



SOLSTICE: EHU Students' eLearning Survey 2008/09

Introduction

There is a growing body of research into the HE/FE learner's experience of technology-enhanced learning. The picture that is emerging is of a complex and diverse group where contextual factors have a significant impact on use of technology (Currant *et al*, 2008, Sharpe *et al*, 2009, Jones and Cross, 2009).

For SOLSTICE, the purpose of surveying Edge Hill students' experience of eLearning was to obtain a better understanding of *their* perceptions, experience and expectations of technology as a tool to enhance learning and teaching. Much of what we know about our own student body is anecdotal, relayed second hand via tutors, largely focused on the identification of problems arising from the deployment of technology – most notably the University VLE.

Methodology

Data collection was by self-completed, online questionnaire. The survey was open from 12th December 2008 to 23rd January 2009. In addition, a paper copy of the questionnaire was completed by 66 Business School students. The reliability and generalisability of the results are compromised by the sample sizes, in particular for the Faculty of Health with only 36 respondents out of the total of 327 respondents.

Results

Contextual Information

Online responses were received from 261 students. The number of responses was increased to 327 by completion of paper copies of the questionnaire by 66 Business School students. The gender distribution (when supplied) was male 103 (33%) and female 208 (67%). The age distribution showed that almost half (49%) were in the 16-20 age group and 21% aged 21 – 25years.

More than half (177) of the respondents were first year undergraduates, as shown in Figure 1. This was due to 65 /66 paper-based responses coming from first year undergraduates in the Business School. This has also biased the distribution between Faculties by the year of study (Table 1) which indicates that more than one-third (122) of the respondents were first year undergraduates in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. By Faculty, over half (52%) the responses were from Arts and Sciences (169), one-third (34%)from Education (111), leaving 11% from Health (36) as 11 students either did not know or did not disclose their Faculty.

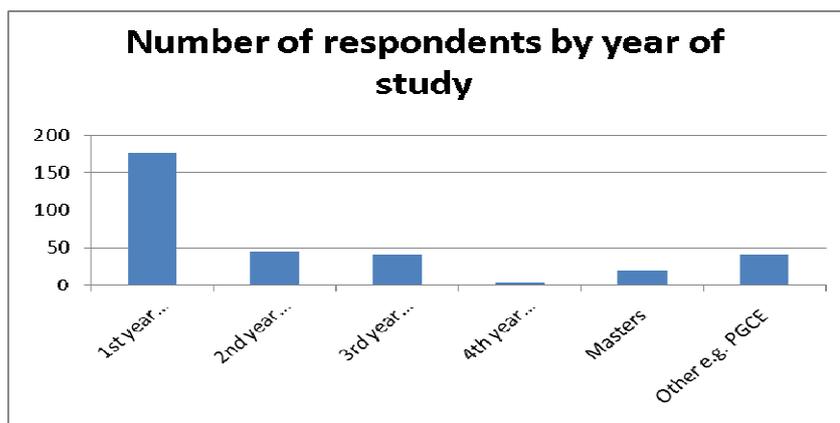


Figure 1. Distribution of respondents by year of study.

Faculty	1st year undergrad.	2nd year undergrad.	3rd year undergrad.	4th year undergrad.	Masters	Other e.g. PGCE
Arts and Sciences	122	22	16	0	6	3
Education	33	17	18	4	11	28
Health	15	4	6	0	2	9
Don't know	7	2	1	0	0	1
Total	177	45	41	4	19	41

Table 1. Distribution of respondents by year of study within Faculty.

Students were asked to estimate their usage of a computer for their studies in hours per week. First year undergraduates indicated lower usage than those further into their studies with 45% using the computer for 4 hours or less per week, whereas for all other groups, half or more are using the computer for more than 10 hours per week for study purposes alone (18% of first year undergraduates).

Student experience of the VLE

The VLE, Blackboard, is a core technology for the support of teaching and learning within the institution. The University had taken the decision for a phased roll out Blackboard across all years of study commencing with a presence in all level 4 modules at the start of the 2008/09 academic year.

Students were asked a series of questions around their use of Blackboard. Firstly, they were asked to assess how many days per week they logged onto Blackboard, from 'every day' to 'rarely or never' (Table 2). This showed that 85% of respondents used the VLE at least twice a week.

Frequency	%	No. of responses
Every day	43	142
2-3 times a week	42	136
Once a week	7	22
Once or twice a term	2	8
Rarely or never	1	4
Never heard of Blackboard	0.3	1
Other	4	14

Table 2. Frequency of logging into BlackBoard.

In the summer of 2008 prior to the roll out of Blackboard to level 4 students, Blackboard replaced WebCT as the University VLE. It is recognized that technical problems did occur during that first semester. To elicit the students' perceptions about the VLE and its effect on their learning, they were presented with a series of statements which they rated from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. 75% either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'I sometimes have technical difficulties accessing Blackboard'. Despite this, 73% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'Blackboard enables me to learn at a place and time of my choosing' and 72% were in agreement that the Announcements tool enabled them to track changes to module delivery. What emerges from the data is effectively a tale of two very different (perceptions of) VLE's.

There are many web-based tools in use in the university and students were asked which they used. The results reflect that: access to resources such as lecture notes and presentations, timetables, module information, reading lists, the online collections, eBooks and eJournals were used most. Communication / enquiry tools were also much used: both university email and Blackboard email, library catalogue facilities. In contrast other tools were used by fewer students: Turnitin (plagiarism software), online quizzes, reflective 'log', digitized book chapters, online audio and video clips. This may reflect either that the students use the same tools as their tutors, or that first year undergraduates had not been exposed to the full range of tools available.

Students were asked to identify their preferences in using technology to support their learning by responding 'more of', 'same', 'less'. The features that they wanted more of were access to lecture notes and presentations, past exam papers, online submission of assignments, use of Turnitin, online quizzes and self-tests, access to timetables, course or module information, online databases and journals, eBooks, eJournals. There was no feature that they strongly wanted less of.

Six strong messages emerge from the data that have direct relevance to the deployment of the VLE:

1. There is clear evidence of the VLE providing essential and consistent support for student learning for students both on and off campus.

Positive comments were made by 123 students that online access to module information and materials had improved their learning experience.

2. Students have experienced some technical problems that have impacted on their experience of using the VLE.

Comments include 'slow speed and it going down frequently during the daytime', 'sometimes when trying to open a course module booklet, the site kicks me off back to the beginning of blackboard'.

3. Where there is inconsistent deployment of the VLE by teaching staff, this has a negative impact on the student experience.

Examples of comments include 'some tutors are not using Blackboard enough', 'some tutors do not keep Blackboard up to date/ information is sometimes missing'.

4. About half of the students surveyed would have benefitted from a structured introduction to the VLE and its intended use.

'I've not had ANY training', 'I understand it now but I think it could have been explained more; it was too slow so the tutor didn't show us'.

5. Students overwhelmingly appreciate the addition of VLE tools and resources such as announcements/timetables/lecture notes/exam papers and would like to see their wider use.

Example comments 'lectures being to hand, if and when I need them', 'access the lecturer's presentation is helpful, as I sometimes struggle to take notes', 'access to lectures before attending so you can do background reading / research therefore you can make the most of the seminar', 'being able to access presentations from lectures so I can read through them again'. The discussion tool (28 comments), contributions to discussions by tutors and announcements (35) were rated highly.

6. Students would like to see more use of the VLE for submission of assessments, return of assessed work and feedback. This includes more use of Turnitin, online exams and online self-tests and quizzes.

Students' preferences in use of web-based tools for teaching and learning

The previous section covered the web-based tools that are regularly used in the VLE. The survey also explored their choices of other tools that are widely available but not yet part of mainstream teaching and learning at Edge Hill. Students were asked to select from a list additional tools they would prefer to use. By far the most popular was *Facebook or similar social networking sites (152 responses)*, followed almost equally by *Instant messaging (128)* and *iPods / mobile phones to access lecture notes / course content (126)*. *Interactive Flash-based activities (105)* and *SMS texting (99)* were also selected by more than 30% of respondents. One pertinent comment by a 16-20year old regarding SMS texting was that students should be sent a text message if lectures were cancelled because *'not everyone checks their email'*. This supports the claims that SMS is very popular with younger people.

Students ownership of technology (hardware)

Arguments for not delivering innovative or large scale blended, wholly online or mobile learning frequently focus on the likelihood that some students may be disadvantaged if they

do not have access to equipment. We therefore included a survey question about computer ownership. Only one student had no PC at all, some had one device, many had more than one. 262 of the 327 respondents (80%) had a desktop with internet access, 177 (54%) had a laptop with internet access, (23%) an internet enabled mobile phone.

Students' use of learning spaces (outside the classroom)

The campus has wireless social learning spaces in a number of areas around the campus. When asked if these encouraged collaborative and new ways of learning 58% said 'Yes', 42% said 'No'. *Comments ranged from 'It allows students to connect and stay in contact, essential when doing groupwork', 'Allows everyone access to the same resources', through 'I can't receive a high enough signal on site for my laptop', 'I wasn't aware until I brought my laptop into G20 that we had wireless facilities' to 'I don't use them, I didn't know they existed'. There was also a lack of awareness of laptops available for loan in the University Library 'I don't have a laptop'.*

Conclusion

For the student participants in this survey, technology clearly plays an important part in their university life. It helps it to run efficiently when made available in a pedagogically informed and organized way but can be a source of frustration when there are unresolved technical issues (either as a result of problems with the VLE or computer network or due to conflicts with students own hardware or software), or when implemented inconsistently or with poor design.

Although the number of responses appears few in comparison with student numbers, similar surveys report low uptake (Haywood *et al.* 2004, Weyers *et al.* 2004, Badoo & Kanu, 2008). Nevertheless, a picture is emerging of what can best be described as 'A Tale of Two VLEs' when Blackboard seemingly evokes a range of perceptions from excellent to poor.

Six strong messages relating to the VLE emerge from the data:

1. There is clear evidence of the VLE providing essential and consistent support for student learning for students both on and off campus.
2. Students have experienced some technical problems that have impacted on their experience of using the VLE.
3. Where there is inconsistent deployment of the VLE by teaching staff, this has a negative impact on the student experience.
4. About half of the students surveyed would have benefitted from a structured introduction to the VLE and its intended use.
5. Students overwhelmingly appreciate the addition of VLE tools and resources such as announcements/timetables/lecture notes/exam papers and would like to see their wider use.
6. Students would like to see more use of the VLE for submission of assessments, return of assessed work and feedback. This includes more use of Turnitin, online exams and online self-tests and quizzes.

Mobile learning, SMS and web 2.0 tools also have the potential to enhance the student experience (subject to consideration of QAA Code of Practice and IPR/Data protection/other legal issues).

The survey has provided a valuable insight into the student experience of TEL. However, for the authors of this report, it has raised as many questions as it has answered. Our next step is to conduct a series of focus groups where we can 'drill down' further into the student experience. A repeat survey is planned for the 09/10 academic year and will enable us to benchmark our progress.

Mary Dean
SOLSTICE Research Officer

Lindsey Martin
eLearning Strategy and Development Manager

8th September 2009

Bibliography

Badoo, R, and Kanu, O. (2008) *Lancaster University E-Learning Survey*. Lancaster University.

Currant, N, Currant, B, Whitfield, R, and Hartley, P. (2008) *Defining 'Generation Y': towards a new typology of digital learners*. Unpublished paper. University of Bradford.

Haywood, J. *et al.* (2004) *Student Views of E-Learning: A survey of University of Edinburgh WebCT users 2004*. University of Edinburgh.

Jones, C, and Cross, S. (2009) Is there a Net Gen coming to University? In: Damis, H. and Creanor, L. (Eds). *In Dreams Begins Responsibility' – choice, evidence, and change*. The 16th Association for Learning Technology Conference (ALT-C 2009). Held 8-10 September. University of Manchester, England, UK.

Sharpe, R. *et al.* (2009) *Learner Experiences of E-learning Synthesis Report: Explaining Learner Differences*. Report for JISC May 2009.
<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/programmes/elearningpedagogy/lxp2finalsynthesis.pdf>

Weyers, J, Adamson, M, & Murie, D. (2004) *Student E-Learning survey report – May 2004*. University of Dundee.