face engagements between teaching staff and students, supported by discursive and inquiry-based learning paradigms. Network connectivity on campus will be key to enabling students to use their own mobile devices to participate in class, using these devices as learning tools in formal educational activities (e.g. interactive lectures), as well as to access learning and teaching resources across campus.

We also need to think about the design of learning spaces and PC classrooms and the design of facilities in staff meeting rooms to support experimentation, sharing of learning etc. to take account of flexible and collaborative learning modes with technology, as well as opportunities for different forms of assessment, such as e.g. high stakes testing.

24 June 2013

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