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Enhancement of Learning: Enabling eLearning and Blended Learning

Dublin Region Higher Education Alliance

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DRHEA Enhancement of Learning Enabling eLearning and Blended Learning



DRHEA eLearning Network of Excellence Preliminary Audit *November 2009*



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Executive Summary

The Dublin Region Higher Education Alliance (hereinafter called 'DRHEA') is an initiative funded by the Higher Education Authority's Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF). The DRHEA began in the second quarter of 2008 to create a coherent framework of access to higher education and to enhance progression through and mobility across programmes and institutions in the Dublin region.

'Developing Dublin as an internationally competitive learning region'

The Enhancement of Learning (EOL) strand, convened by Dublin City University (DCU), is one of four component strands of the DRHEA SIF II submission. EOL is the largest strand, involving all eight of the collaborating institutions and its budget, including matched funding, is in the region of ten million Euro for 2009. It comprises a number of projects organised into four major areas:

- The Dublin Centre for Academic Development
- Transforming the Curriculum/Learning Outcomes
- Teaching for Engagement and Retention
- Enabling eLearning and Blended Learning

The increased levels of participation in higher education over the past decades create significant challenges and demands for third-level teaching and learning, resulting in a need for:

- Curriculum reform with greater emphasis on learning outcomes
- Increased engagement and retention
- New and innovative approaches to the management of large classes
- Greater focus on core competencies
- More effective use of educational technologies

The principal priorities of the EOL strand predominately relate to the areas of teaching and learning. It will support and augment activity across the remaining strands identified by the DRHEA as key areas for collaborative action: Internationalisation, Widening Participation and Graduate Education.

The Dublin Centre for Academic Development (DCAD), the focal point for the DRHEA's EOL strand, will create a 'virtual' centre that will capitalise on expertise in educational practice, pedagogy and training in the individual institutions. It will provide access to tailored, structured programmes of training, development and support for academics in a cost-effective and collaborative manner. Activities of the DCAD and the other projects within the EOL – Teaching for Engagement and Retention, eLearning Network of Excellence and Research-Enabled Learning – will be mutually supportive and complementary and will work collectively and collaboratively to forge strategic and innovative new directions for teaching and learning across the DRHEA.

DRHEA User Community

The EOL strand is transforming undergraduate education, particularly teaching and learning approaches, across the Dublin region. EOL brings together eight diverse institutions, from the largest university (UCD) to the smallest institute of technology (IADT), the oldest university (TCD) to the newest institute of technology (ITB) with the added dimension of a cross-sectoral, regional perspective. Catering for over 75,000 students in the most densely populated region of Ireland but with a view to the growing global and international climate of Irish higher education, the EOL partner institutions know that their greatest



strength may lie in their diversity. Under the DRHEA, old traditions are coupled with new opportunities such as from the Bologna Process, the National Framework of Qualification and technologies such as social networking, second life and web 3.0. This enables the EOL partners to pool their expertise, experience, ideas and initiatives to affect real change in an uncertain and unprecedented economic climate. Irish higher education has possibly never been more challenged or more important than it is currently and the collaboration in progress through EOL provides a means to collectively address the most important and critical issues.

The characteristics and elearning demands of the DRHEA user community are established on an annual basis through a combination of surveys, interviews and group sessions across the institutes. With a significant proportion of the overall student body being part-time, especially in the postgraduate population (44%), there is a **'strong demand for electronic course resources and flexible delivery of these'**. Users can also be classified as **'Highly Mobile'** as the majority of them have laptop ownership and access to broadband networks. There are over 4,500 academic staff members across the DRHEA and while take-up of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is high, it is mainly as an information repository. Interest in other learning technologies is quite high among teaching staff; however, actual take-up and implementation is generally low and in pockets centering on individual champions and departments. In addition, continued and sustained use of learning technologies is difficult to gauge.

What is eLearning?

A widely used definition of elearning is: 'The use of ICTs to improve the quality of learning for all students and to extend access to higher education to those who are unable to attend on-campus'.

This definition reflects the two main facets of elearning. On the one hand, elearning is increasingly being used to improve the quality of learning for current (mainly on-campus) students, while also being used to extend access to off-campus students by what is sometimes referred to as online learning. The major focus of elearning to date has been to improve on-campus teaching and learning but online learning is growing very rapidly. For example, the total number of students doing at least one fully online course in degree-granting institutions in the United States grew to just under four million in 2007, which was a 162% growth over the previous five years. Over the same period, total enrolment in the same institutions grew by only 2.1%. (Allan and Seaman 2008, p. 5)

eLearning Network of Excellence Objectives

The main objectives of the eLearning Network of Excellence are to:

1. Establish a co-coordinated elearning and instructional design network across the DRHEA.
2. Implement online collaboration and develop peer-learning tools to support the teaching of large groups and the delivery of a flexible curriculum with trans-institutional graduate and doctoral programmes.

Current Position of eLearning across the DRHEA

Key strengths and challenges of the current environment are:

- Generally, there is a high-level sponsorship of elearning (usually a Vice-President or Director) in the institutions and elearning functions as an element of learning/teaching development initiatives. All institutions recognise the importance of having a progressive elearning strategy as



part of the overall institutional strategy; however it has not been fully embedded in the smaller colleges.

- All institutions have a VLE, which is used for electronic information distribution, course management and elearning. Most VLEs, with the exception of TCD, are integrated with the IT systems/student database. In the majority of cases, all modules on the institutional database have a space in the VLE and although use of the VLE is not mandatory for teaching purposes, in reality the level of use by both staff and students is extremely high and growing. However, in the majority of modules, the VLE is used primarily for electronic information distribution rather than elearning.
- There are 26 people in total employed to support elearning across the eight institutions. However, there can be significant demands on support due to high expectations among staff and students, especially at the start of term.
- A 'working relationship' with each institution's Information Systems Services is the norm (i.e. non-formal). However, most DRHEA partners noted that IT departments within institutions are not always in a position to implement new learning-technology application rollouts. This leads to outsourcing of support/hosting, thus generating additional costs to expanding elearning support and provision.

eLearning Network of Excellence Key Development Priorities

To meet the demands for increased capacity and to deliver the technology appropriate to the institutions' mission and strategy, the following key IT priorities have been identified:

1. Balance the basic technical and training support demands versus provision of support for online teaching and elearning development activities online.

The 'helpdesk' function in elearning can be overwhelming, particularly at the beginning of the academic year and there can also be high demands on support due to high expectations among staff and students. The development of a collaborative DRHEA support function might be a possible solution in response to these resource constraints.

2. Upgrade the elearning skills of all academic and supporting staff across the DRHEA.

The majority of staff members are now familiar with the basic functionality of information presentation and distribution. The next phase of elearning development should support and inform them on the principles of best practice in relation to the use of elearning technology with a pedagogical focus rather than a technological one. This is an essential next step in order to build on the progress made to date.

3. Expand the use of VLEs beyond content sharing and basic course management towards learning activities.

The implementation of VLEs in the DRHEA institutes over the past decade has made a substantial difference to the accessibility of learning material to students. The focus now should be on supporting the use of the extensive functionality in the VLEs to support learning activities.

4. Ensure the online learning systems are supported as mission-critical services for the institutions.

Online learning and VLEs are increasingly mission-critical and it is no longer acceptable for the environment and data to be inaccessible for any period of time. Senior management in the institutions need to take these services seriously by ensuring the necessary infrastructure and support services are in place so that these services have 99.9% availability on a 24*7 basis.

1. Institutional Profile

DRHEA comprises the four universities in the Dublin region – Dublin City University (DCU), National College of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM), Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and University College Dublin (UCD) – along with the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), the Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT), the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB) and the Institute of Technology Tallaght (ITT).

As can be seen from Table 1.1, there are in total almost 76,000 students across the D. This ranges from over 22,000 students in UCD to some 1,700 students in ITB. It is interesting to note that part-time students are a significant portion of the overall student numbers. Of the overall student body (undergraduate and postgraduate), part-time students comprise 20% of the total while part-time postgraduate students comprise 44% of all postgraduate students. Part-time students can gain particular benefits from the widespread adoption of elearning.

Type¹	DCU	DIT	IADT	ITB	ITT	NUIM	TCD	UCD	Total
<i>F/T UG</i>	6183	9329	1633	1224	2522	5084	10387	14145	49949
<i>P/T UG</i>	562	2562	86	416	1450	638	320	2303	8277
<i>F/T PG</i>	1435	1080	91	15	88	1016	3119	3959	10804
<i>P/T PG</i>	1403	1024	74	49	-	538	1662	2037	6889
TOTAL	9583	13995	1884	1704	4060	7276	15488	22444	75919

Table 1.1: Number of students by type in each of the DRHEA colleges

F/T=Full Time; P/T=Part Time; UG=Undergraduate; PG=Postgraduate

Source: HEA 2008/09 Annual Statistics, available online at <http://www.heai.ie>

Accessed 19th Oct 2009

Issues and Priorities

If elearning is to be implemented across the Alliance, it will entail considerable updating of the skills of many of the staff in the DRHEA colleges. Table 1.2 gives an estimate of the number of staff in each of the colleges in the Alliance. It should be noted that the figures given in Table 1.2 are estimates. For example, some members of the Alliance count part-time staff as fractions (depending on the number of hours worked), while others count each member of staff as a whole number. In addition, different members have varying definitions of which category each member of staff should be placed. Despite these caveats, Table 1.2 gives a good indication of the scale of the task in updating the elearning skills of the staff in the institutions of the Alliance. There are over 4,500 academic staff members across the DRHEA and the

widespread introduction of elearning would entail the upgrading of the elearning skills of a substantial number of these staff. In addition, there is a similar number of non-academic staff (administrative managerial, service, technical, etc.) and a substantial portion of these staff would need their skills upgraded.

	DCU	DIT	IADT	ITB	ITT	NUI M	TCD	UCD	Total
<i>Academic</i>	438	1518	128	110	196	262	828	1270	4750
<i>Non-Academic</i>	470	657	88		137.5	319	1312	1536	4519.5
<i>Researchers</i>	247	-	1		16	232	536	638	1670
TOTAL	1155	2175	217	N/A	349.5	813	2676	3444	10939.5

Table 1.2: Number of staff by type in each of the DRHEA colleges

Source: Estimates provided by the members of the elearning Network from each of the DRHEA institutions above

2. People

elearning support is a relatively new role in all of the institutions, with the earliest appointments made in 2002. As of April 2009, there are 26 people in total employed to support elearning across the eight institutions. Of these resources, 12.5 positions (48%) are focused full-time on elearning support and development, while the others are shared across functions (e.g. ICT, staff training, etc.). In addition, 15.5 (60%) are permanent positions or contracts of indefinite duration and the other 10.5 (40%) are employed under NDLR or SIF funding or are under secondment from other positions. Just one appointment is at senior level. Five of these positions are classified as academic and 25 as administrative.

Generally, there is a high-level sponsorship of elearning (usually a Vice-President or Director) in the institutions and elearning functions as an element of learning/teaching development initiatives. A 'working relationship' with each institution's Information Systems Services is the norm (i.e. non-formal).

Issues and Priorities

The main issue is the high demands on support due to high expectations among staff and students. The 'helpdesk' function in elearning can be overwhelming, particularly at the beginning of the academic year. Because of this, there can be a lack of time for research and elearning is generally regarded as having an administrative rather than an academic status. One possibility in addressing this would be to explore the idea of a common helpdesk. Other possible areas of collaboration would be software purchasing/piloting and workshop design and implementation.

3. Technology

1. All DRHEA institutions support elearning with a VLE. Moodle is used by DCU, ITB, ITT and NUIM, while BlackBoard/WebCT is used by DIT, IADT, UCD, TCD. In addition, DIT and UCD host a Moodle instance. In the majority of cases, all modules on the institutional database have a space in the VLE. However, use of the VLE is not mandatory for teaching purposes.
2. In general, the Centres for Teaching and Learning and the IT departments jointly manage VLEs within institutions. The responsibility for user support and training lies with the centres of teaching and learning, while systems support lies with the IT departments. Most VLEs are now integrated with the IT systems/student database with the exception of TCD.
3. Vice-Presidents, IT departments and teaching and learning steering groups are jointly responsible for VLE decision-making.
4. The level of VLE use across all DRHEA partners is extremely high in all institutions and is growing annually. As of April 2009:
 - a. VLE active user numbers range from 25,000 to 1,832 across DRHEA VLEs.
 - b. Daily user logins range from approximately 12,000 to 4,114 across institutions.
 - c. Average data stored and transferred on a daily basis ranges between 15GB to 0.73GB per day.
5. The highest use of VLEs in institutions is evident in the Sciences, Engineering, Medicine and Business subject areas, while the lowest use is evident in Arts and Humanities.
6. In addition to VLEs, a wide range of learning technologies is supported across the DRHEA institutions to support the development of blended learning. As of April 2009, learning technologies include:
 - a. Audio/Podcasting (Audacity, Voice Recorders, GarageBand)
 - b. Video (Video Conferencing, Camcorders, Echo360)
 - c. Collaborative Learning Tools (Blogs, Wikis, Voting Tools)
 - d. Resource Development Tools (Camtasia, Articulate, Wimba Create)
 - e. Web 2.0 Tools (WordPress, YouTube, Delicious, Flickr)
 - f. SMART Technologies (Interactive Whiteboards, Sympodium)
 - g. Assessment Tools (Moodle, Blackboard, Hot Potatoes)
 - h. Synchronous Learning Tools (Adobe Connect, Breeze, Blackboard)
 - i. Portfolio Tools (Mahara)

Issues and Priorities

1. Most DRHEA institutions do not have an elearning strategy, although IADT has incorporated elearning into a learning, teaching and assessment strategy.
2. In the majority of cases, VLEs are primarily being used as repositories rather than learning environments. While the sharing of content through the VLE is a necessary activity, the challenge for elearning teams is expanding staff use beyond basic course management activities towards learning activities.
3. All institutions noted the lack of dedicated training spaces (although IADT and UCD have dedicated training rooms), equipment and software due to lack of funding. This presents a significant obstacle to training teaching staff in the short term and enabling them to develop elearning materials and deliver courses online going forward. This factor has also led to increased use of open-source software by DRHEA partners, which usually requires more internal support and time from institutional elearning staff.

4. While interest in various learning technologies is quite high among teaching staff, actual take-up and implementation is largely low and in pockets centering on individual champions and departments. In addition, continued and sustained use of learning technologies is difficult to gauge.
5. All DRHEA partners recognised the increased pressure/workload on elearning development staff to re-skill and support increasing numbers of staff, as well as increasing types and numbers of learning applications.
6. Most DRHEA partners noted that IT departments within institutions are not always in a position to implement new learning-technology application rollouts, which leads to outsourcing of support/hosting, thus generating additional costs to expanding elearning support and provision.
7. The issue of the identity and role of elearning development staff was cited as a concern. Increasingly, the role is focused on technical and training support tasks rather than online teaching/elearning development activities.

Based on the audit findings and discussions, several potential areas for collaboration across DRHEA partner institutions have been identified, namely:

- Sharing of staff and student VLE training development and delivery resources
- Sharing of learning technology expertise within the eLearning Network of Excellence
- Sharing of user-learning technology workshops between DRHEA partners
- Reduction of software and equipment costs through group purchases
- Group piloting and evaluation of emerging technologies and applications

The DRHEA eLearning Network of Excellence provides a genuine opportunity for valuable collaboration between all partners to share existing knowledge and expertise and to build new knowledge and supports more efficiently. However, while the support for elearning development within the DRHEA institutions is evident from the top down, increased resources in terms of personnel, funding and infrastructure are necessary if elearning is to be expanded across the DRHEA institutions.

4. Staff Development

1. elearning training is predominantly a function of Centres for Teaching and Learning or of learning technologists within other departments (e.g. IT departments).
2. Training is both technical and pedagogical.
3. Emphasis is often placed on VLE training and associated elearning software.
4. Funding sources such as the NDLR and SIF I and II have been essential in helping to maintain elearning support in the majority of DRHEA institutions.
5. There is a high level of replication of training across the DRHEA institutions. Common training and development themes include:
 - a. VLE training
 - b. Teaching online
 - c. Pedagogical skills
 - d. Workshop environments

Issues and Priorities

1. The majority of institutions commented on a lack of IT support and cooperation for elearning initiatives and support for staff engaged in elearning.
2. There is a lack of a well-defined elearning strategy for some institutions.
3. Staff issues with elearning engagement include:
 - a. Perceived increase in workload
 - b. IP and copyright
 - c. Security of online materials
 - d. Lack of ICT training and knowledge
 - e. Job security - 'Will I be replaced by technology?'
 - f. Lack of on-campus facilities and support
4. Continued funding is uncertain. Many elearning functions are funded from SIF or similar projects with limited funding windows. Will staff be supported if project funding becomes an issue?
5. Most training is workshop and instructor based but many staff with ICT issues prefer one-to-one training sessions to mask their lack of ICT knowledge from peers. Little self-paced training has been developed. There is a lack of dedicated training facilities.

Based on the audit findings and discussions, several potential areas for collaboration across DRHEA partner institutions have been identified, namely:

- Sharing of user-learning technology workshops between DRHEA partners
- Sharing of existing training materials and resources
- Development of accredited modules on teaching and learning with technology. While most of the existing training comes in the form of short workshops, staff may benefit from an accredited offering.
- Development of resources for common training and development requirements
- Reduction of software and equipment costs through group purchase
- Group piloting and evaluation of emerging technologies and applications

The DRHEA eLearning Network of Excellence provides a genuine opportunity for collaboration towards the improvement in the range and quality of training given to academic staff in all partner institutions. At present, staff training and development across the majority of partner institutions are delivered in

workshop form by teaching and learning support units or specialised elearning support staff. Most institutions do not have a formalised elearning strategy and therefore have no solid goals in relation to staff training and development in elearning. As pressure on public sector resources increases, there is a danger that elearning support and training budgets may be cut, both financially and in terms of manpower. Therefore, collaboration in this area may be essential to the continued delivery of support, training and staff development initiatives.

5. eLearning Support

elearning support requires support for both students and staff. Student support is usually dealt with by IT/Computer Services in the various colleges as most student issues are password reset requests, especially for the VLE. elearning support officers and learning technologists provide pedagogical and end-user support to staff. Technical and infrastructure supports tend to be dealt with by the IT/Computer Services departments. Support calls tend to be highest at the beginning of each academic year.

Issues and Priorities

The main issues are:

1. Engendering a cultural shift in attitude towards the use of elearning technologies.
2. The time required for one-to-one support to staff.
3. The lack of support available for part-time staff and students.
4. An increasing use of the VLE leads to an increase in workload for elearning support personnel.
5. The lack of a formalised relationship with Computer/IT Services departments and the Centres for Teaching and Learning leads to difficulty and delay in the uptake of new technologies.
6. Resource constraints limit the uptake of new and emerging technologies as time is consumed supporting existing systems.

The main priority is to reduce the support workload by investigating the following possibilities:

1. Identify elearning support personnel's different areas of expertise. We could identify a single point of contact if support queries need to be escalated.
2. elearning technologies encompass a huge range of technologies. When there is just one support contact in a college, it can be difficult to deal with the huge range of queries. Where common technologies are used, we could share support resources, such as a common helpdesk, FAQs and self-training materials (e.g. short 'how-to' screencasts).
3. elearning support personnel tend to be inundated with support queries at the start of the academic year. If expertise and support resources were shared between elearning support personnel, it would free up some of their time to investigate new and emerging technologies and work in collaborative projects.

6. Research and Development

In areas where new technologies are used for growth and progress, research and development is crucial for real advancement, elearning is one such field. The institutions in the DRHEA recognise the importance of research and development and work to integrate it into the institutional elearning strategies.

The institutes within the DRHEA take different approaches to measuring the impact of elearning in their institutions but all recognise the importance of obtaining feedback from lecturers and students. Possible metrics used across the DRHEA institutions in measuring the impact of elearning are as follows:

- Optional end-of-year evaluation by students
- Optional end-of-year evaluation by staff
- Performance monitoring and feedback from technology-enhanced helpdesks and computer centre helpdesks using web-based incident/issue reporting systems
- Projects including Podcasting, Screencasting, ARS, Symposium, NDLR and feedback and evaluation as per individual project guidelines
- VLE survey (UCC Survey by Rob Cosgrove)

Quality feedback from students and staff members through surveys and questionnaires contribute to the development of elearning within an institution. Institutions capture the calibre of problems and issues experienced by users through the helpdesk software and work to provide solutions through training and the build-up of a knowledge database.

There are a variety of technology-enhanced projects integrated into teaching and learning throughout the institutions. Many of these projects allow technology-enhanced learning teams to use innovative teaching methods and supports and to gain feedback through evaluation and assessment.

Issues and Priorities

The priority for all DRHEA institutions is to develop a sustainable elearning strategy that will support a full elearning service throughout higher education. Colleges within the DRHEA pursue international elearning research activity and research funding. Many hold annual elearning conferences and develop elearning projects that lead to research through evaluation and assessment. Technologists produce a number of academic papers annually on aspects of elearning and contribute to conferences in both the educational and technological fields.

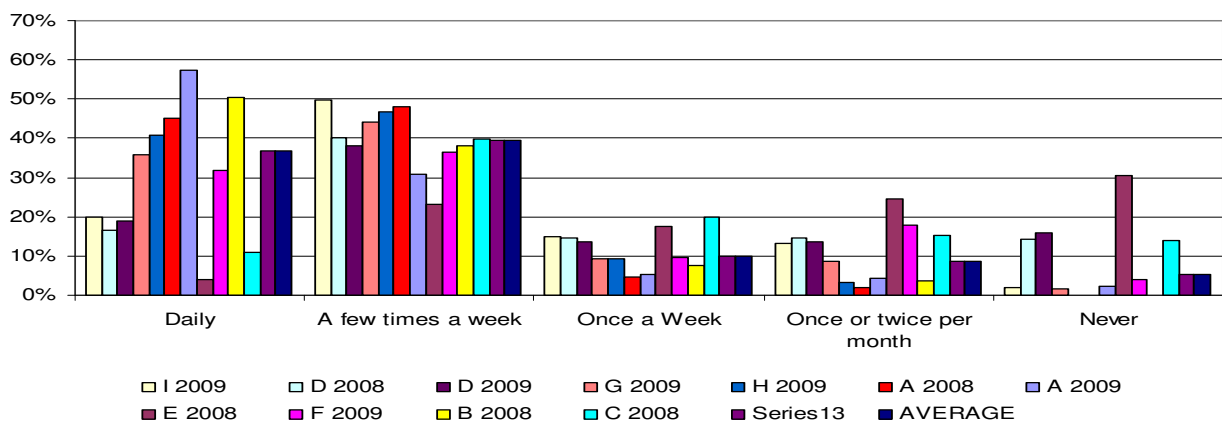
Other elearning priorities within the institutions include the use of elearning to widen access and provide more flexible forms of delivery. New technologies are identified and investigated to promote and support academics in quality elearning for all students. All institutions embed new technologies in quality teaching for their students and support flexible lifelong learning. All institutions recognise the importance of having a progressive elearning strategy as part of the overall institutional strategy. However, such a strategy has not been fully embedded in the smaller colleges.

7. Student Reception of eLearning

This section gives an insight into student reception of elearning/VLEs across the regions. The information is compiled from individual institutional surveys across the region as well as a multi-institutional survey coordinated by UCC.

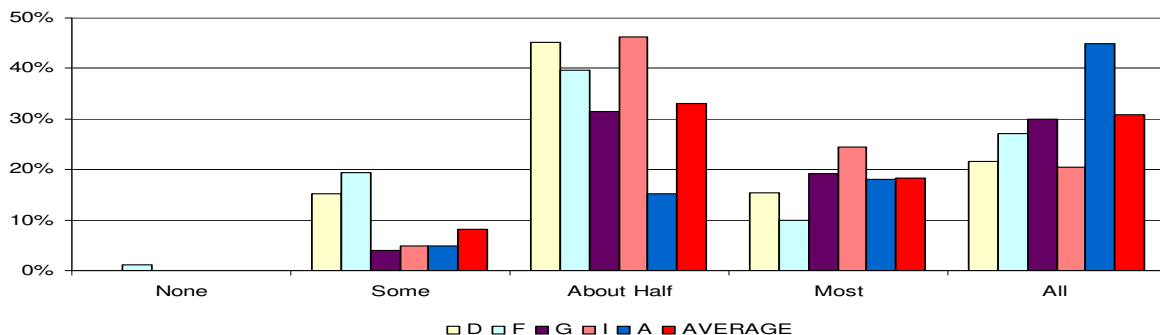
- **Most popular features** - The most popular features are interactivity and the ability to access the VLE off-campus.
- **Frequency of use** - The majority of students surveyed use their VLE quite frequently (from a few times a week to daily). See Graph 7.1 below.
- **Increase of use** - Students received very little or no formal training on the use of VLE but student's enrolment has increased annually across the region.
- **Support of VLE** - While bandwidth, access to computers and 'digital divide' are important issues for students, they are not as important as having a system that is adequately supported and has high reliability and response times.
- **Common formats** - Word, PowerPoint and PDF are the most commonly used formats.

How often do you use your VLE?

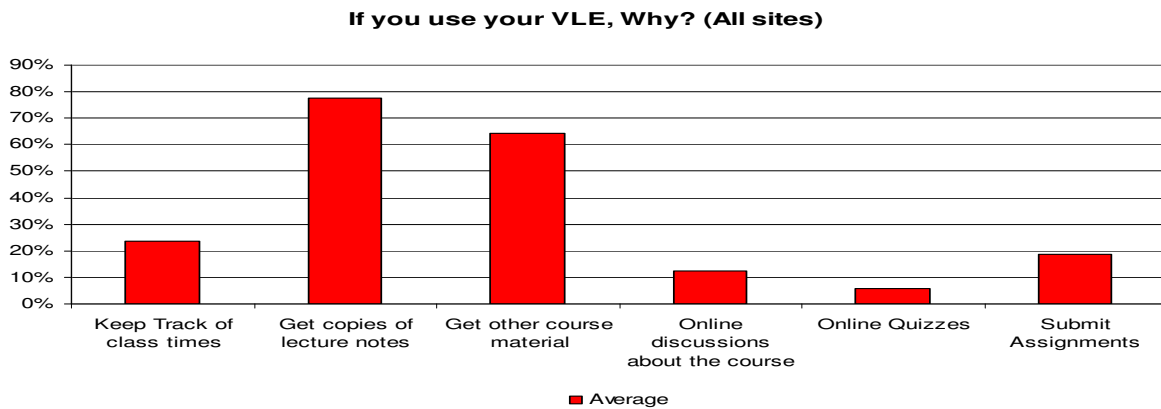


Graph 7.1: Frequency of use

What proportion of your coursework this term has had material in your VLE?



Graph 7.2: Course usage



Graph 7.3: Reasons for use

Issues and Priorities

The main issues and priorities are:

1. General feedback from students indicates that it is critical that the VLE is adequately supported and has high reliability and response times. Students do not see choice of VLE as important.
2. Students reported that the VLEs are used as repositories for content and to support traditional content-based teaching styles. The challenge is to push the pedagogical motivation for introducing these systems in the first case and to make the content more interactive.
3. There is a general assumption that students are less likely to come to class if course notes are available on a VLE. Repeated surveys and research have found this to be an incorrect assumption and that needs to be challenged.

Appendix A - Contributors

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