Edge Hill University

6th EHU
Student
eLearning
Survey

In their own words:
Findings from the **6th EHU Student eLearning Survey**

LEARNING SERVICES 2015

6th EHU Student e-Learning Survey

Contents

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6th EHU Student e-Learning Survey

Executive Summary

The Student eLearning Survey was introduced in December 2008 as a means of exploring the learner perspective of technology-enhanced learning (TEL) at Edge Hill University (EHU). It seemed timely in 2013/14 to take a gap year and thereafter make the survey biennial. This year's report is informed by the findings of the 2013/14 survey and identifies and examines trends and system performance where there are direct comparisons to past surveys. The intention is to improve the student experience through a better understanding of what makes a good experience of TEL, and more importantly, what does not. It also provides an indicator of the extent to which the institutional VLE, Learning Edge, is integral to the learning experience of Edge Hill students.

This year's findings are based on a sample of 798 students and shed light on a number of topics:

Access to technology

Students are increasingly likely to own a range of internet-enabled devices of which the most common are laptop and smartphone, with over half now owning a tablet. They frequently bring at least two devices onto campus and connect them all onto campus WIFI whilst they are here. They access Learning Edge on their phones, particularly for accessing announcements and notifications, but also course content. This has implications for the network infrastructure, technical and learner support, and VLE course design and requires our continual monitoring using enquiry management systems and formal and informal University feedback mechanisms.

Trend analysis from 2008/09 to the present

The five trends identified and discussed in this section are pleasingly positive with noticeable improvements in all categories. Student difficulties accessing Learning Edge have reduced year-on-year since 2008/09, with the greatest improvement being seen in the experience of those accessing Learning Edge from off-campus.

Whilst the on-campus access experience has also continued to improve, it is at a slower rate. In other sections students describe issues with Learning Edge being unavailable or slow to upload/ download files. With the majority of students accessing Learning Edge and various study apps on their smartphones and tablets as well as personal laptops both on and off campus, we need to focus on (i) investigating the permutations of student-owned devices – operating systems, browsers, (ii) how students use Learning Edge e.g. the signposts and pathways to the system, and (iii) where and when on-campus access is difficult.

Negative features of Learning Edge

The overall message emerging from student comments is that they resent having to spend unnecessary time trying to access slow systems or locate course material. Too much or not enough information can be a problem as is information aimed at others and deemed irrelevant. As Learning Edge has grown in use, it is increasingly being described as complicated or confusing, particularly to new users.

The review and updating of the institutional 'Baseline' Framework for Learning Edge in 2015 has addressed many of the issues identified around consistency of student experience across programmes of study but there is still work to be done in embedding it into everyday practice.

What makes an 'ideal' learning environment

It is interesting to note that many of the tools and technologies that students would like to see in an 'ideal' VLE or for wider use in learning and teaching can be found in EHU's current VLE. This suggests that we need to better understand why these are not being used by staff as well as students – are they 'invisible', 'clunky' or difficult to use?

Some of the student ideas have been achieved with the introduction of new systems or tools for 2014/15. This includes a new library management system that integrates with Learning Edge to allow the user access to their library account. A reading list management software was introduced at the same time and this too is being made available to students via the My Library tab in Learning Edge.

It would seem that students would appreciate having access to recordings of lectures and again, the 2015/16 academic year has seen the introduction of a 12 month pilot of lecture capture software, Panopto that should satisfy this demand.

With regard to laptop loans, a successful case has been made for the Library to purchase 30 additional laptops, and for these to be housed in self-service storage/charging units. These will be available during the second semester 2015/16.

The use of tools to support students in organizing and planning their study activity is an interesting one. Whilst there is VLE functionality with potential in this area, there are many mobile apps that provide this support and are perceived to be of value to students. There is a Learning Services project in operation that is gathering, evaluating and disseminating apps that will be of benefit to students.

Whilst the look and feel of Learning Edge is much improved since it was first introduced to EHU, the many comments about it being at times 'confusing', 'jumbled', 'overwhelming' have been noted. We need to look at Learning Edge through our students eyes more often to better understand whether their comments relate to the course content or the system structure which frames it.

Sometimes in surveys what is not mentioned is also of interest. In this case, it was the almost total absence of any reference to Facebook (apart from a couple of negative comments). It was particularly striking in comparison to the wealth of positive feedback about it in the 2013/14 survey as a tool to support instant messaging, group work and peer support. Whilst we can only hypothesise about the reason for the absence of references to Facebook at this time, students are telling us that they want to see the VLE providing Facebook 'like' means of communicating and sharing information with their tutors and fellow students.

Finally, we are very grateful for our students' generosity with their time and feedback. It is our hope that we repay them with year-on-year progress that shows we are listening to what they tell us in these surveys. This report, therefore, contains a series of recommendations for action based upon what we have learned.

Foreword

Since its launch in December 2008, the student e-learning survey has provided a rich source of intelligence and insight into students' use of technology in support of their learning; their views, likes, dislikes and preferences on tutor use of the virtual learning environment and associated technologies are captured, analysed and considered.   Feedback on institutional systems and personal ownership and use of devices is also collected to form part of a rich picture, and as time passes the survey's value has grown incrementally. Now in its 6th iteration, it is possible to draw a correlation between action taken in response to issues raised in earlier surveys and noticeable improvements in satisfaction today. Strategically, the survey responses have formed a valuable evidence base, which have prompted a number of follow-on actions. These have ranged from business cases for additional investment, to conversations with individual departments on their use of technology to support student engagement. Both, in their own way, are essential to the university's strategic need to keep pace with student expectations of a technology rich learning environment.

Within the portfolio of evidence gathered by Learning Services, this survey acts as a keystone. It absorbs a considerable amount of staff time and effort to administer, run and analyse the responses, but the effort is more than rewarded by the intelligence gained.

The report which has been compiled from the latest survey draws out the headlines from both the quantitative, and perhaps of more value, the qualitative feedback. Its length is representative of the richness of the survey and its breadth of coverage. It includes a small number of key recommendations which have emerged as the evidence has been reviewed and analysed and these in turn will benefit from a wider discussion.

In conclusion, this report forms an output, but the accompanying volume of activity which is undertaken to analyse the results is far more significant. I am very grateful to Lindsey Martin for compiling the initial survey in 2008 and for continuing to lead and champion both the administration of the subsequent surveys and to her personal time which is spent on its analysis. Without this level of commitment we would lack a vital source of evidence and insight.

Alison Mackenzie
Dean of Learning Services
Edge Hill University

Introduction

The Student eLearning Survey was introduced in December 2008 as a means of exploring the learner perspective of technology-enhanced learning (TEL) at Edge Hill University (EHU). It was driven by a desire to improve the student experience through a better understanding of what made for a good experience of TEL, and more importantly, what did not. It also provides an indicator of the extent to which the institutional VLE, Learning Edge, is integral to the learning experience of Edge Hill students.

After five years of consecutive annual student surveys it seemed timely in 2013/14 to take a gap year and thereafter make the survey biennial, with a staff survey on a similar topic every alternate year. This year's survey follows on from past surveys and allows us to identify trends and benchmark system performance where there are direct comparisons to past surveys.

The survey consists of a series of multiple choice questions supplemented by opportunities for free-text responses. The free-text generates a considerable amount of student feedback on the following TEL-related issues:

- Features of Learning Edge that have improved student experience

- Features of Learning Edge that have had a negative impact on the student experience

- Tools or features that an 'ideal' Learning Edge would contain

- Views on the usefulness of the Mobile Learn app and suggestions for its future improvement

- Student ideas on what other technologies might be used in teaching and learning

The survey was carried out using the Bristol Online Surveys tool (BOS) and made available to all students via a panel on the Welcome page of Learning Edge (Blackboard). A prize draw of Amazon vouchers (£100, £50, £25) was offered to encourage responses. The survey ran for 8 weeks from 22nd October 2014.

Response rates for each of the surveys carried out to date provide a reasonable sample size for a snapshot of student experience and expectations around TEL:

2009/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2014/15
261	775	750	529	633	798

Simply reproducing the free text comments of 798 students in this report was not feasible. The challenge, however, was the need to reduce the data for intelligibility whilst maintaining its integrity. An inductive, phenomenographic approach was used to analyse the data in order to surface the variation of student experience, exposing the different ways that they can experience the same phenomenon. (Cousin, 2009). Various categories of description emerged from the data and are discussed in each section with quotations from the students to support the plausibility or trustworthiness of the account.

Context and background

Demographic information

There is remarkable consistency with regard to the characteristics of those completing the survey over the years the survey has run. Whilst the survey is completed by students of all ages, at all levels of study and in many different locations, the majority of respondents are in the 19-25 age range, studying full-time on the Ormskirk campus and in their first or second year.

Participation in this year's survey is spread reasonably evenly across the three faculties as follows:

Arts & Sciences	Education	Health & Social Care	Don't Know
36.7%	30.7%	27.4%	5.1%

As the survey tool, BOS, allows cross tabulation of questions, it was possible to compare the responses to questions with categories of respondents, e.g. faculty, year of study, and full-time/ part-time study. Whilst cross tabulating questions has shown some small differences between categories of students, no noticeable anomalies have been found. By way of example, Figure 1 and Table 1 below shows the cross tabulation of year of study against technical issues accessing Learning Edge.

Fig 1. Cross tabulation of year of study against Q5.2 On campus I sometimes have technical difficulties accessing Learning Edge

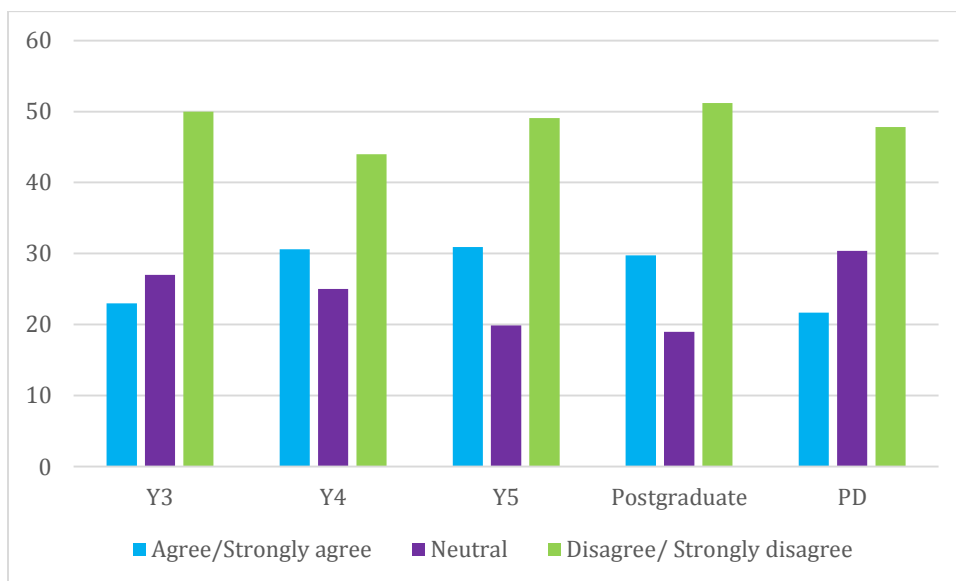*Table 1. Cross tabulation of year of study against Q5.2 On campus I sometimes have technical difficulties accessing Learning Edge*

	Y3	Y4	Y5	Postgraduate	Professional Development
Agree/Strongly agree	23	30.6	30.9	29.75	21.7
Neutral	27	25	19.9	19	30.4
Disagree/ Strongly disagree	50	44	49.1	51.2	47.8

Access to technology

The majority of students have access to more than one internet-enabled device (see table 2 and fig 2). The most commonly owned device identified in this year's survey is a laptop (90.37% own one of these compared to 45.1% owning a pc). Interestingly, over half (54.9%) now own a tablet device and 77.1% own a smartphone. Only one student reported having no computer or internet access at all.
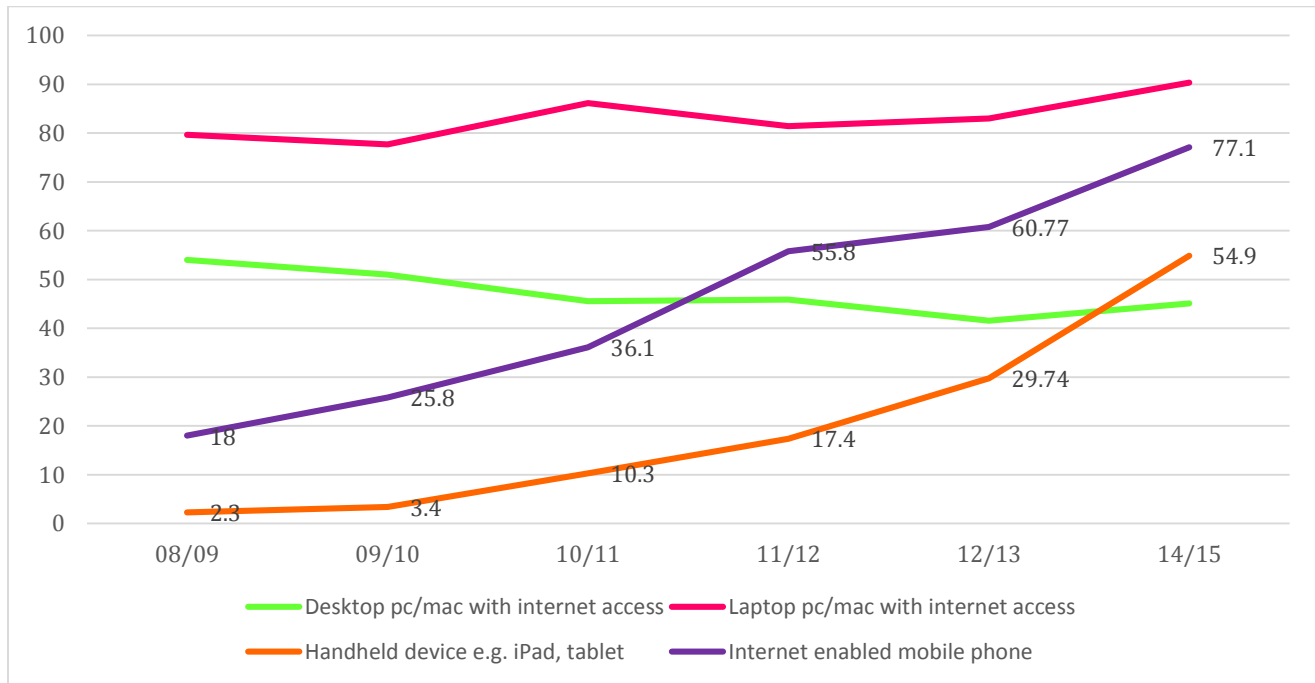
Fig 2. Personal access to the internet

Table 2: Personal access to the Internet 2008-2014/15

Personal access to the Internet	08/09 %	09/10 %	10/11 %	11/12 %	12/13 %	14/15 %
Desktop pc/mac with internet access	54	51	45.6	45.92	41.6	45.1
Laptop pc/mac with internet access	79.7	77.7	86.17	81.44	83.03	90.37
Handheld device e.g. iPad, tablet	2.3	3.4	10.3	17.4	29.74	54.9
Internet enabled mobile phone	18	25.8	36.1	55.8	60.77	77.1

The question asking about device ownership revealed that the 797 who responded claimed to have between them personal access to a total of 2137 devices – this works out at an average of approximately 3 devices per person.

EHU's data when compared with the UK benchmark (Ofcom, 2014) reflects the same trends with regard to device ownership although it should be noted that the EHU data reflects a much narrower cross-section of the population and may explain why PC and laptop ownership are relatively higher than that contained in the Ofcom report. It is also possible to compare the EHU data with the US ECAR studies of 10,000 undergraduate students and technology, 2014 and 2015 (Dahlstrom and Bischel, 2014, Dahlstrom *et al*, 2015).

Table 3. EHU student comparison with Ofcom UK's 2013/14 data and ECAR data 2014 and 2015

Personal access to the Internet	EHU 2014/15	Ofcom 2013/14 (overall)	Ofcom (16-24 age group)	ECAR UG study 2014	ECAR UG study 2015
Desktop pc/mac with internet access	45.1%	35%	32%	Data no longer collected	Data no longer collected
Laptop pc/mac with internet access	90.37%	63%	73%	90%	91%
Handheld device e.g. iPad, tablet	54.9%	44%	49%	47%	54%
Internet enabled mobile phone	77.1%	61%	88%	86%	92%

Personal devices to support learning

We know from tracking device ownership in each successive survey that student ownership of mobile devices is high. As described in the previous section the 797 who responded to this year's survey claimed to have personal access to a total of 2137 devices – this works out at an average of approximately 3 devices per person.

In addition to asking about device ownership, we wanted to know more about what devices students regularly brought onto campus (see Fig 3, Table 4). Looking at a random sample of individual student responses it would seem that they frequently bring at least two devices onto campus – usually a phone and/or either a laptop, tablet or e-reader, using the campus WIFI to connect them to the Internet.

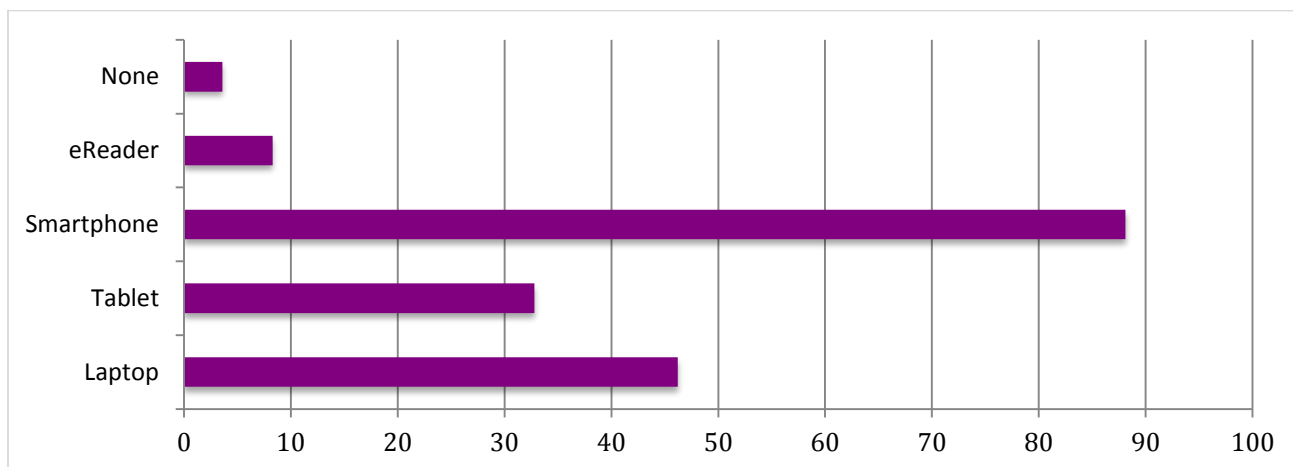*Fig 3. What devices do students regularly bring onto campus (%)?*

Table 4. Mobile use on campus

|	2014/15 %
Laptop	46.2
Tablet	32.8
Smartphone	88.1
eBook Reader	8.3
None	3.6

The popularity of smart phone ownership isn't really surprising when you think that these now have more computing power than Apollo 11 when it landed a man on the moon in 1969. Apart from keys and money, a phone is the one thing most people now probably won't leave home without. The survey told us that 70.6% of students had installed the Blackboard Mobile app and from their comments that smart phone access to Learning Edge now seems to be a mainstream activity for accessing Learning Edge notifications, presentations and course content.

Table 5 and Fig 4 below show how mobile access to Learning Edge has increased year on year alongside other activities.

Table 5

Do you use your mobile device for:	11/12 %	12/13 %	14/15 %
Learning Edge	46.31	61.3	84.8
Emails	66.35	76.3	90.7
Library catalogue	18.34	27.3	37.6
Social networking	66.73	75.5	79.1
Internet searching	64.1	70.93	85.3
Study apps	n/a	n/a	28.2
No mobile phone	3.21	4.74	0.8

Fig 4. Mobile device use by students
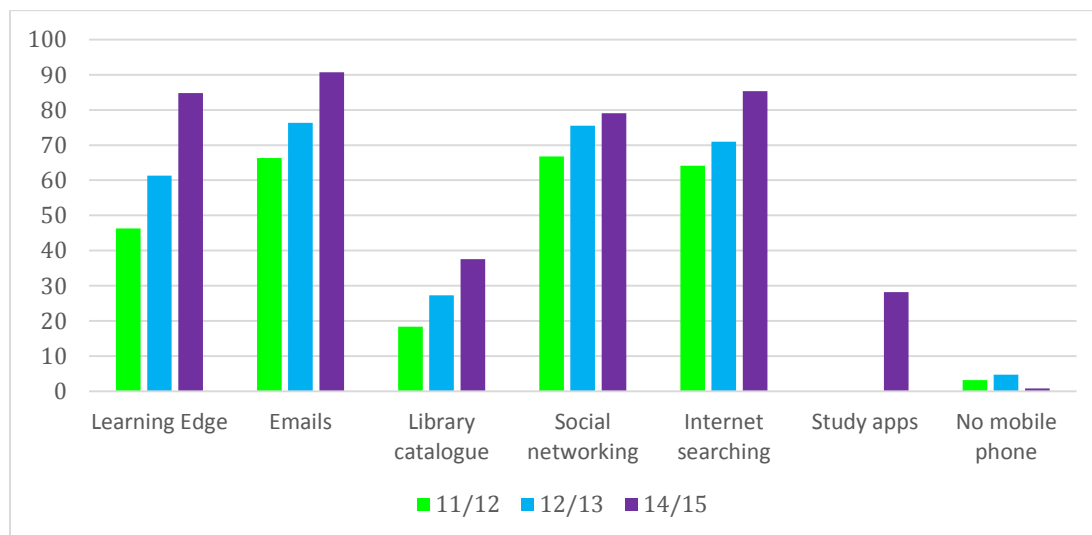
Use of Apps to support learning

This is the first year that the survey has asked about the use of study apps and 28% responded to say they are using Apps to support study. From the 171 students who went on to tell us what apps they use it was possible to identify six generic tool types that appeared especially useful:

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Harvard referencing (RefMe) (by far the most popular)

Reading tools such as dictionaries, thesauri, eBook readers

Note taking (Evernote, MS Office, OneNote etc.)

File storage such as Dropbox, One Drive, Google Drive

Revision and assignment planning (calendars, timetables, countdowns, cue cards)

Audience response apps (Socrative) for testing understanding in class.

PC Availability, barcode scanners and messenger tools were also used by some to support study.

Two cautionary notes were sounded: firstly, 7 students who owned Windows 8 smart phones described how poor app availability meant that they could not use most study apps.

> "I wish there were some, or rather I wish I could at least use the ones available, however, there is absolutely nothing available for Windows 8 phones."

Secondly, it would seem that for some international students, using Apple iPhone, iPad, iPod devices, and access to study apps is an issue.

> "I cannot download the apps because I am registered in the USA iTunes and cannot download UK apps. This might be a problem for all other international students. I was very disappointed when I found this out in August."

Concluding thoughts on access to technology

Students are increasingly likely to own a range of internet-enabled devices of which the most common are laptop and smartphone, and with over half in our survey now owning a tablet. They frequently bring at least two devices onto campus and connect them all onto campus WIFI whilst they are here. They access Learning Edge on their phones, particularly for receiving announcements and notifications, but also for course content (although Windows phone users are at a disadvantage here). This has implications for the network infrastructure, technical and learner support, and VLE course design. It requires our continual monitoring using enquiry management systems and formal and informal University feedback mechanisms.

Recommendations

It would be helpful to draw up guidance for prospective and new students on (i) what University owned apps are available and on what operating systems, (ii) access to University WIFI, (iii) apps other students find helpful in supporting their learning, and (iv) information for international students on accessing UK apps.

Trend analysis of student use and experience with technology

The majority of questions used in the survey have remained the same since its inception with only a few changed or added in order to better reflect the ever-changing digital environment in which we live. As a result of this overall consistency, we are able to identify trends over the six surveys we have carried out. Five key trends in student satisfaction with the Learning Edge VLE are described below.

Learning Edge enables me to learn at a time and place of my own choosing
It is pleasing to report that in relation to students' experience of Learning Edge, the quantitative data offers very strong indicators of its importance and satisfaction and 91.7% agree/strongly agree with the statement that Learning Edge allows students to learn at a time and place of their own choosing (Fig 5, Table 6).

Fig 5. Learning Edge enables me to learn at a time and place of my own choosing
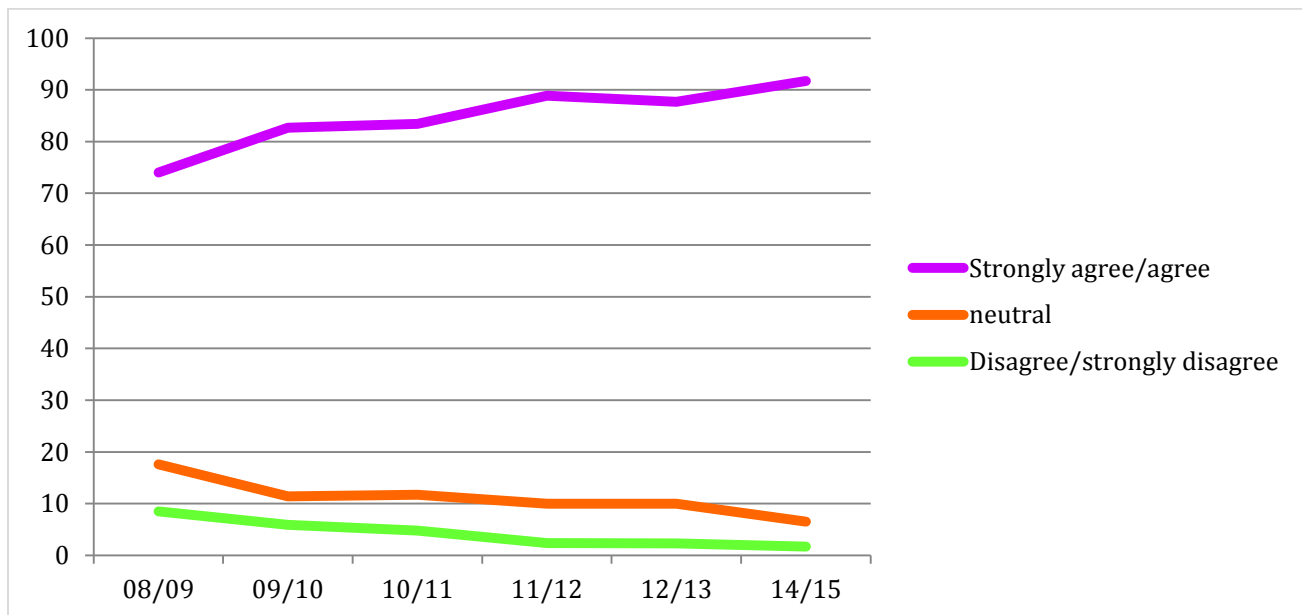
Table 6.	08/09 %	09/10 %	10/11 %	11/12 %	12/13 %	14/15 %
Strongly agree/agree	74	82.7	83.4	88.9	87.7	91.7
Neutral	17.6	11.4	11.7	10	10	6.5
Disagree/strongly disagree	8.5	5.9	4.8	2.4	2.3	1.7

Using Learning Edge has enhanced the knowledge and understanding I get from lectures, tutorials and practical sessions

With each successive survey, more students agree with the statement that Learning Edge enhances knowledge and understanding gained at taught sessions. This year's survey is no different, and has produced a pleasing improvement on previous years (Martin, 2012, 2013), see Fig 6 and Table 7.

Fig 6. Using Learning Edge has enhanced the knowledge and understanding I get from lectures, tutorials and practical sessions
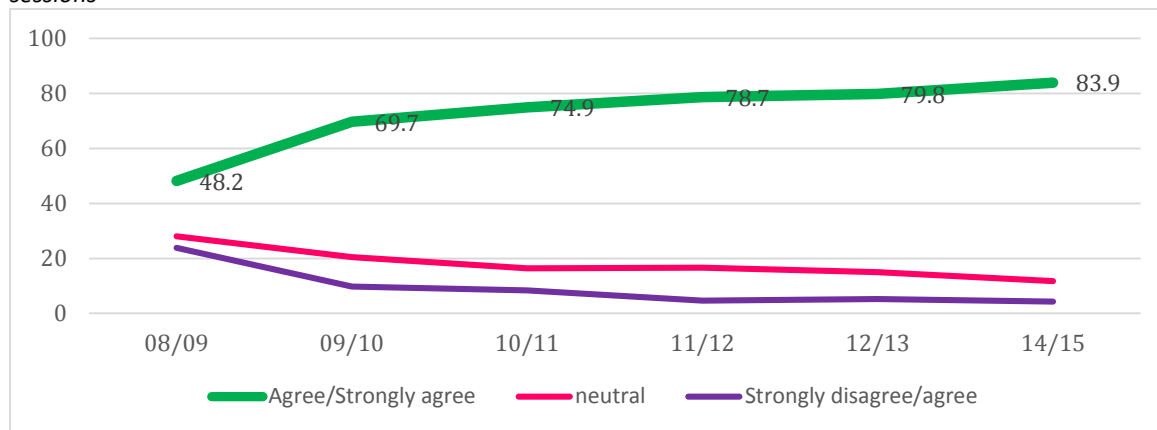

Table 7.	08/09 %	09/10 %	10/11 %	11/12 %	12/13 %	14/15 %
Agree/Strongly agree	48.2	69.7	74.9	78.7	79.8	83.9
Neutral	28	20.5	16.4	16.6	15	11.8
Strongly disagree/agree	23.8	9.8	8.4	4.7	5.2	4.3

My tutors regularly update Learning Edge with course information and materials

There has been a similar improvement in the response to the statement 'my tutors regularly update Learning Edge with course information and materials –currently 88% of student responses agree with this statement. Even more pleasing, the number of students who disagree/strongly disagree with that statement has declined to only 3.2% (Fig 7, Table 8). Overall, there has been a 35.7% improvement in this aspect of the student experience since 2008/09.

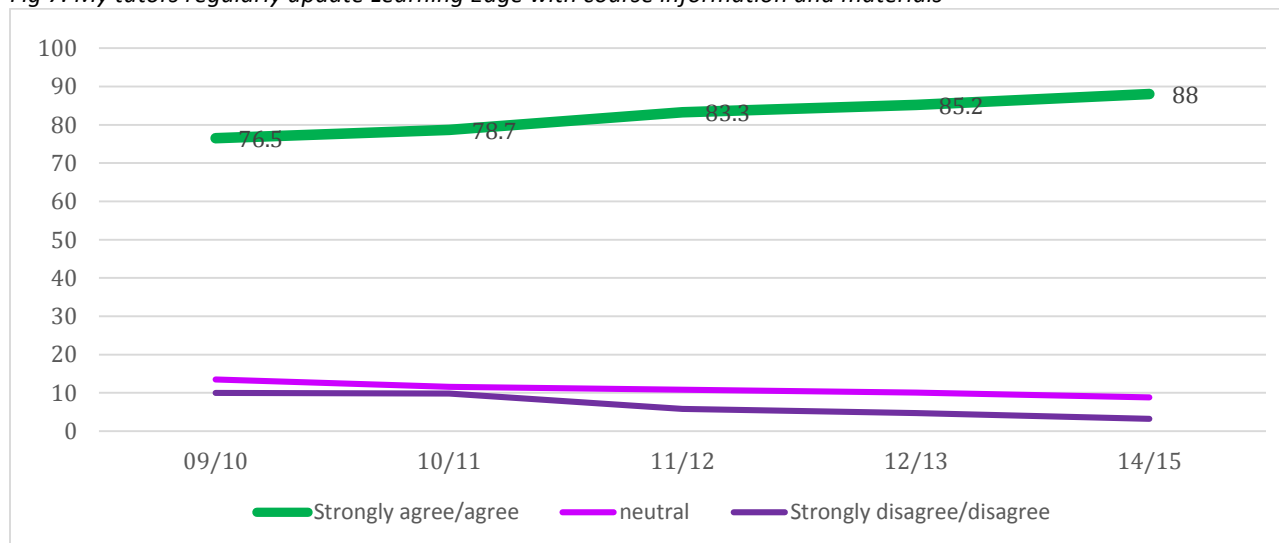*Fig 7. My tutors regularly update Learning Edge with course information and materials*

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Table 8.	08/09 %	09/10 %	10/11 %	11/12 %	12/13 %	14/15 %
Strongly agree/agree	n/a	76.5	78.7	83.3	85.2	88
Neutral	n/a	13.5	11.6	10.8	10.1	8.8
Strongly disagree/disagree	n/a	10	9.8	5.8	4.7	3.2

The announcements tool in Learning Edge enables me to keep track of changes to the delivery of my module(s)

A popular feature of Learning Edge is the ability to send announcements and notifications about changes to the delivery of modules that can be picked up on a variety of devices including smartphones and tablets. This year, 88.1% of responses agreed/strongly agreed that the announcements tool enabled them to track module changes (Fig 8, Table 9).

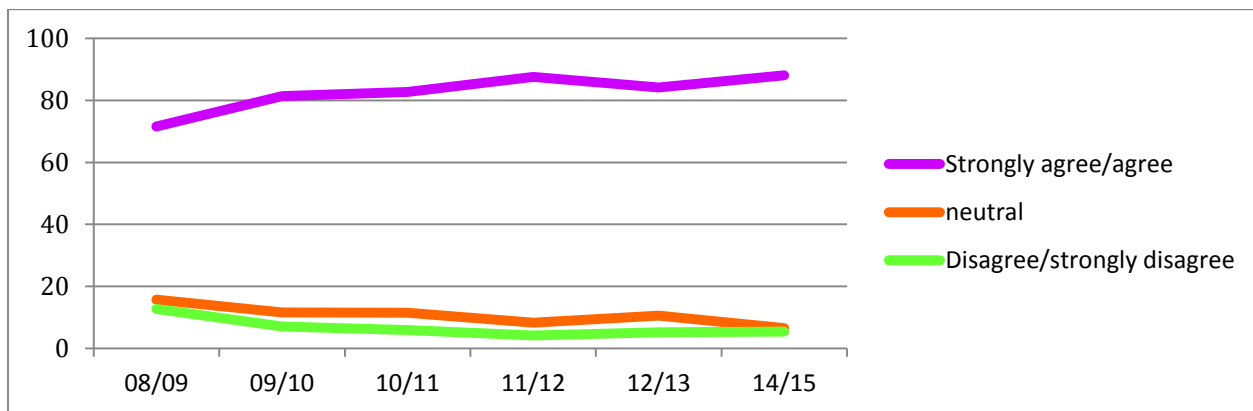Fig 8. The announcements tool in Learning Edge enables me to keep track of changes to the delivery of my module

Table 9.	08/09 %	09/10 %	10/11 %	11/12 %	12/13 %	14/15 %
Strongly agree/agree	71.6	81.4	82.7	87.6	84.2	88.1
Neutral	15.7	11.6	11.5	8.3	10.6	6.5
Disagree/strongly disagree	12.7	7	5.9	4.2	5.2	5.4

On Campus and/or off campus I sometimes have difficulties accessing Learning Edge

The 2012/13 survey confirmed a trend towards fewer numbers of students experiencing technical difficulties when using Learning Edge on and off campus – with the most dramatic improvement in the reduction of off campus technical difficulties. We have seen a 15% improvement in the off-campus experience since 2012/13 and a 24% improvement since 2008/09.

This prompted us to take a fresh look at on-campus access to Learning Edge via institutional WIFI networks and it would seem that the University's ongoing investment in the WIFI infrastructure, along with the many student *#getconnected* roadshows, and active promotion of Eduroam for reliable WIFI access on campus have had a positive impact. Data from the current survey shows an ongoing improvement of 2.5% in on-campus access to Learning Edge since 2012/13 and 5% since 2008/09, as

illustrated by figures 9 and 10, tables 10 and 11.

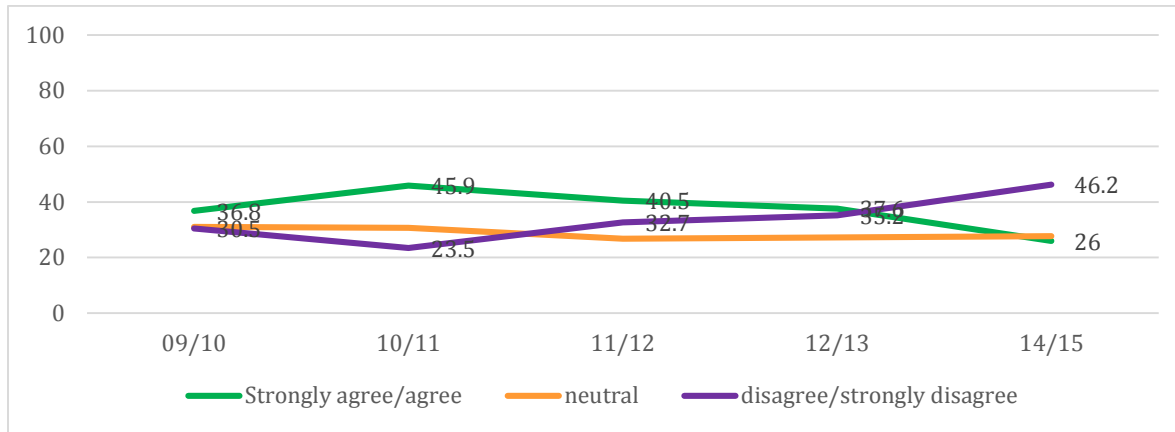*Fig 9: On campus I sometimes have difficulties accessing Learning Edge*

Table 10. On campus I sometimes have difficulties accessing Learning Edge

	09/10	10/11	11/12	12/13	14/15
Strongly agree/agree	36.8	45.9	40.5	37.6	26
neutral	31	30.7	26.8	27.2	27.7
disagree/strongly disagree	30.5	23.5	32.7	35.2	46.2

Fig 10. Off campus I sometimes have difficulties accessing Learning Edge
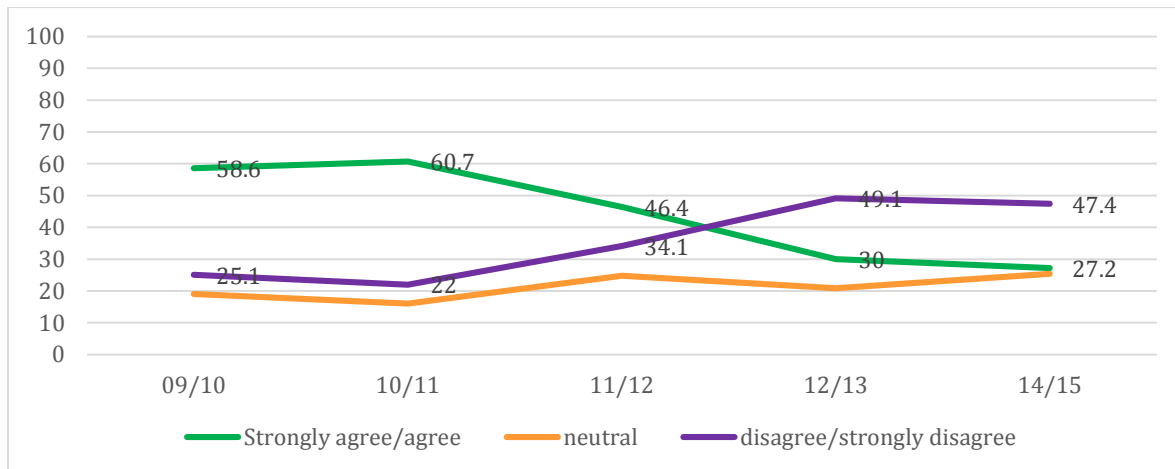
Table 11. *Off campus I sometimes have difficulties accessing Learning Edge*

	09/10	10/11	11/12	12/13	14/15
Strongly agree/agree	58.6	60.7	46.4	30	27.2
neutral	19	16	24.8	20.9	25.4
disagree/strongly disagree	25.1	22	34.1	49.1	47.4

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Concluding thoughts on the trend analysis

The five trends discussed in this section are pleasingly positive with noticeable improvements in all categories. Student difficulties accessing Learning Edge have reduced year-on-year since 2008/09, with the greatest improvement being seen in the experience of those accessing Learning Edge from off-campus.

Whilst the on-campus access experience has also continued to improve, it is at a slower rate. In other sections students describe issues with Learning Edge being unavailable or slow to upload/ download files. With the majority of students accessing Learning Edge and various study apps on their smartphones and tablets as well as personal laptops both on and off campus, we need to focus on (i) investigating the range of permutations of student-owned devices, i.e. operating systems, browsers, (ii) how students access Learning Edge, e.g. the signposts and pathways to the system, and (iii) where, when and how on-campus access is difficult.

Recommendation

- ***Establish a task and finish group underpinned with User Experience (UX) work to investigate students' on-campus use of mobile devices so that we can better understand their specific difficulties.***

Students' feedback of their experience using Learning Edge

When students were invited to tell us what features of Learning Edge have improved their experience of learning, 355 substantive comments were received. Whilst this is pleasing, more importantly, perhaps, we wanted to learn about what features have a negative impact on students' experience of learning. This resulted in 209 substantive comments. The grey text boxes within the next few sections contain an illustrative selection of student comments.

Understanding 'negative impact' comments allows us (and colleagues) where appropriate, to be specific about what activities are targeted for improvement – and why.

Features of Learning Edge that improve the student experience of learning

Whilst a number of student responses described the beneficial use of discussion fora, formative quizzes and online submission of assignments, the majority of the 355 comments fell into 4 main areas:

Access to lecture notes, preparatory materials and handouts

This area elicited the most feedback with just under half of the comments received. The benefits from having teaching and learning materials available online were in assisting planning and preparation (where lecture notes or preparatory materials were uploaded to Learning Edge in advance), or being able to review, reinforce or revise from lecture notes after the event.

> "Lecture content is often available before the lecture which enables me to prepare effectively for the lectures."
>
> "It's a great way to access information about my course. I know that I can catch up if I miss any lectures and know that if I don't understand something I can go through the lecture notes in my own time – this helps a lot, especially with revision."
>
> "The ability to recall content from previous lectures, it's the ultimate revision tool."

Access to library and study skills resources.

Embedding subject-specific library resources within Learning Edge has seemingly had a positive impact on the student learning experience with 96 positive comments. A subject-specific My Library 'tab' had been added to Learning Edge and made available to all students for the 2013/14 academic year. This was in response to feedback received in previous years of this survey. Since the last survey, the library has extended further into Learning Edge with students now able to access their personal library account from the My Library tab. This allows them to reserve and renew books, and pay fines without leaving Learning Edge.

> "Central area where all resources can be accessed. Especially good for library access."
>
> "The subject specific tabs allow me to access certain content easily without having to search for it all over the website."
>
> "The ability to access various e-books and other online resources through the library has been beneficial to my assignments."

Keeping up-to-date via push notifications and emails.

The *announcements* tool in Blackboard allows tutors to post short, time-sensitive updates or reminders of important activities outside normal face-to-face contact time e.g. assignment hand-in dates or signposting to timetable or venue changes. The *notifications* feature automatically alerts tutors and students when events occur in their courses, such as when assignments are due, marks are available, emails received, new content and tests are made available, and when there are unread discussions and blogs. Announcements and notifications are particularly valued by students who have set them up to be sent to their smart phone with 76 students commenting on how these are beneficial to their student life.

It was interesting to note that a number of comments also indicated that notifications provided a direct route to new course information and content which ensured they did not waste time having to search for it (see the section on negative experiences below for issues around locating content).

> "Announcements as to when any materials etc. have been posted as this then enables me to be prompt in checking the work and this I am able to use it more effectively."
>
> "The update system keeps me informed of new and important information."
>
> "The announcements section allows me to see what has changed during the course, this has improved my learning experience as I know about room changes or changes to preparation I need to do for my lectured/seminars."
>
> "Updates direct to my mobile phone."

Ready access to course information such as timetables, module handbooks, assessment information.

Many students (65) used the term 'course information' as a catch-all for lecture notes, handbooks, timetables, other course-related and assessment information. The value to these students lies in having this information in one place, available and reliable 24/7/365.

> "You can get course information when you need it, wherever you need it."
>
> "24 hour VLE able to work whenever with access to resources everywhere."
>
> "Being able to access it 24/7 allows me to plan when I can work and structure my learning."
>
> "Most things are very easy to access and it is really convenient just being able to get what I need, when I need it."

Whilst there is some reference to students using interactive and collaborative tools such as discussion boards, blogs and wikis in Learning Edge, this would seem to be a small proportion of its use. Student opinion appears to be split over their value which invites further investigation for where it works well, it is highly valued.

It seems to be a moot point whether it is a good thing to have continuous, ready access to completed modules as well as those currently being taught. Some students found that it is possible to hide completed modules using the Settings facility in Learning Edge.

> "Ability to customize my home page in a manner that appeals to me."
>
> "Access to show and hide modules, allowing me to access feedback from old ones I hide while making the newer, current modules more easily and quickly accessed."

Features of Learning Edge having a negative impact on the experience of learning
As with previous years, many of the negative aspects of Learning Edge could be described as the other side of the coin as the positive for example, for some notifications are valued but for others, there is over-communication, or it is not relevant. Negative comments could be grouped into four main themes.

Access to content and resources
This category of comment produced 79 responses that could then be subdivided into (i) tutors' not updating content, (ii) tutors uploading content that cannot be readily accessed on tablets or mobile devices, and (iii) student problems finding library resources both practically and as a skills issue.

> "Library features can be difficult to find specific information as it takes you through too many routes in and also too many new windows."
>
> "Not all tutors use Blackboard as much as they could."
>
> "Lecture notes, materials etc. that are uploaded by tutors are rarely in a PDF format which makes it difficult to use on an iPad or takes up valuable time converting to a format that is more usable for me."
>
> "Not all formats are accepted so sometimes the uploaded content cannot actually be viewed."

Access difficulties (Technical)
These produced 61 comments which can be mostly subdivided into: system downtime, slow loading and downloading, and problems accessing from personal devices. These comments also shed some light onto the on- and off-campus access difficulties discussed in the section on trend analysis.

> "Being timed out when using DiscoverMore remotely."
>
> "External problems related to browser use."
>
> I can't always access Learning Edge when at home for reasons I don't know."
>
> "Every so often Learning Edge goes down without warning and this can be very frustrating."
>
> "Loading times are often slow (on a variety of systems and locations) which is annoying."

There is a small category of negative experiences relating to Windows 8 smart phone owners who as there is no dedicated app for their phones, are unable to harness the benefits of mobile access to Learning Edge.

Communication – announcements, notifications, email
In contrast to the 76 students who found the Learning Edge communication tools a huge benefit, there were 30 for whom they are responsible for a negative experience. The main issues are (i) over-communication – simply too many announcements, updates and emails, (ii) irrelevant communications – for example for other groups, and (iii) the poor functionality of the announcements tool that does not filter and does not stay in chronological order.

> "Notifications from the wrong people to the wrong people are annoying."
>
> "Gets confusing sometimes, announcements aren't in date order which makes them hard to find the most recent and this may cause you to miss it."
>
> "It may only be a problem for nursing students but I get notifications through for the other branches that are not applicable to me and can cause confusion regarding work due and the location/time of sessions."

Design and Layout

The way courses are set up in Learning Edge, particularly inconsistencies in naming conventions, was a source of student complaint due to the time wasted in finding information and resources. The majority of the 38 negative comments related to how academic colleagues organise their courses but some students said they were confused by Learning Edge's relationship with email and the Go portal. Some also found the introduction of information panels on the Learning Edge home pages and in the Library Resources tab confusing and at times overwhelming.

> "Initially it's difficult to find your way around (but not for too long)."
>
> "The layouts for each module being different – struggled to find some things for certain modules."
>
> "Pages are not consistent from module to module (e.g. a handbook might be under 'module information' in one module and 'module assessment'in another. It's very hard to find what you are looking for."
>
> "Lots of time spent looking for documents."
>
> "The email function doesn't appear on Learning Edge. I had to figure out that I needed to go back to Go for that."
>
> "Feels too jumbled".

Concluding thoughts on negative features of Learning Edge

The overall message emerging from these comments is that students resent having to spend unnecessary time trying to access slow systems or locate course material. Too much or not enough information can be a problem, as is information aimed at others and deemed irrelevant. As Learning Edge has grown in use, it is increasingly being described as complicated or confusing, particularly to new users.

The review and updating of the institutional 'Baseline' Framework for Learning Edge[1] has addressed many of the issues identified around consistency of student experience across programmes of study but there is still work to be done in embedding it into everyday practice.

Recommendations

- *Continue to actively disseminate the Learning Edge 'Baseline' Framework to all academic staff by providing exemplars, practitioner case studies, briefings and staff development opportunities.*
- *Develop a student-facing version of the 'Baseline' Framework so that they are aware of the University's expectations in this area.*
- *To improve consistency across programmes, work with academic colleagues to develop a VLE taxonomy that ensures a shared use of terminology that describes module folders, tools and activities.*
- *With regard to technical and access difficulties, see the recommendation in the section on trend analysis.*
- *Review the functionality of the announcements tool to ascertain whether the issues raised can be remedied or whether this needs to be fed back to Blackboard as a requested enhancement.*

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[1] http://www.eshare.edgehill.ac.uk/6892/

6th EHU Student e-Learning Survey

Student views on an 'ideal' learning environment

If you could create your 'ideal' VLE what tools or features would it contain?
The survey asks students to tell us what features their 'ideal' VLE would contain that we might take forward in developing Learning Edge and 198 substantive comments were received. Some suggestions related to pre-existing but unknown tools and features, other features have been introduced since the survey closed, and others we will investigate for feasibility. Some suggestions may take some time …

> "Who to see if your computer starts to give up the will to live, and free chocolate bar vouchers."

Analysis of the student 'ideal' VLE comments suggested 5 broad areas for consideration:

Better integration of the Library and resources with the VLE
Tools to support organization and planning of study activity
Recording of lectures
Communication tools and practices
Design and layout

Better integration of the Library and resources with the VLE
Improving access to the library and resources from within the VLE elicited the most comments.

> "Making essential and recommended reading more easily accessible."
>
> "Reading lists accessible from online, all books available as ebooks."
>
> "Library renewals, loans, listings etc."

Tools to support organization and planning of study activity
Tools and features that would better support how students can plan their studies were popular. It is interesting to note that a number of students would find an attendance tracker of great value in identifying where they have knowledge gaps due to missed lectures.

"A list of the deadlines for course in chronological order with a tick box for when you have completed them."

"A list of your up-and-coming deadlines to the homepage."

"Attendance feature I feel is a key essential so that I can see when I was off and what I have missed so it is easier to catch up and revise."

"Maybe online attendance? You can see which lectures/seminars you missed and therefore need to catch up on."

"Option to view all assignments due on page 1 rather than segregated by module."

Recording of lectures

Nine comments suggested the addition of recorded or videoed lectures as a means of reviewing, reinforcing or revising topics.

"For students with learning disabilities … I would like to see each module's page divided into individual weeks … a video or audio recording of the lecture, links to relevant reading."

Recording of all lectures allowing me to watch what was covered."

My ideal Learning Edge would have videos of lectures and a chat page for students to talk about the session. This would help create a place for student to discuss the topic covered, and raise and answer questions together occasionally, without tutor help"

"An online video streaming service – like YouTube that contains a collection of video lectures, podcasts, screencasts …"

Communication tools and practices

This category subdivides into three sub-categories to offer solutions on how communication tools and practices (between staff and students and student to student) could be improved. It offers some solutions to those negative aspects of Learning Edge identified in the preceding section.

Communicating with fellow students within a course with the aim of assisting one another through posing and answering questions, and with collaborative spaces for group work.

> "Group chats with seminar groups …. The ability to easily work within teams on the platform and share documents and files."
>
> "I think all the tools are good on Learning Edge but as a distance learning student I would like there to be more chances to communicate."
>
> "I would create a forum for each class so that there is a way for us to talk over Learning Edge about work we have to do."
>
> "Similar set-up to facebook/for information about course and modules for each teaching group so it is easier to speak and contact friends instantly."
>
> "Better communication vehicles between students as everyone resorted to Facebook in the end and I don't really use that to communicate with people over academic things."

Easier ways of contacting tutors. A few students suggested a chat facility so they could contact their tutors at their point-of-need instead of email. Some suggested that tutor email address, office location and availability be made available in Learning Edge.

> "I think if we had an online chat or access to tutors at any time where they can reply instantaneously with a read and delivered notification would help."
>
> "Quick chat to an inbox of a member of staff (instead of email)."
>
> "Q and A instant messages with tutors which are anonymous but everyone in the lesson/course can see."
>
> ".. info about when tutors are off on leave so I don't email them and then get a message back saying 'I'm on leave at the moment"'.
>
> "contacts of all my tutors listed so it is easy to find their location on campus (i.e. their room number in the building) and also a list of important email addresses."

Better management of the notifications and announcements tools and in particular, the automatic ordering of announcements into chronological order. Colour-coding announcement types were also suggested as a means of improving the visibility or ordering of announcements.

Design and Layout

Comments in this category suggested solutions to issues identified in the section of this report looking at the negative features of Learning Edge. Many were non-specific, for example, "simple and easy to navigate" and "less clutter". Overall, the comments emphasized that many find it difficult to navigate around the site and a few recommended that first-time users are provided with online tutorials. The majority of solutions seemed to be within the gift of the University, for example, an online Learning Edge tutorial is now available from the home page.

Some students were keen to have the potential to customize their home page and hide information or modules that were no longer relevant to them [this is already a feature in Learning Edge, see page 20].

> "I would let every student personalize the front page as for me it is busy."
>
> "Folders that can be personally named."
>
> "Modules would be clearer and colour coded."
>
> "More simple page navigation and a favourites tool bar."
>
> "I would declutter the interface as it looks rather busy."
>
> "Small list of what each folder entails could be useful underneath each hyperlink to folder."
>
> "When it's first opened, possibly having a step-by-step guide for what's available."
>
> "A search feature … search module code or lecture no. as trawling through 6 modules worth of course info just looking for that assignment timetable one more time will kill me off …".

There was one suggestion that falls within this category that may not be possible to reinstate - but the underlying reason for the request can perhaps be satisfied using another technology.

> "There used to be a tool that allowed you to search for modules outside of your course and if lecture slides had been made available, you could download them. I found this very helpful in year 1 when it came to choosing my year 2 modules as I was able to look through some of the module lecture slides that I was interested in and see if the content matched up with my desires for the course. Unfortunately, it seems that this feature was removed, but I'd love to see its return."

Other technologies students would like to see used in teaching and learning

When we asked students to tell us about other (non-Learning Edge) technologies that they would like to see used for learning and teaching, we received 168 substantive comments. Whilst the student comments provided a wide range of ideas about how other technologies could be used, there was one significant difference when compared to the previous survey in 2012/13. From 62 comments in 2012/13 extolling the virtues of Facebook as a tool to support sharing of information, group work and messaging, the 2014/15 student comments referenced Facebook only twice – and in each case, it was that they were unhappy having to resort to using Facebook. The comments below reflect those contained in the 'ideal' VLE section which suggest that the preferred location for chat and a discussion facility is within Learning Edge.

> "More online discussions. We have some on Facebook but this does not seem as official as I would like."
>
> "Online chat and discussions currently used in a Facebook group on my course. I no longer access Facebook so could do something which is as good online/chat group set up on Facebook."

Technologies that students said they would like to see used to support learning and teaching largely fell into seven categories:

Lecture recordings

Communication tools (including chat and discussion groups)

Hardware (laptops, PCs and mobile devices)

Mobile apps

Revision and Assessment

Calendar/timetable access

Lecture recordings
From a minimal 2 references to recording lectures in this section of the survey in 2012/13, this most recent survey contained 45 references to the recording of lectures (including videos of practice).

> "Audio recordings of lectures to recap on what is not mentioned on slides."
>
> "Videos to show how to do something."
>
> "Lectures could be recorded and students could be allowed access on Blackboard."
>
> "More video'd actual lectures given in the classroom setting, useful for online only students."

Communications

Comments in this section were similar to those contained in the 'ideal' VLE section, page 24. There were a few references to how conference calls with tutors might be beneficial.

> "Ability to conference call tutors."
>
> "Possibly the use of tele or video conferencing for (some) contact sessions."
>
> "The option for skype style communication with tutors so that you do not have to take time out of placement to travel to University to discuss issues/ coursework."

Hardware (laptops, PCs and mobile devices)

There were 16 students who took the opportunity to make a case for laptop and tablet loans. A couple of students also asked for more PCs on campus.

> "More computers in library ground floor".
>
> "More lap tops in case room computer does not work. One day that problem wasted 1 hr and 30 minutes."
>
> "Laptops during tests for those students with difficulties articulating thoughts via pen and paper due to poor handwriting inhibiting train of thought".
>
> "For some subjects we get asked to bring laptops/tablets. Some of us don't have them so maybe they could have spare ones that work efficiently."
>
> iPads and how they can be used in a primary classroom to keep up to date with technologies in primary schools".

Revision and Assessment

It was interesting to note that 12 students were keen to have access to past exam papers, formative online tests or practice exams to check understanding, and to act as a revision tool.

> "Tests or quizzes accessible online to be able to revise from. Also past exam papers online".
>
> "A collection of past exam papers for each course module".
>
> "The ### department does not make use of quizzes. Personally, I would like to see these to test our knowledge".

One student also suggested using an existing Learning Edge feature to support student planning for assessment.

> "The 'To-Do' section on Blackboard for each individual module is highly underutilized and could be beneficial for students who have missed a seminar/ workshop and so may not be aware of the likes of up-coming homework etc. Similarly, it could be helpful in terms of reminders for due-in work."

Mobile apps

There were many general comments that indicated students would like to see more use of apps to support their studies (and see also the section on personal devices to support learning, page 10) with only a few comments relating to a specific technology or activity.

> "I am an online student. The Blackboard area does its job well for me. I use it as an app on my iPad. Any other technologies I use via their own apps, such as the Turnitin app. I would prefer it if the lecture notes and presentations were uploaded in PDF format as it makes them easier to read on mobile devices".
>
> "I think the Blackboard app for iPhone and Android does the job perfectly".
>
> "Make Blackboard more mobile-friendly so we can access presentations on mobiles and iPads during lectures rather than having to bring laptops".
>
> "Library app for iPhone, Android, iPads and tablets would make it easier accessing e-books, journals and other resources".

No additional technologies needed to support learning and teaching

There were also comments from 35 students saying that the technologies already on offer were enough – with a small number asking for fewer.

> "None at present. Let people catch up"
>
> "I don't want any more, in fact, I'd like to see less."
>
> ""I am very happy with the technologies on offer".
>
> "No suggestions, pretty sure everything I need is covered".

Concluding thoughts on an 'ideal' learning environment

It is interesting to note that many of the tools and technologies that students would like to see in an 'ideal' VLE or for wider use in learning and teaching can already be found in EHU's current VLE. This

suggests that we need to better understand why these are not being used by staff as well as students – are they 'invisible', 'clunky' or difficult to use?

Some of the student ideas have been achieved for the 2015/16 academic year with the introduction of new systems or tools. This includes a new library management system that integrates with Learning Edge to allow the user access to their library account, and reading list management software. Both have been made available to students via the My Library tab in Learning Edge.

It would seem that students would appreciate having access to recordings of lectures and again, the 2015/16 academic year has seen the introduction of a 12 month pilot of lecture capture software, Panopto[2] that should satisfy this demand.

With regard to laptop loans, a case has been made for the Library to purchase of 30 additional laptops, and for these to be housed in self-service storage/charging units. These will be available during the second semester 2015/16.

The category of tools to support students in organizing and planning their study activity is an interesting one. Whilst there is VLE functionality that has the potential to be of use, there are many mobile Apps that provide this support and are perceived to be of value to students. There is currently a Learning Services project in operation that is gathering and evaluating apps with the potential to be of benefit to students.

Whilst the look and feel of Learning Edge is much improved since it was first introduced to EHU, the many comments about it being 'confusing', 'jumbled', 'overwhelming' have been noted. We need to look at Learning Edge through our students eyes more often so we can better understand whether their comments relate to the course content or the system structure which frames it.

Sometimes in surveys what is not mentioned is of interest. In this case, it was the almost total absence of any reference to Facebook (apart from a couple of negative comments). It was particularly striking in comparison to positive feedback about it in the 2013/14 survey as a tool to support instant messaging, group work and peer support. This time, there is an expectation that the VLE should house these tools. Whilst we can only hypothesise at this time, some insight may be found in the 2015 ECAR report of US students which has found that almost 75% of students agreed with the statement 'When it comes to social media, I like to keep my academic and my social life separate.' (Dahlstrom, 2015, p11).

Recommendations
- ***Review Learning Edge tools and in particular (i) potential for live chat and group discussion, and (ii) for study planning and support). Test these out with staff and students to inform staff development and wider dissemination.***
- ***Complete work on a staff teaching and learning tab for Learning Edge that will provide support, guidance, practitioner case studies and signposting to advice and training at the point of need.***
- ***Undertake User Experience (UX) work to explore what students find confusing and/or overwhelming about Learning Edge and use this to inform changes to course, tab or home page layout.***

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[2] http://panopto.com/panopto-for-education/

Conclusions and recommendations

The intention behind the EHU Student e-Learning survey is to improve the student experience through a better understanding of what makes a good experience of TEL, and more importantly, what does not. It also provides an indicator of the extent to which the institutional VLE, Learning Edge, is integral to the learning experience of Edge Hill students. It is pleasing to note that students rate Learning Edge highly, although they are also rightly critical if it does not always meet their needs. Our students' generosity with their time and feedback is absolutely invaluable and I hope we repay them with year-on-year progress that shows we really are listening to what they tell us.

A series of conclusions and recommendations are included at the end of each section where appropriate and they are reproduced here for ease of reference.

Concluding thoughts on access to technology
Students are increasingly likely to own a range of internet-enabled devices of which the most common are laptop and smartphone, with over half now owning a tablet. They frequently bring at least two devices onto campus and connect them all onto campus WIFI whilst they are here. They access Learning Edge on their phones, particularly for receiving announcements and notifications, but also course content (although Windows phone users are at a disadvantage here). This has implications for the network infrastructure, technical and learner support, and VLE course design. It requires our continual monitoring using enquiry management systems and formal and informal University feedback mechanisms.

> *Recommendations*
> It would be helpful to draw up guidance for prospective and new students on (i) what University apps are available and on what operating systems, (ii) access to University WIFI, (iii) apps other students find helpful in supporting their learning, and (iv) information for international students on accessing UK apps.

Concluding thoughts on the trend analysis from 2008/09 to the present
The five trends discussed in this section are pleasingly positive with noticeable improvements in all categories. Student difficulties accessing Learning Edge have reduced year-on-year since 2008/09, with the greatest improvement being seen in the experience of those accessing Learning Edge from off-campus.

Whilst the on-campus access experience has also continued to improve, it is at a much slower rate. In other sections students describe issues with Learning Edge being unavailable or slow to upload/ download files. With the majority of students accessing Learning Edge and various study apps on their smartphones and tablets as well as personal laptops both on and off campus, we need to focus on (i) investigating the range of permutations of student-owned devices. E.g. operating systems, browsers, (ii) how students use Learning Edge e.g. the signposts and pathways to the system, and (iii) where and when on-campus access is difficult.

> **Recommendations**
> Establish a task and finish group underpinned with User Experience (UX) work to investigate students' on-campus use of mobile devices so that we can better understand their specific difficulties.

Concluding thoughts on negative features of Learning Edge

The overall message emerging from the student comments is that they resent having to spend unnecessary time trying to access slow systems or locate course material. Too much or not enough information can be a problem as is information aimed at others and deemed irrelevant. As Learning Edge has grown in use, it is increasingly being described as complicated or confusing, particularly to new users.

The review and updating of the institutional 'Baseline' Framework for Learning Edge[3] have addressed many of the issues identified around consistency of student experience across programmes of study but there is still work to be done in embedding it into everyday practice.

> **Recommendations**
> Continue to actively disseminate the Learning Edge 'Baseline' Framework to all academic staff by providing exemplars, practitioner case studies, briefings and staff development opportunities.
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It is interesting to note that many of the tools and technologies that students would like to see in an 'ideal' VLE or for wider use in learning and teaching can be found in EHU's current VLE. This suggests that we need to better understand why these are not being used by staff as well as students – are they 'invisible' to users, 'clunky' or difficult to use?

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6th EHU Student e-Learning Survey

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