Running an e-learning course through a virtual learning environment (VLE) across several institutions

It is invaluable if course facilitators are able to gain the support of their individual information technology (IT) department to assist the interprofessional education (IPE) team to enable the course to run on their virtual learning environment (VLE).

Some specific considerations are as follows:

- To allow a course to be run 3-4 times a year without major changes to be made by the programme tutors or administrators a master programme should be created. The dedicated IT lead for the VLE should ensure that a 'master' is always available so that the core IPE team does not have to build a course from scratch every time it needs to be updated. This will also help when courses need to be copied on different shells within a VLE. Once a 'master' course is saved, the course will still need to be updated on a regular basis.

- The master shell will enable the courses to be copied from 'masters' without losing the vital links to discussion boards, WIKIs and external video links

- Negotiate with your IT department that the course statistics and data are available for all the students who have completed the course (including external students) for at least one year post course. This will enable you time to evaluate your courses. For example in Blackboard this is called a Grade Book.

Frequently Asked Questions

How will enrolment take place?

External students

In order to ensure that the course is interprofessional you may decide to link with other institutions so that their students can be enrolled onto your VLE for the duration of the course.

External tutors

So that external tutors from the collaborating universities can e-moderate the course, the following details are sent to the enrolment officers.

- Tutor's full name
- Name of institution
- Position in the institution
- University email address
- Date of Birth

All enrolments to the course may need to be done manually by the IPE Team at the host higher educational institution (HEI). You will need to confirm how students and tutors will be enrolled with your own institution. All external students and tutors will then be emailed their user names and passwords and how to access the course. Internal students can be made aware of the course via the VLE email system.

What sort of time scales should be considered for the length of enrolment?

Details for enrolment are requested in advance e.g. one week before the courses are due to commence.

The IT officers and registration officers at the host HEI need to know the total length of time which external students will need to access the VLE (usually 7-8 weeks for a 5 week IPE course. This allows time for students to refer to the course for assignments after it has formally finished. External students will usually be enrolled from the point at which the enrolment office releases their passwords and user names.

The IT team will assign distinguishable user names for external tutors and students so that they can be easily identified on the master e-directories for the IT team.

External tutors will have access to the courses for 12 months (or a time to be determined by the course leads), at which time their enrolment needs to be renewed for another period of time. When access for tutors needs to be renewed, the original user name for the external tutor is sent to the IT team and the tutors may be re-instated.

How can IT technologists help?

At the time of designing the course, a number of actions may require specific IT input from an expert IT learning technologist. It is recommended that there is a dedicated person from a central IT team (or equivalent) for e-learning courses This will save you a great deal of administration time and students can have better access to all IPE materials when part of a core curriculum.

Can I make adjustments to course content?

Yes. Do make sure that a 'master' course is saved, as courses need to be updated on a regular basis. The dedicated IT lead for the VLE should ensure that a 'master' is always available so that the core IPE team does not have to build a course from scratch every time it needs to be updated. This will also help when courses need to copied on different shells within the VLE.

What major adjustments need to be made to the courses?

All hard coded embedded links (e.g. direct links to discussion boards and WIKIs) will be removed from the masters so that the WIKIs and discussion boards, videos and images are not lost every time we copy the courses for roll out. We have created extra 'buttons' to the course content menu so that students and tutors can access these areas easily. The instructions within the courses have been significantly altered to include instructions guiding students to access these functions with minimal disruption.

Videos have been streamed to facilitate better imaging. Students and tutors have been informed that they will need 'real player' on their PCs to access audio-visual materials. All computers in the HEI libraries and student areas have the appropriate programmes installed. Tutors (including external tutors) will need to install this on their own machines and contact their institute IT

personnel to do this. Links to download these programmes are embedded in the course if users need to download this programme on personal computers.

The videos have been filed in the HEI video library for access by the IPE course tutors.

What do instructors need to do before commencing a new course?

- Check all dates and adaptive release elements

In the 'master' course, all the 'weeks' and accompanying WIKIs and discussion boards are programmed for adaptive release. Course tutors need to ensure that they check dates for this and input appropriate dates for release into all 'copied' courses. Course tutors need to check that all statistics are enabled for tracking, and that manual dates need to be added into the appropriate week pages so that students know when the course materials will be available for them to view.

- Check that the WIKIs are available to all students and that they can edit these (can modify the WIKIs in instructor mode. Tip: check the course in 'student' mode).

What do tutors do at the end of the course?

External students will not be able to access the course after 8 weeks as the system will automatically deny them access. Internal students however can still be able to access the course so the course needs to be made 'unavailable'. This can be pre-set using adaptive release functions or done manually.

How can I evaluate data?

Data for external students can still be available for the courses. IT technologists can programme the process such that the data does not 'disappear' once the external students have finished the course and are no longer enrolled. It is good practice to download all the data from WIKIs, discussion boards, evaluation questionnaires and statistics of use (e.g. gradebook) as soon as possible after the course finishes.

How do I download statistical data?

This can be done by instructors using the a 'course statistics' tab on the VLE from the control panel.

Tip for printing WIKI pages: set the page set up to landscape rather than portrait

Tip for printing discussion boards: click on 'collect all' in the discussion board forums and then print.

How do I archive populated courses?

The HEI may have a policy of archiving all populated courses for example, every 2 years. When archived, all discussion board data, WIKI data and statistical data on the VLE will not be available.

 Tip: It is good practice that archiving of courses takes place after all the statistical information is retrieved. We can then instruct the systems administrators that populated courses can be archived.

How can I manage 'Trouble shooting'?

A forum can be added to the discussion board for students to leave messages about any ambiguities or technical issues. This will need to be checked on a regular basis. If there are technical difficulties, contact the institution's IT VLE Administrators.

Can students access a VLE at NHS sites?

Anecdotal feedback has highlighted that VLEs cannot be accessed by students due to NHS firewall regulations and hence students out on placements cannot access the course whilst on the wards. They can only access VLEs from the clinical libraries at the hospitals or own equipment.

An example of registering external students to De Montfort University's VLE

To enable access for external students, we have to (email address for enrolment officer in IT department) and provide the following details:

-Student's full name

-Student registration number at their base University

-Student's date of birth

-The student's university email address

The IPE leads from the Universities which we collaborate with forward these details to the named IPE e-learning leads at the host institution. The email with these details is used for verification as proof of registration and can be sent to the academic registrar.

External tutors can also be enrolled using similar processes. Once the IT team registers the external students and tutors on their system, they will send IPE e-learning leads at the host institution the user names and passwords (initially their dates of birth).

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