The EHU Students' eLearning Survey 2009/10

Executive summary

The second EHU Students' online eLearning survey was completed by 775 students, compared to 327 in 2008/2009. Responses covered a representative mix: good representation from all three Faculties, all years of undergraduate study, Masters / PG and PD, and all age groups. The student participants indicated a high usage of computing in their studies, undergraduates averaging 3.0 – 3.2 hours per day.

The university VLE, Blackboard, is used at least once a week by 95% of respondents, with 31% claiming to use it every day. Students appreciate the eLearning tools that are available and the ones used most frequently were Blackboard itself, accessing module information, tutor's lecture notes, library catalogue and online databases / journals.

Free text responses from students were thoughtful and informative and more (285) commented on features improving their learning experience than on negative impacts (245). Students particularly valued the 'anywhere, anytime' availability of material through the VLE. Issues which negatively affected the students were frequently accessibility or navigation issues and these are being addressed as part of ongoing testing.

There were several themes emerging from the survey

1. The responses reflect the diversity of the student body at Edge Hill and the diversity of experiences.

2. The VLE and other electronic sources are considered important learning resources by students and are rated as important to their studies. The flexibility of studying 'anywhere, anytime' is valued.

3. There were more positive than negative comments concerning the VLE. Where available, students valued access to tutors' lecture notes. However, a number of students reported difficulties in downloading resources from the VLE and this is being addressed.

4. The use of Facebook and other social networking sites to organize groupwork and for peer support is popular with students.

5. Rapid communication such as SMS texting would be valued by students as an additional method to inform them of urgent or last minute changes.

Introduction

The second EHU Students' eLearning survey was run one year after the first. As in 2008/09 the purpose was to obtain a better understanding of students' perceptions, experience and expectations of technology as a tool to enhance learning and teaching. A second survey enabled comparison to last year's survey to determine where the changes that have been implemented have made an impact and how the students' experience has changed. The timing of the survey corresponded with the university VLE review so questions for this review were incorporated to prevent asking students to complete two surveys and the likelihood of survey fatigue affecting the number of respondents.

The previous survey was completed by 327 students and a higher response rate was sought to achieve a more representative range of experiences. To encourage participation the survey was advertised with a direct link to the survey as a 'pop up' announcement on Blackboard (university VLE) which a student would see when they logged into Blackboard, an item under the Learning tab on the GO portal and through blog postings. The Blackboard announcement was re-presented at intervals to maximize responses. As further encouragement students could voluntarily be entered for a prize draw of two £50 Amazon vouchers.

Methodology

The survey was run as an online, self-completed questionnaire and was open from 3rd December 2009 to 29th January 2010. The response rate was highest in the first few days of the survey opening with 200 questionnaires completed within the first day and 500 within the first eight days.

The survey included many of the same questions as in the 2008 survey to allow direct comparison. A few questions were reworded to clarify because of obvious misunderstandings in 2008 responses. Within some the ranges for categories were changed to break down the largest group and combine very small groups as appropriate. For example year of study in 2008 resulted in a large group (16 – 20 years) and a very small group (50+ years) and these were changed to 16-18 years, 19-20 years to split the first group and a combined category for 41+ years to include the latter. New questions were included based on students' responses in 2008 and to incorporate questions to feed into the VLE review. The response to the VLE review questions have been passed to the VLE review team.

Most questions were compulsory and these usually contained either a 'don't know' option, a mid range / neutral option or an 'other' category to which the student could key their own response which was analysed for inclusion in an appropriate category. As a consequence results for individual questions usually consist of less than the full 775 responses. Some optional questions explored the students' experience and ideas and required a free form text response.

Results of survey

Contextual Information

Questionnaires were completed by 775 students, a pleasing increase compared to the 327 responses in 2008/2009. A number of students chose to respond to optional questions and give valuable in-depth feedback on their experiences and thoughts.

From the information supplied, by Faculty, 359 (46%) were from Education, 226 (29%) from Arts and Sciences and 174 (23%) from Health. The highest number of responses (278) came from first year undergraduates, 164 from second year, 112 from third year plus, 159 from Masters / Postgraduates and 33 Professional Development. Comparisons of breakdown by year of study across Faculties show that a high number of Masters / Postgraduate students (119) accounted for almost a third of the Faculty of Education responses (Figure 1). To break down the responses within Faculties students were optionally asked to give their discipline. Disciplines with more than 15 responses were Business, Early Years studies, English, Nursing and Primary Education.

Part time students accounted for 24% of responses, full time 76%. The gender distribution was female 567 (73%) and male 208 (27%). Age distribution showed that all age groups were well represented (Figure 2) : 53 (7%) were in the 16-18 age group, similar numbers in the 19-20 and 21-25 age groups (168 and 172 respectively, 22% each), 108 (14%) aged 26-30, 151 (20%)aged 31-40 and 123 (16%) aged 41 or over. More than half of students aged 31-40 and 41or over were from Faculty of Education (Figure 2) and more than one-third of students in these age groups were studying at Masters / Postgraduate level. Evidence of the diversity of students at Edge Hill University is shown by the number of mature students (aged 21 and over) in their first year as an undergraduate, 148, compared to 130 from the traditional under 21 entry (Table 1).

Responses came mainly from students based at the Ormskirk campus, with a few students from Armstrong House, Holy Cross (Bury), Woodlands (Chorley), Shrewsbury and some who studied online.
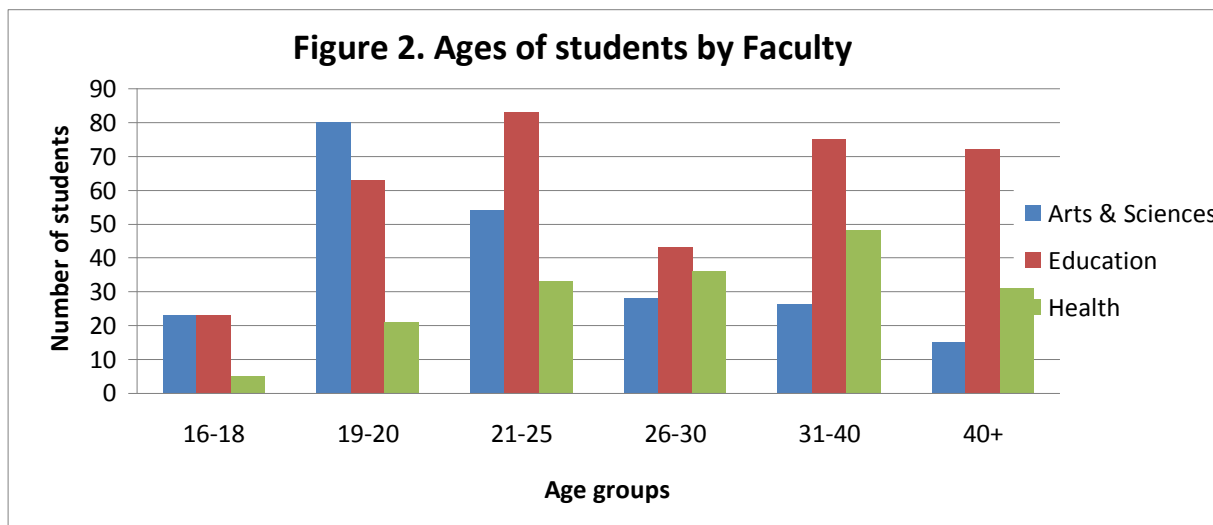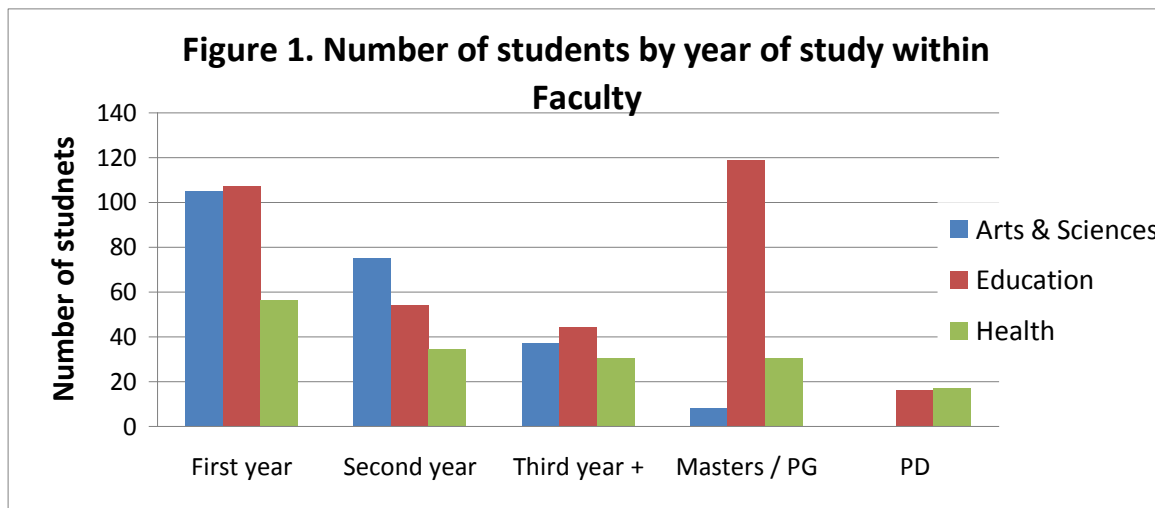

Figure 1. Number of students by year of study within Faculty

Figure 2. Ages of students by Faculty

Table 1. Age group by level of study

Current level of study	16-18	19-20	21-25	26-30	31-40	41+	**Totals**
First year undergraduate	52	78	44	28	45	31	278
Second year undergraduate	1	62	39	17	25	20	164
Third year or more as undergraduate	0	25	43	17	13	14	112
Masters / postgraduate / research student	0	0	33	33	51	42	159
Professional Development	0	0	5	9	11	8	33
Other	0	3	8	4	6	8	29
Totals	53	168	172	108	151	123	775

Computer usage for study

Average daily computer usage for study purposes was 3 hours with individual responses ranging from less than one hour (seven students) to more than 10 (four students). If the higher usages are accurate it shows a concerning amount of time spent using a computer. However, as one student responded with 18 hours it is likely that some students gave weekly study usage rather than daily. Students on Professional Development modules reported lowest daily usage (average 1.5 hours), probably because most of these are studying part-time. Average usage by undergraduates were in the range 3.0 – 3.2 hours, regardless of year of study.

Student experience of the VLE

The university VLE, Blackboard, is a core technology for the support of teaching and learning within the institution. The phased roll out Blackboard across all years of study continued with a requirement for a minimum presence (baseline provision) for all level 5 modules (second year undergraduate) at the start of the 2009/10 academic year. Before we asked students about their usage of Blackboard we wanted to determine if the modules they studied contained only baseline provision, contained e-learning components such as lecture note and presentations, or a combination. Results indicated that for a significant percentage of students (more than 20%) there was a combination of baseline provision modules and modules with learning resources. 23 students reported that none of their modules had a presence on Blackboard, however 16 of these responded that they used Blackboard '*sometimes'* or '*a* lot', which implies they may have interpreted the question differently to that intended. Of the remaining seven only one was a first year undergraduate who would be entitled to baseline provision.

Students were asked to assess how many days per week they logged onto Blackboard, from 'every day (7 days)' to 'rarely or never'. This showed that 95% of respondents used Blackboard at least once a week, 31% using it every day. Five students rarely or never used Blackboard and only one student, a third year undergraduate who would not be entitled to baseline provision, had not heard of Blackboard.

Students were then asked a series of questions around their use of Blackboard and other web-based tools, investigating both the frequency of use (from 'a lot' down to 'never') and the importance to their studies (very important' down to 'unimportant'). eLearning tools that were used 'a lot' by more than 40% were Blackboard itself (80%), accessing module information (69%), tutor's lecture notes (67%), library catalogue (60%), online databases / journals (50%), followed by eJournals, eBooks, reading lists and Blackboard email. All of these may be considered basic study tools used by students. Blackboard email was used 'a lot' by 42%, in comparison the university email was used 'a lot' by 53 %, reflecting that if

there is only baseline presence then students have only the university option for email. eLearning tools that were used 'rarely' or 'never' by more than 50% were generally tools requiring considerable input from tutors and are probably not available on most modules: online examinations, past examination papers, online self-tests and capturing reflections.

Not surprisingly, the elearning tools used most frequently were also considered 'very important' to their studies by high percentages of students (>50%): Blackboard, accessing module information, tutor's lecture notes, library catalogue, online databases / journals, eJournals, eBooks and reading lists. Rated as 'unimportant' were tools that were little used: online examinations, past examination papers, online self-tests, Turnitin plagiarism software and online chat.

To elicit the students' experiences of Blackboard and its effect on their learning, they were presented with a series of statements which they rated from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Percentage ratings of 70% and above for agree or strongly agree were given for *'Blackboard enables me to learn at a place and time of my choosing'* (83%), *'using Blackboard has enhanced the knowledge I get from lectures ...'* (70%), *'my tutors regularly update Blackboard'* (77%), *'Blackboard is a useful resource that includes information I might need for my studies* (86%), *'provides useful links to other web-based resources'* (76%), *'announcement tool ...'* (81%) and *'it is important that I am informed about updates e.g. planned downtime.'* (82%).

It is known that students experience technical difficulties accessing Blackboard and percentages for 'agree or strongly agree' were 39% for 'on campus' and 59% for 'at home'. While the university computing facilities are configured to be compatible with the VLE, the students' home computers may not be ideally configured. Although the VLE is tested on a number of configurations that the students use, or may use, at home, it is not possible to predict all the software combinations that will be used.

Features having positive effects on learning
There were also two free text questions to find out which features of Blackboard had improved the students' experience of learning and which had a negative impact. There were a pleasing number of thoughtful responses to these optional questions. Analysis of these reveals a wide range of student experiences which would be expected in a university offering traditional on campus university teaching and learning with lectures, laboratory / practical sessions, blended learning (combination of online and face to face teaching), modules that are wholly online, full or part time study, pre-undergraduate, undergraduate, postgraduate and professional development, intake from non-traditional backgrounds. Individual comments can therefore not be easily generalized and need to be put in the context of the individual's course and mode of study.

There were 285 text comments on features improving their experience. For some it was the overall flexibility of studying 'anywhere, anytime' , 38 comments such as, "being able to access course material 24/7", "ability to work at own pace", "I have the easy access to all I need about the module right in front of me".

The features with the highest number of comments were access to tutors' lecture notes and presentations (123 responses) with 43 commenting that it helped to recap after the lecture or allow them to catch up on missed lectures, and 17 said having notes in advance of lectures helped with preparation, "being able to catch up on missed lectures, and look back on lectures that I haven't fully understood", "being able to access previous lecture notes easily allows me to improve my understanding", "access to lecture notes prior to the session have made a huge difference to my learning and my organisational skills". Remarks made by a few students indicated that they would have difficulties if lecture notes were not available, "The lecture slides are a godsend! I am not the best note taker so to be able to catch up in my own time is great", "look back on lectures that I haven't fully understood".

Generally being able to access module resources was also rated beneficial (116 comments such as "Its just a one stop shop....I love it, really has enhanced my learning"), as was the discussion tool, chat, fora and communication tools (62 comments), announcements (35), reading lists / library resource links (31).

Features having negative effects on learning

There were fewer comments (245) on features having a negative impact on student learning. Any general issues or specific queries will be passed to the appropriate team and we have already started to address some issues raised. Some comments indicate there may be training needs for staff and students. Analysis of negative impacts showed that 103 comments could be classed as technical accessibility issues regarding the VLE 'crashing', not being reliably accessible or functions apparently not working correctly and 24 students commented on slow speed. It is not possible to determine the extent to which this has a negative impact on the student experience as very few of these remarks were quantified. Most were remarks such as "technical problems" or "the difficulties in being able to access it", with only some giving an indication of perceived frequency "often problems accessing it and downtime", "very rarely but sometimes can't access due to technical fault". Although issues may be minor for students on campus, for students on online modules and reliant on the VLE, issues are more problematical "Blackboard failure can seriously impact my learning in terms of accessing required and important information".

23 students commented specifically about difficulties on downloading files, usually that either they were unable to download or through a protracted method "When accessing certain modules and downloading lecture notes you are constantly thrown back to the main page", "going back to the start again when you try to download something" . We are being proactive in investigating this to determine the causes and are working on the solutions. We will also to identify if there are training needs.

 Some students perceived the VLE as difficult to use or navigate (63 comments) and these issues may be due to lack of training, differences between layout of modules and / or usage by tutors. Impacts due to differences in usage by tutors gave rise to 62 comments. The students' expectations regarding VLE content will vary greatly but it is clear that once a student has experienced modules for which tutors loaded up lecture notes and presentations for online access, or hear about this from other students, they want this as the norm. Comments include "lecturers either don't or cannot use blackboard", "a lot of the work in class is never uploaded to blackboard which means I am unable to go back and reread through areas that I have difficulty in understanding". This expectation needs to be managed with consideration of pedagogic rationale and the academic freedom of lecturers. Some students (42) recognised personal challenges regarding VLE use, sometimes counteracting the pleas for more resources on the VLE "less personal, everything is done through blackboard", "Blackboard has not been effective for my confidence levels. I am not familiar with the subject studying and have experienced difficulty in highlighting my knowledge gap in comparison with other learners on the course".

Your ideal VLE

Students were asked which features and tools they would like in their ideal VLE. 144 students responded with 44 wanting the same as now. Linking back to the previous question on negative impacts of the VLE, 22 students wanted access to be improved and 35 comments related to ease of navigation and simple to use tools. 40 comments related to additional tools or facilities to those currently available, with requests such as access on 3G or hand held devices, a search facility, instant messaging, tabbed pages, alerts of discussion threads. Some comments relating to existing tools were students wanting a wider range to be used on their course / module (23 comments) and there are impacts on tutor workload "enhance my learning with more interactive exercises, quizzes", "video/audio recordings of missed lectures".

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

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 (336 responses),* followed almost equally by *iPods / mobile phones to access lecture notes / course content (270), SMS texting (252) and Instant messaging (240).*

Although nearly all students responded to this question, when asked to explain their ideas for using these tools in their learning there were fewer responses. However there are a number of students whose responses indicate are actively using such tools in their learning and for communicating with peers. The responses can be broadly split into those who were interested using tools for learning and those who explained how they could communicate using the tools. Tools for learning were interactive Flash-based activities, wikis and blogs, lectures available on iPod / iphone (several comments),

For example some students already use Facebook to set up groups to organize groupwork and for peer communication and support. Others use Chat for peer support. There were ideas such as using blogs to form part of a reflective assessment,

SMS texting was suggested as a communication tool to inform students if a lesson was cancelled, room changes or for other important announcements.

A few responses indicated the challenges of accessibility for some students, "I would like the lectures to be more accessible and meet more of my learning needs … appeal to other learning styles as well as auditory …. provide visual aids (power point) that were not on a white back ground, as this is difficult for me to read". Amidst the valuable comments from the technologically savvy, it is easy to think that all students are familiar with Web 2.0, "I am not very technical and all those suggestions mean nothing to me".

Students' use of learning spaces (outside the classroom)

Students were asked where they preferred to study when not in taught sessions. Library second floor (silent study) was most popular (282 students), followed by Library first floor (quiet discussion) (248), individual study carrels (182) and LINC (161).

This year a question was included to gauge awareness and usage of the wifi enabled spaces around the campus. Students were asked how often they used the wifi areas on campus and this showed although 278 (36%) used the wifi facilities at least once a week, a surprising 126 (16%) were unaware of the wireless facilities (Table 2). Students were asked for which aspects of their studies they used the spaces. From the choices given, research was the most popular activity (384 students), followed by communication (e.g. email, social networking) (345), accessing the VLE (317), online learning (273) and groupwork (200).

The survey also wanted to gauge usage of students' own equipment and usage / awareness of loan equipment. When asked to gauge how often they used their own laptop / netbook, from the 724 responses 45% selected 'sometimes' or 'a lot' and 55% 'rarely' or 'never'. Turning to usage of university workstations there was almost an even split, 53% for 'sometimes / a lot' and 47% 'rarely / never'. Few students loaned university laptops, only 14 (2%) using them 'a lot'.

Table 2. Usage of campus wifi enabled spaces

Frequency of use	no. of students
5 or more days per week	94
1-4 days per week	184
Once or twice per term	78
Rarely or never	293
Never heard of this	126

Students ownership of technology (hardware)

The survey included a question about personal access to computers and the internet. A number of students had more than one device. Most common was a laptop / Mac with internet access (602), followed by desktop pc with internet access (398). 200 students had access to an internet enabled mobile phone. 8 students had no access to personal computing facilities.

Training in using the VLE

This year we included questions on the amount and type of training students had received in using the VLE. Responses to *'How much training have you received in the use of Blackboard?'* indicated that 61% (476) had received 'enough' or 'too much' and around 20% each for 'not enough' (150) and 'none' (149). For those who received training, delivery was by various methods, some receiving more than one form of delivery (Table 3).

Table 3. Delivery of Blackboard training

Delivery method	no of students
Group workshop (hands on)	314
Group training (not hands on)	234
handouts	121
peer training / support	76
one-to-one session	24
video	16
other	75

The 149 students who received no training were asked to indicate why and from the choices presented 101 selected *'No training offered for my course',* 16 missed the training for their course, 19 selected *'I did not see the adverts for additional training sessions'* and 5 *'I have not used any web-based training material'*. Other responses given included 'did not need training', 'self taught', 'had used Blackboard previously' or they were from Performing Arts students who have their own virtual learning environment.

Conclusion

Themes emerging from 2009 / 2010 survey

1. The responses reflect the diversity of the student body at Edge Hill and the diversity of experiences.

2. The VLE and other electronic sources are considered important learning resources by students and are rated as important to their studies. The flexibility of studying 'anywhere, anytime' is valued.

3. There were more positive than negative comments concerning the VLE. Where available, students valued access to tutors' lecture notes. However, a number of students reported difficulties in downloading resources from the VLE and this is being addressed.

4. The use of Facebook and other social networking sites to organize groupwork and for peer support is popular with students.

5. Rapid communication such as SMS texting would be valued by students as an additional method to inform them of urgent or last minute changes.

Comparison to 2008/2009 survey

The increased number of responses (775 compared to 327) has given a more representative view of students' experiences of technology in their learning. Comparing percentages, the demographic figures show the gender distribution, far more female than male respondents, was similar to 2008. Differences from 2008 were age grouping (more mature students this survey) and a more even split between the different years of study and more Masters / PG students. This year the highest number of responses was from Faculty of Education, particularly for Masters / PG, compared to FAS in 2008.

As would be expected with rollout of baseline provision, usage of the VLE has increased slightly, with 95% logging on at least once per week (92% in 2008). Students value the same electronic resources as in 2008, such as module information, lecture notes, library catalogue, and email. Technical issues with the VLE and difficulties in navigation were still concerns for students. Work began last year to overcome these technical problems, some of which involve the software used by students at home compared to that used by the university. There is a continuous process of testing new software as it becomes available.

From the list of technologies not in mainstream use, most popular again this year were Facebook / social networking sites and there is evidence of growing use of such sites for groupwork / peer support. Use of iPods / mobile phones to access resources was also selected by a high number of students in both surveys. This year more students supplied suggestions as to how these technologies could be used in their studies, particularly recommendations for tools for learning such as wikis and blogs. This will be used to inform outcomes of the VLE review.

As in 2008, nearly all students had personal access to personal computing facilities (e.g. laptop, netbook), but 8 students had no such access. Ownership of internet enabled phones was 200, out of 775 respondents, showed a slight percentage increase from the previous survey.

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