
Learning Virtually or Virtually Learning?

**A survey to gauge
students' use and
perception of
Blackboard and
VLEs**

**University of the Arts,
London
May, 2008**

Olivia Sagan &
Emily Candela,
ctad, UAL.

Contents

		page
	Executive summary	2
1	The context	3
2	Methodology	4
3	Main findings of the survey	5
	3:1 About you and Blackboard	
	3:2 You and your virtual learning	
	3:3 Main themes	
	3:3a Weaknesses of existing systems	
	3:3b Visuals and communication	
	3:3c Enhancing not replacing	
4	Main findings of the focus group	17
5	Recommendations	19
6	References	20
7	Appendix 1: Summary of pilot findings	21
8	Appendix 2: Demographic data of respondents	24
9	Appendix 3: Focus group interview schedule	28
10	Appendix 4: The on-line questionnaire	29

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a survey of students' use and perception of Blackboard and VLEs as part of their learning in art and design higher education. In November 2007 a consultative process began through which the scope and design of the survey were decided. An on-line questionnaire was designed and piloted, and eventually responded to by 256 students across UAL during spring of 2008. This data was supplemented by data from a focus group interview held in June 2008.

The main findings of this survey were:

- Students were supportive of Blackboard and many could see its function and potential as part of their learning
- While using Blackboard mainly for accessing course materials and keeping up to date with course information, students also valued the networking and communication aspect of Blackboard, for example discussion forums, and would like to see this aspect expanded
- Students were generally supportive of increased virtual learning, but were not in favour of it replacing tutor contact
- There was criticism of the appearance of Blackboard and its general navigability
- Students were aware that there were noticeable differences in the ways in which tutors used Blackboard. They valued those who used it consistently, particularly by keeping the material on it up to date

This report concludes that Blackboard is providing a useful service to UAL students but that there are aspects which could be improved upon. It is also suggested that student opinion be sought and used as a part of the ongoing development of teaching tools such as Blackboard.

1. The context

Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) have been in widespread use in British Universities for several years (Brown, 2003). Very much now part of the bricolage of teaching and learning, the virtual learning experience is an embedded part of HE provision, with a reported usage of 95% of all HE institutions in 2005, compared to 81% in 2001 and 86% in 2003 (Browne *et al.*, 2006).

Within this context, however, there is a wide variety of implementation, usage and expectation on the part of both teachers and students. There is also a diversity of institutional responses, attitude and strategy through which to plan for a future which, almost certainly, will see a greater use of virtual learning. As HEIs manage and negotiate a field which is undergoing almost weekly change, more localised, tailor-made models and solutions are becoming favoured. In order, however, to fine tune the somewhat clunky instruments and systems now installed in these HEIs, each institution is becoming aware of the need to evaluate its own systems. Part of this drive towards local evaluation includes an urgent need to hear what students themselves are saying about the virtual learning experience:

Despite the growing importance of learner voice as a strategy for quality improvement in education, research into e-learning has hitherto focused on the institutional and pedagogical implications of using technology in learning. Little attention has been paid to learners' own perceptions of e-learning or to how they use technology to learn more effectively. (JISC, 2007:6)

The University of the Arts first tested Blackboard in 1999, and has moved from Level 1, version 5 in 2000 to the current version 7, during which time usage has increased considerably. The profile of e-learning has risen to strategic and management level, with an ELearning strategy for 2007-2010 now in place which recognises: *'that learning technologies are increasingly and irreversibly central to students' learning'*. Plans for the further development of Blackboard and tools are underway to meet an anticipated *'increase in the use of mobile technologies for learning (mobile phones, Personal Digital Assistants and iPods, for example) as well laptops and workstations.'* (p2).

This survey is a snapshot of current use and perception amongst students which can inform the design and scope of future evaluative undertakings in the area.

Acknowledgments

Thanks are due to those members of staff who took the time to comment on the draft proposal and questionnaire and of course to all the students who took part in the pilot, the on-line survey or the focus group interview.

Special thanks to Darren Raven of LCC for his help throughout the project.

Comments and suggestions should be sent to Olivia Sagan, Senior Research Fellow (Pedagogy): o.sagan@arts.ac.uk

2. Methodology

Consultation and pilot

This research began with a month long consultation period in November/December 2007. During this period approximately 10 members of staff with specific interest in e-learning across UAL were asked to give their views on the draft proposal for this research and on which areas of questioning the survey should focus. Following this, the on-line questionnaire was designed, and commented on further by staff members. It was then piloted at LCC, with the co-ordination of Darren Raven. The questionnaire (see appendix 4) was then slightly modified in response to feedback and responses from the 24 responders. The questionnaire was designed using SurveyMonkey software, which is user friendly and allows for on-line completion and submission via either email or webpage link.

Sampling

The aim of this research was to obtain a snapshot of usage and perception across UAL, while working with a manageable sample size. A staff member from each college was asked to email the link through Blackboard to a random sample of 100 full time BA students. In addition, the link was posted on the Blackboard site itself. The link was live from mid-January 2008 to the end of March 2008, and collected a total of 256 responses from across UAL. A breakdown of the response college by college can be seen in the findings section.

Focus Group

It was also decided (and endorsed through the consultation process) that a focus group should be formed to gather further qualitative data. The final question on the questionnaire asked for contact details of all respondents willing to be contacted for this purpose. Students from this group were contacted and invited to attend two such groups in May 2008. Unfortunately, many of them did not at that point respond to the invitation, or were unavailable on the dates offered. In order, however, to achieve the aim of gathering focus group data, a focus group was arranged at LCC in May 2008, with a random selection of students from the FdA, Design for Graphic Communication. The findings of this group interview can be seen in section 4. Questions put to this group were arranged around the 3 main areas of interest to emerge from the questionnaire (see appendix 4).

Data analysis

All data collected by SurveyMonkey was analysed in two stages, giving both numerical breakdown of responses and also a more detailed overview of the themes of the qualitative responses on the questionnaire. The qualitative data gathered from the focus group interview is also reported on thematically.

Limitations

All surveys are subject to bias and therefore the data must be interpreted with some caution.

The extent to which lead tutors at the colleges encouraged students to participate varied greatly. In addition, the respondees of the questionnaire represent, to some extent, a self-selecting group of students sufficiently motivated and/or interested in the subject of the survey. It should be noted that students *not* using Blackboard, for reasons of accessibility, perception, choice or other, are also perhaps less likely to have been drawn to participate in this survey. For this reason, one serious limitation of the study remains the possibility that the most important viewpoints are those this survey was unable to gather.

Furthermore, in a university the size of UAL, the final sample must also be recognised as small, representing only, as mentioned, a snapshot. That said, credit must be given to the students who did respond for their clear, articulate and thoughtful answers. There were no 'spoiled' entries, neither were there inappropriate responses, though there were some which were humorous but valid. This research can comfortably claim to have gathered some useful articulations of the use of and perception of Blackboard and VLEs more generally from a group of its current students. These views should be taken into account and fed into future planning and developments of Blackboard and VLEs at UAL.

The questionnaire consisted of three sections:

- About you
- About you and Blackboard
- You and your virtual learning

Basic demographic information on this cohort (about you) collected in section 1 is provided in appendix 2. The following data represents results of sections 2 and 3. This is followed by a presentation of the main themes identified in the qualitative sections of the questionnaire.

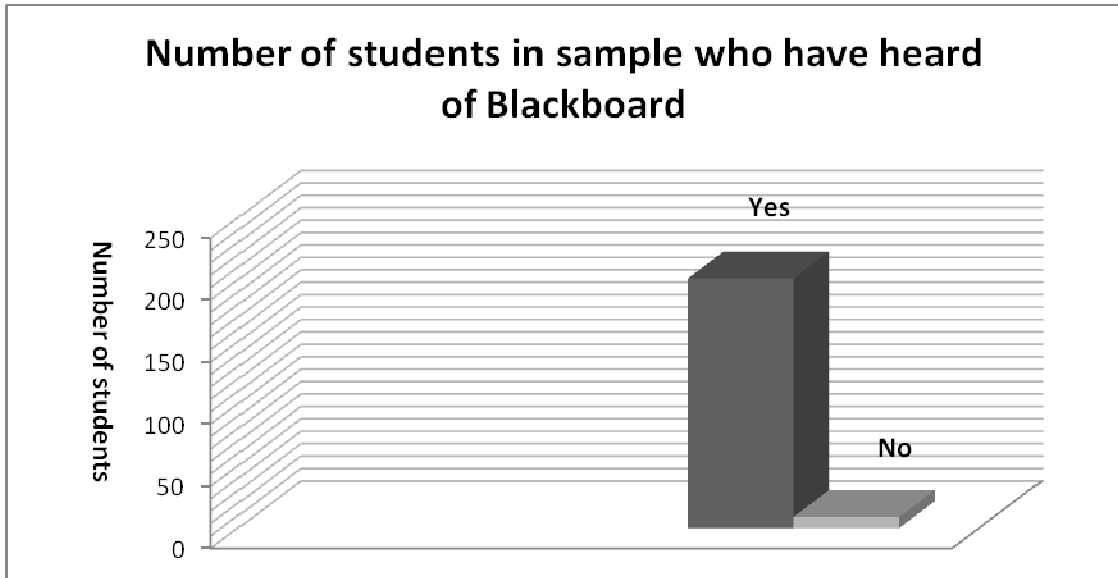
3. Main findings of the survey

What follows is an overview of the findings under each of the three section headings.

3:1 About you and Blackboard

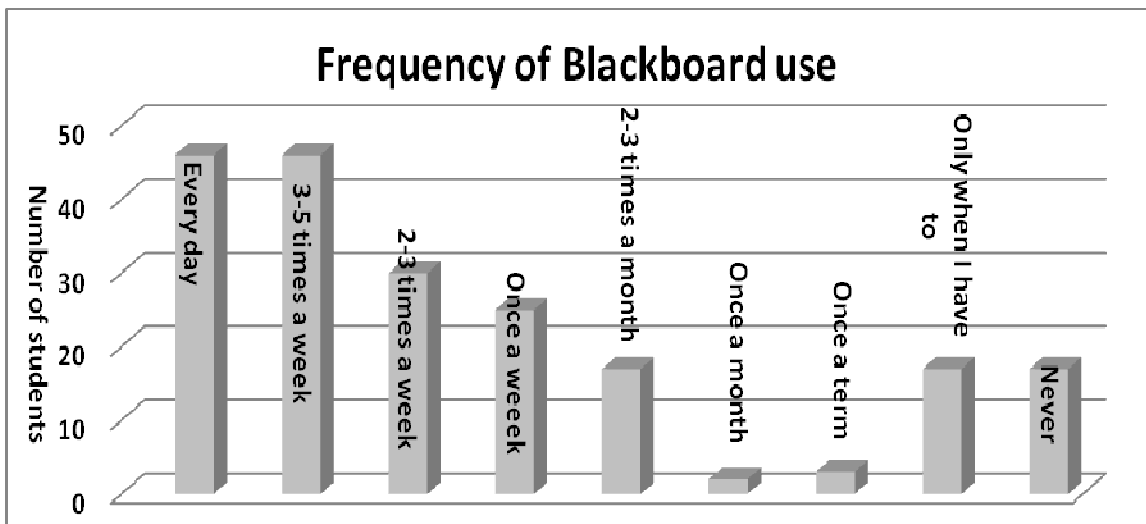
How many students knew what BB was:

Of the 201 students who responded to this question, only 9 stated they did not know what Blackboard was:



Frequency of use

Most respondents use blackboard either every day or 3 – 5 times a week. However, a total of 34 students stated they used Blackboard either ‘only when I have to’ or never, a considerable number for a survey of this size.



Of those who answered ‘never’ to this question, a variety of reasons were given, mainly pertaining to technical failures, but also to uneven use amongst tutors:

I tend to become frustrated every time I attempt to log onto Blackboard: either the site is not up or it takes too long to load, or memos are posted in awkward areas of the site. It just seems a bit unorganised. And the branding doesn't help either. It's a bit bland. Plus, all the professors don't seem to be on the same page regarding its relevance. Some use it. Some don't. There have been moments when I've spent time searching for course documents only to find out that they weren't published in the first place.

But there were also comments as to Blackboard's compatibility, navigability and design:

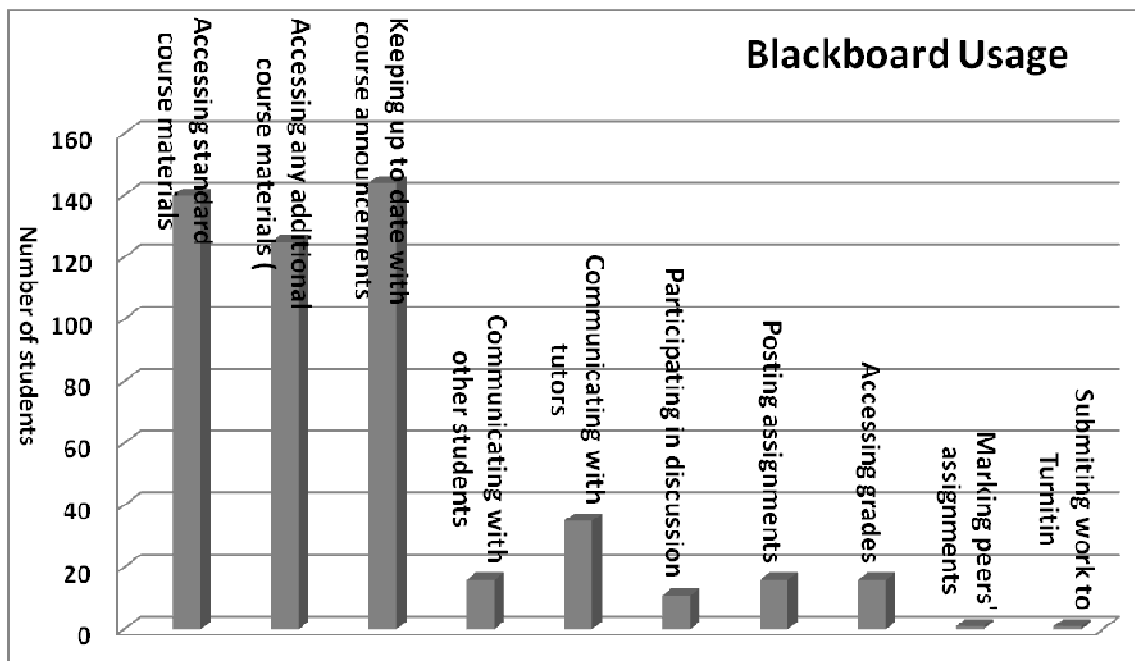
IT DOES NOT WORK ON A MAC PROPERLY. IT IS FAR TOO FRUSTRATING. I HAVE NEVER BEEN ABLE TO FIND WHAT I NEED ON IT. THE INTERFACE AND FILE STRUCTURE IS DISORGANISED.

SOOOOooooo difficult to navigate. I can never find what I want.

That said, there is no way of knowing from the survey data, whether such comments reflected *actual* navigational problems, or a lack of skill and knowledge on the part of the individual – either one of which would require a different intervention.

Reasons for use

Most of the respondents used Blackboard for accessing standard course materials (140) and/or accessing any additional course materials, including lecture notes, (125). Other types of usage are depicted below:

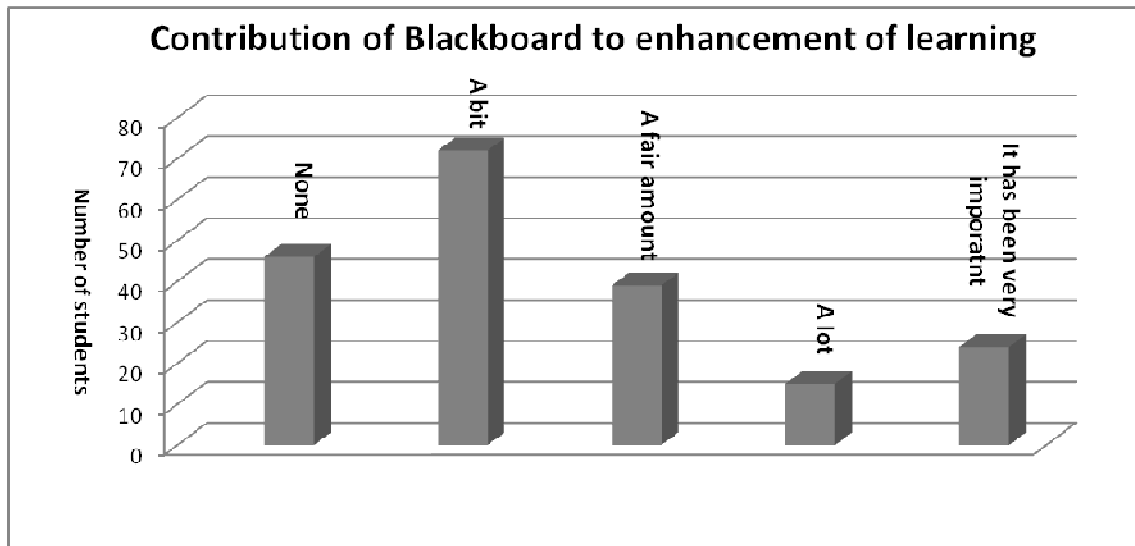


In the category of 'other', students cited emailing and accessing the library catalogue. There were also further comments on what they would like to access:

...would like to have all briefs there, would like to go directly to my course and see ALL related papers, such as Dissertation formatting documents for example. Where is it? This is very important.

Contribution of Blackboard to enhancing learning experience

36.7% per cent of responders (72) felt that Blackboard had enhanced their learning experience 'a bit.' Note needs to be taken, however, that a relatively large group, 23.5% or 46 responders, answered that Blackboard had not enhanced their learning experience at all. That said, the language of 'enhancing learning experience' is notoriously vulnerable to misinterpretation and miscalculation, and this is one area where the focus group data can serve our understanding better.



Aspects of BB found to be particularly helpful

A variety of responses were elicited in this area, but it needs to be noted that just over half of the cohort responded, with a total of 124 skipping the question. This is a further area where focus group data is useful. Amongst the responses, accessing course announcements held a high premium, particularly those pertaining to a rescheduling of practical arrangements. There was also an appreciation of being able to download handouts and lectures, and other standard 'course materials'. Students who studied part time, and/or who travelled some distance to their college and had reason to feel some dislocation from their peers, their course and/or their tutors, valued the discussion and communication potential of Blackboard:

The fact that it is updated regular by my tutors and so i can get current information. Also that i can join in discussion boards with other students.

A number of students also commented that Blackboard was useful in widening the breadth of information available, through links to the library, other websites, exhibitions and so on:

*...keeping abreast of what's going on, ie exhibitions etc
...events happening all around UAL.
...It is a very good idea and a good way of keeping in touch in theory*

There were a number of comments, however, which identified Blackboard as a less than inclusive means of conveying important information, and one which leads, in some cases to tutors being lax about updating students verbally:

Blackboard is helpful.....IF YOU HAVE THE NET AT HOME If you aren't blessed with a lap top or computer with internet, you have to come all the way into uni to find out maybe your lecture is cancelled or that there was some extra assessment or deadline you had no idea about.

It has had a negative effect on the academic progress of the whole class as tutors assume we can access information on blackboard and fail to communicate it effectively in classes, lectures and seminars.

Facilities students would like to see added to BB

Only 103 students (less than half) responded to this question, but of those who did, there was a clear request for more interactivity:

...a student to tutor chatboard for specific tutor queries (emails are not always possible or answered). It would be good if blackboard allowed students to post and interact instead of just tutors to students. It is very difficult for students to express worries/positives/negatives about courses/work. Blackboard is very onesided. our opinion is important too and it does not feel like the university values it.

COMMUNICATING WORLDWIDE WITH OTHER STUDENTS WITHIN THE SAME MAJOR FIELD.

I know it sounds weird but I've always thought that some form of alumni support link would be great. You could contact and converse with past students regarding assignments, interviews, and possible professional opportunities.

...integration with facebook?

As well as a repeated request that Blackboard be more visual, and amenable to visual experimentation:

*...Better interface design...Better graphics! More colour!
...photo blog too see what other students on your course are doing
...more fluid design more colourful more widgets more online submission of assignments
...The forums are quite bland as most users seem unaware of how to post images, video files, audio files etc. Anything which made them feel able to contribute extended materials would enrich the experience for everyone.*

*...Students being able to upload photos from the lessons because at the moment we have to share them on facebook, and not everyone is on there and group up to our course group.
...Ability to batch upload images.*

While respondents were, on the whole enthusiastic about potential developments of Blackboard, there were cautionary comments about the patchy use of Blackboard having a negative effect:

Get everyone to really use it. Right now, there is very little point in checking it every day because it is very rarely made use of by teachers, let alone students. If everything would be on there as a standard, people will start using it [if they know of course] and it will become a very valuable thing. Right now it's almost useless.

Aspects of BB found to be unhelpful / confusing

This question predictably elicited some honest and frustrated responses. Many of the 125 responses were regarding the lack of robustness of Blackboard, and this theme runs through the qualitative data gathered through the survey.

it periodically goes down, with no explanation or warning.

There was also great frustration expressed at Blackboard's ability to lead you round in circles and/or dead ends:

*Clicking on links for new announcements that don't exist or lead you back to the main board...
...It has a "labyrinth-interface design" that I don't think enhances the experience.*

Yet another common theme was the appreciation of the potential of Blackboard, if only it would do the job better, and, importantly, reflect in some way the design-conscious student of UAL. That said, the criticisms of design elements were often collapsed with comments regarding the tutors' use:

...A lot of duplication of information in folder areas. I think that there should be a more standard approach to how information is uploaded so that it is clearly marked as new, dated and sign posted. At the moment it seem a free for all in term of typeface use, styles, size and colour etc. .It all adds to its messy look. Style guide please!!

And here again, criticism of what is seen as disorganised material seems to lead to a more general impatience:

*There is nothing on it, out of date, not structured well [get it clear where what is, per year, per class, per project], hard to find my way. Get it going properly! It's a mess but it has such potential.
...the navigation is not straight forward - the naming of each section and how they overlap its not easy to find things nor is it easy to access Course announcements as some are over a year old!*

Comments regarding outdated material or empty folders are hard to dispute and should be looked into. However, there are a number of possible factors at play in comments regarding navigability and design. For example, it may be that 'design and layout' or the software were being blamed for poor or erratic use – as mentioned earlier, the survey could not gauge the actual competence of the user.

Regrettably, whilst it would seem that many students are more than happy and willing to engage with Blackboard, there was a perception that it was short-changing them, and frustrations were running high:

The interface is visually repelling, it never works, tutors don't put their stuff up, no one communicates via it, it is often hard to access, it is hard to navigate with no apparent thought through structure. It is by all means absolutely rubbish.

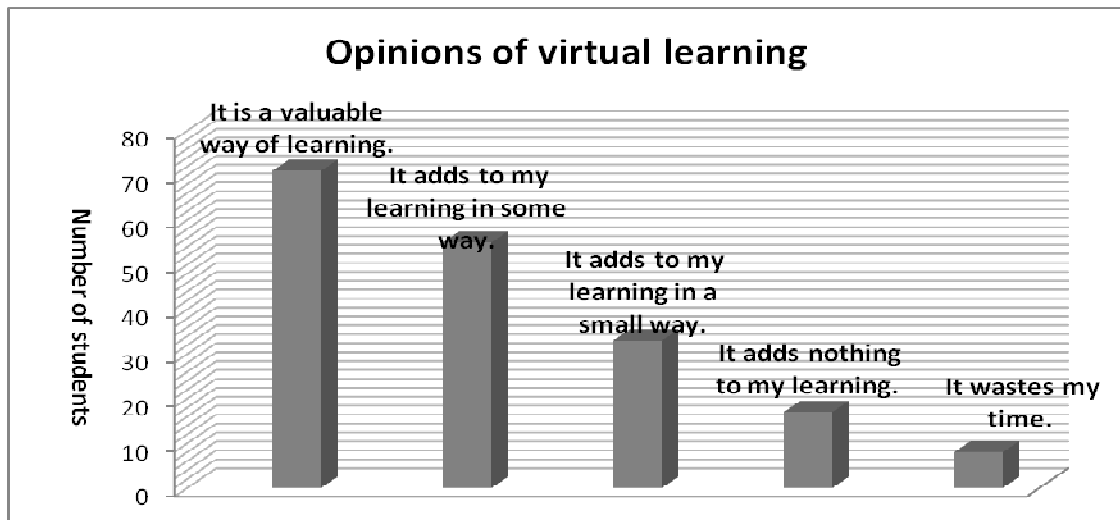
In this quote, however, a number of factors, Blackboard itself, weaknesses of the IT infrastructure, *and* tutors' sometimes less than competent use, are again merged, leading to a general frustration about Blackboard being 'absolutely rubbish'.

An easily identifiable and common theme of section 2 of the survey, is that the **students who responded are both e-learning smart and more than willing to integrate Blackboard into their learning experience**. They feel they are a step ahead of the way Blackboard is mainly being used, and do not feel that it currently adequately represents or serves them as an art and design student cohort. That said, they are also clear about the potential benefits of Blackboard, and offered several examples of how it helped them with their course load.

3:2 You and your virtual learning

General opinions of virtual learning

Of the 184 responses to this question, most (71) were clearly of the opinion that virtual learning, in general, is a valuable way of learning. However a combined total of 25 students thought that it either added nothing, or indeed wasted their time.



Reasons why virtual learning does not add to the learning experience and suggestions

21 students explained further why they felt virtual learning added so little to their learning, including one who commented rather succinctly:

I think it would be easier to ask someone why virtual learning ADDS to the experience, instead of the other way around.

Several comments related to lack of access – either because they could not get to a reliable computer when they needed to, or because once on, systems were down, slow or, indeed, they lacked the know-how as to what to access and how. Some students also felt there was an information overload which needed to be better managed:

I would not know where to look. It is not made clear enough.

I think sometimes there is too much information available, so I'm not sure what is important, so I ignore all of it. This problem is compounded by my dyslexia.

In addition, several students commented that they valued face to face contact:

...well, if you are in a school, paying to be there, then be there, not at home looking at a screen...

...I think it's more important with good face to face relations...

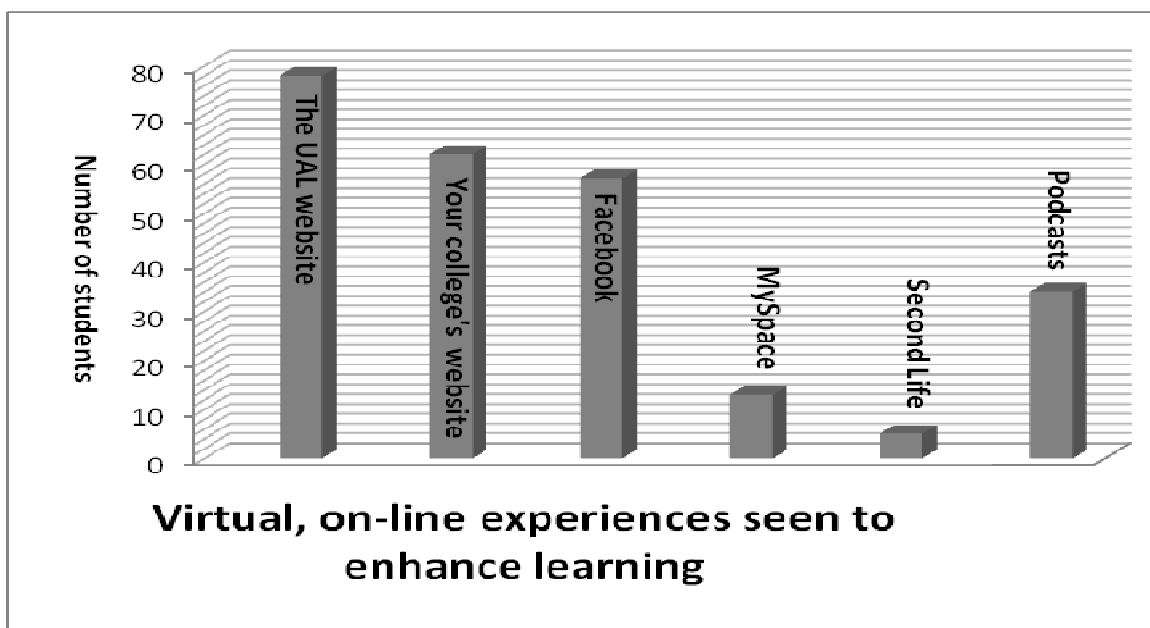
...you cant beat learning from actual PEOPLE!

Online, virtual experiences which are seen to enhance learning

143 students responded to this question which sought to explore what on-line/virtual experiences *other* than Blackboard students were experimenting

with. Here there is clear indication that the UAL website and the college website are thought of as enhancing the student's learning. In the category of 'other' students cited a range of online experiences, with some emphasis on 'information' gathering sites such as Wikipedia and Google. There was also a focus on communication through a number of blog/discussion sites, some specific to the student's area of study, and again, mention of Facebook. Students felt that the communication and interaction offered by such sites was important:

It must be remembered that there is NO CAMPUS LIFE at this university and in such a big city it sometimes feels like there is no community.



Proportion of respondents welcoming a move to more or less virtual learning

A high number of students skipped this question (90) which may indicate ambivalence or indecision. Of the 166 who did answer, 118 were in favour of more virtual learning. Further comments added indicated there was wariness about more virtual learning until systems were improved, and a similar wariness regarding the potential downgrading of teaching and lessening of face to face contact. There was no expression of support for a move towards greater 'substitution' (Badge, *et al*, 2005). Rather, there seemed to be a strong voice supporting the tutor as the most important element in the student's experience and any potential weakening of this relationship was seen as a negative move:

I think that real contact with tutor is the most important part of our creative learning and knowledge developing

The best way of learning will always be from tutors who make the classes interesting

How virtual learning / BB could be developed to enhance learning on specific courses

81 students answered this question, and answers to most of the questions focussed less on specific courses and more on repeating general requirements for better systems, communication and better managed information. There was, however, a strong demand that any further developments include a stronger visual element, with more podcasts and on-line exhibition spaces. Dyslexic students also feel resources are not being used as well as they could be:

All lectures would be available as pod casts through the website or at least mp3's. I am dyslexic and I cannot take notes and my recording equipment is not good enough quality to replay lectures

Again, there was a concern that virtual learning and Blackboard would eventually erode tutor contact:

It's fine as a way of storing data for students to access, but I wouldn't really welcome the idea of virtual learning replacing any of the precious little contact we already have with tutors.

3:3 Main themes

Overall, there appeared to be three main themes which emerged as those we need to take heed of:

- a) Weakness of existing systems
- b) Visuals and communication
- c) Enhancing not replacing

3:3a Weakness of existing systems

There were numerous comments which referred to weaknesses, across different domains, of our current systems. This section of the report will confine itself to addressing weaknesses of Blackboard. Weaknesses fell into two domains: weaknesses of Blackboard itself and weaknesses in the knowledge base of both tutors and students.

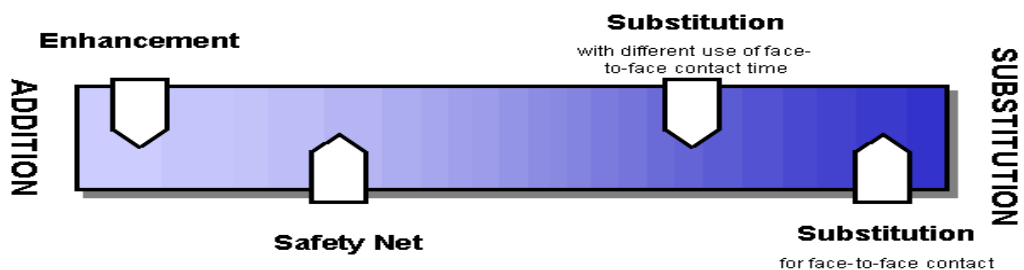
Students were critical of the clumsiness of Blackboard, its design and navigability. But they were also weary of their own lack of access to it, either because of system breakdown or slowness, or because they did not have their own computer at home and sometimes found it less than easy to access one at college. Mac Users also mentioned compatibility issues.

But there was also a significant voice which complained that knowledge and usage were limited, and that when used in a minimal way, Blackboard hardly enhanced learning at all, concurring with other studies:

Not surprisingly, recent evidence has shown 'simply putting notes on the web' does not improve student learning

(Evans et al, 2004:60)

From the students' point of view, many bemoaned the fact that there was little support in libraries or on their course for Blackboard use and that they were 'expected to know' how to use the various tools on offer. But the main complaint regarding knowledge was levelled at tutors' own usage – in that it is perceived as lacking in several ways. Blackboard is seen to be used inconsistently and unimaginatively by tutors, and even given its clumsiness, it is regarded as not being currently used as well as it could be. Many staff, it would seem, are located at a *basic* 'enhancement' end of a spectrum of use. One possible model to illustrate this is that of (Badge *et al*, 2005:5):



While a move to substitution is *not* a target at UAL, more sophisticated and effective enhancement is. Dyslexic students, for example, remarked on what was seen as a wasted resource which could be helping them immensely. The very least students appeared to be requiring of their tutors is that Blackboard be used as a *reliable and up-to-date* repository.

3:3b Visuals and communication

Many suggested improvements fell into these two areas. Students at UAL for the most part study visual art and design, and it is unsurprising therefore that they should comment on the *non-visual* aspect of Blackboard and its weak visual design. Greater use of visuals as part of its design but also as part of its content (images, podcasts, video recordings, on-line exhibition links, etc.) was highly recommended. This reflects Owen's observation that:

What characterises the use of ILT in most (not all) subject areas is that students are users of software and the medium of software and ILT is incidental to the content of the learning. In some ways students are consumers of the software as a way of getting at the content. Within Art and Design and Media things are somewhat different. Design students study interface design, create web and multimedia artefacts and are

concerned with issues of visual language, usability and the medium of ILT itself.

(Owen, 2006)

The lack of usage of Blackboard as a communicative tool was also frequently noted. Many comments suggested that Blackboard be linked with Facebook, and/or provide a forum for a more open, fluid, student-centred social space. This was seen as ideally being available for students after they leave UAL, to enhance social and professional networking.

Blackboard was seen as several steps behind the requirements of the creative, savvy UAL student. It was perceived as not meeting the visual and communication needs of the student, both elements of which are essential aspects of the art and design student's experience of both learning and developing a creative, interactive, informed persona:

Digital technology, more than any other technology of the past, is redefining what it means to be art and design-educated.

(Davies & Worrall, 2002:37)

3:3c Enhancing not replacing

This creative, switched-on student voice was, however, also aware of the potential of an over-reliance on virtual learning and Blackboard to damage the quality of teaching and learning. Any erosion of the amount of teaching / contact time with tutors which students clearly valued highly was seen as unacceptable, and that use of any on-line, virtual resource should be regarded as an addition to, not substitute for, human contact in the learning domain. That said, students were aware of how Blackboard could remove some of the more mundane tasks of teaching (repeating lectures, or instructions, for example) and how it could be used to add a further dimension to lectures and teaching. It would seem that students' perceptions of tutors' use in this survey echo, at least to some extent, findings of Evans et al (2004), who noted:

... there is evidence that little consideration is given by hard-pressed academic staff of how best to adapt the format of previous teaching materials and assessments for delivery via the VLE.

(Evans et al., 2004:4)

In conclusion, this questionnaire found great, but discerning, critical support for Blackboard and virtual learning more broadly. This suggests that further time and resources allocated to training and supporting staff to use Blackboard more creatively would be a prudent investment. Students' generosity in giving their ideas and creative responses should be noted as a valuable resource to be drawn on and consulted with to inform any further developments in UAL's virtual learning domain.

4. Main findings of the focus group

A group of 10 full time, BA students participated in a focus group at the end of May, 2008. Their responses to questions (see appendix 3) and general comments strongly mirrored and substantiated the data collected in the on-line questionnaire. These are briefly summarised below.

Perceived strengths of Blackboard

On the whole, again, the group was enthusiastic about the perceived *potential* of Blackboard to both enhance and facilitate learning. They commented that its use as a repository was helpful, enabling them to access documents, notes, important information and so on. They were keen that this often saved them 'unnecessary' trips into the university.

Discussion boards were also highly favoured, although it was noted that only a few, (and the same few) routinely took part. The staff and student profiles and contact details were described as helpful, particularly with the busy atmosphere in which both students and tutors worked, where *'sometimes it's hard to get to know who anyone is...'*

All of these comments were underscored by a running commentary that useful as these aspects are, they are rendered far less so unless constant updating is undertaken.

Perceived weaknesses of Blackboard

Students gave detailed descriptions of being led round in circles, clicking tabs which led them nowhere or back to square one. They bemoaned the non-intuitive nature of Blackboard, and the apparently illogical grouping of modules¹ and materials. Numerous examples were humorously given of time wasting pursuits which led nowhere.

*It's not very...um...it doesn't flow...it's not joined up...it's quite difficult to navigate...
...yeah, the navigation should be worked on quite a lot...
...they should look at other sites, for example Facebook - visually it's very good...*

Students expressed frustration at 'things being in different places' –

*I want to go to ONE place to check my emails, get announcements, search the library...
...Maybe top up our photocopy cards on-line, like an Oyster?*

Students were unanimous in expressing the opinion that:

*It's quite ugly...
The way it looks! I mean...this is the University of the ARTS...do something about it!*

¹ Students referred to 'modules' by which it is assumed they meant course units.

Suggested improvements

When asked how Blackboard could be improved, students agreed again that visually, Blackboard was bordering on the unacceptable. They suggested employing Graphic Design students to redesign the package, and suggested Blackboard become more akin to other popular sites which had a fresher face. Opinions were voiced too that initial induction was often poor, and that a video clip of Blackboard usage instructions could be launched as one logged in for the first time. Students were also aware that although there 'is a facility' to get their marks through Blackboard, 'nobody seems to do it'.

Visuals and communication

Much had already been made by this point of the poor visuals and layout, and Blackboard being less than inspiring, especially for students of Art and Design. There were some comments of appreciation for the way announcements were stacked in chronological order with tabs linking back seven days, one month, etc. but generally there was a high level of criticism for what was seen as an ad hoc, illogical, dull layout.

A more dynamic interface, with increased visual elements such as links with YouTube, hotmail and Facebook, and immediate access to who was online at the same time, to facilitate live chat was recommended. Students were quick to point out what a help it would be if while searching for something on Blackboard about which you had a query, you spotted someone else on-line from your group and could quickly ask them what they thought about the issue.

It was agreed that Blackboard could also be instrumental in helping students find work placements and job opportunities, as well as offering short on-line courses in a range of areas to bolster the learning offer.

Enhancing or replacing

There was a unified voice that Blackboard should only ever enhance and support learning, and not be used in any way to lessen physical contact hours with tutors, who, it was felt, were seen seldom enough. Students dismissed any further increase of virtual learning.

<p><i>It should be just to SUPPORT the learning!</i> <i>It should NEVER take over</i> <i>How well d'you think an origami or screen printing class would work on-line (laughs)</i></p>

And the final word on Blackboard was:

<p><i>If they fix all the things we've been talking about - if things are sorted, it'd be useful...people would use it more often...</i></p>
--

5. Recommendations

This report conveys the results of an on-line questionnaire and focus group interview – both of which were with a limited number of self-selecting students. Recommendations are therefore tentative, and the authors suggest this report **be used primarily to trigger and support more in-depth discussion amongst Blackboard management teams** regarding the possibility and desirability of Blackboard change and development.

However, on the basis of this data, four recommendations can be put forward:

- 1) As Blackboard is, on the basis of this data, largely supported as a facility, the student body should be seen as a vital resource for consultative opinion regarding its future use and development.
- 2) Blackboard should be developed to be more accurately representative of an *Arts* education establishment.
- 3) A demand for increased communicability through Blackboard should be recognised.
- 4) Tutors and other practitioners at UAL should receive (or in some cases continue to receive) solid levels of support and development time to enable them to use Blackboard more creatively, consistently and more in line with the needs of their students and courses.

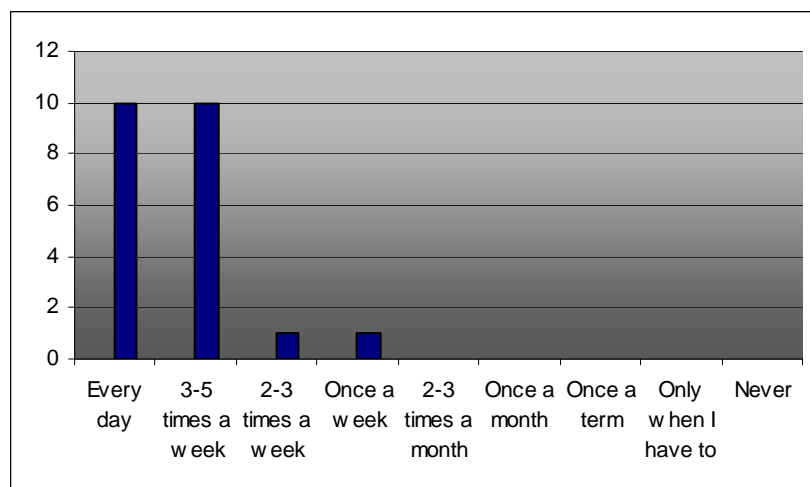
9. References

- Badge, J.L., Cann, A.J., Scott, J. (2005) e-Learning versus e-Teaching: Seeing the Pedagogic Wood for the Technological Trees, Research article for: *The Higher Education Academy Centre for Bioscience*
URL: <http://www.bioscience.heacademy.ac.uk/journal/vol5/beej-5-6.htm> (Accessed May 2008)
- Browne, T., Jenkins, M. & Walker, R. (2006) A longitudinal perspective regarding the use of VLEs by higher education institutions in the United Kingdom *Interactive Learning Environments*, 14(2)
- Browne, T. a. J., M. (2003). (2003) *VLE Surveys - a longitudinal perspective between March 2001 and March 2003 for Higher Education in the United Kingdom*. Report for UCSIS.
- Davies, T. & Worrall, P. (2002) Towards the development of electronic learning and 'on-line' tools: An experimental approach to specialist teacher education (Art & Design). *Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education*, 1(1),
- Evans, C., Gibbons, N. J., Shah, K. & Griffin, D. K. (2004) Virtual learning in the biological sciences: pitfalls of simply "putting notes on the web". *Computers & Education*, 43
- JISC (2007) *In Their Own Words: Exploring the learner's perspective on e-learning*. Report for Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) on behalf of JISC.
- Owen, M. (2006) *JISC - HE in FE e-Learning study*
A study of the use of learning technologies in delivering art and design courses to HE students within an FE environment. Report for Kingston College.
- Smith, K. (2008 forthcoming) Who do you think you're talking to? - the discourse of learning and teaching strategies, *Higher Education*

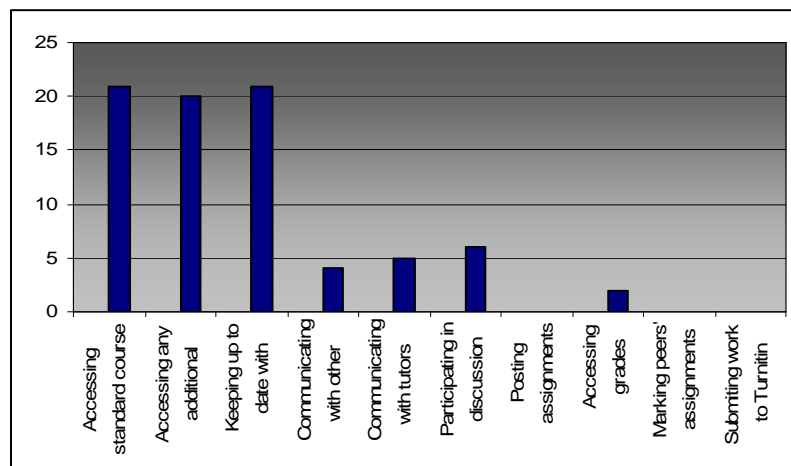
Appendix 1: Summary of pilot findings

The 24 students who responded to the survey at pilot stage answered the questionnaire fully. They are also not part of the cohort questioned in the survey run itself. Because no major modifications were made to the questionnaire following their feedback, the numerical data, in summary, is worthy of attention and is briefly depicted below, to be considered as a useful adjunct to the main data. Note: In cases where figures do not add up to 24, question(s) have been skipped. Where they exceed 24, this indicates the question had an option for more than one answer.

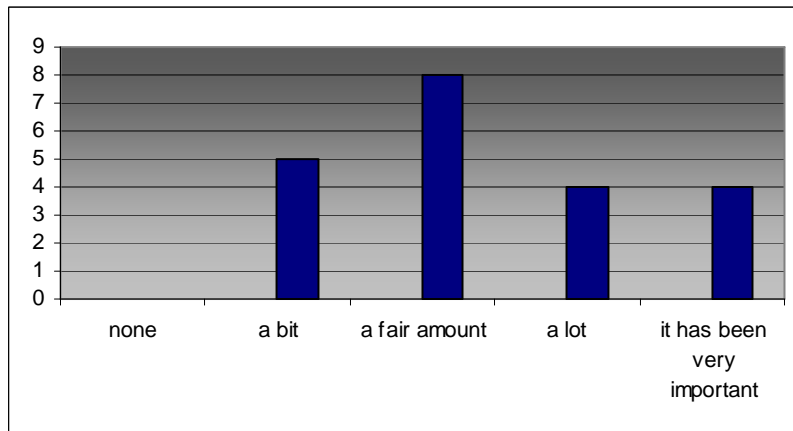
Blackboard frequency of use



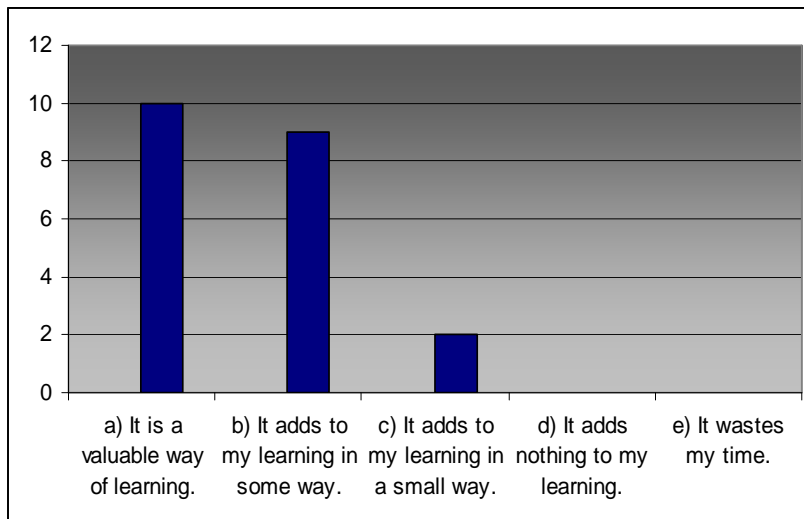
Current elements in use



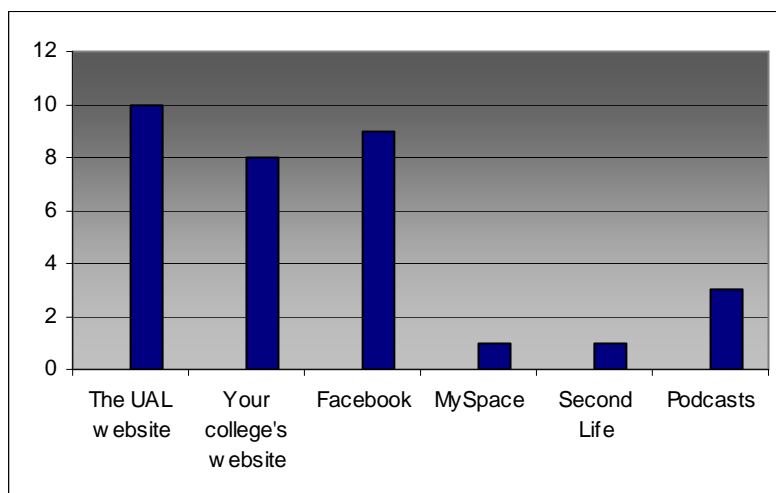
Perceived contribution made by Blackboard to enhancing the learning experience



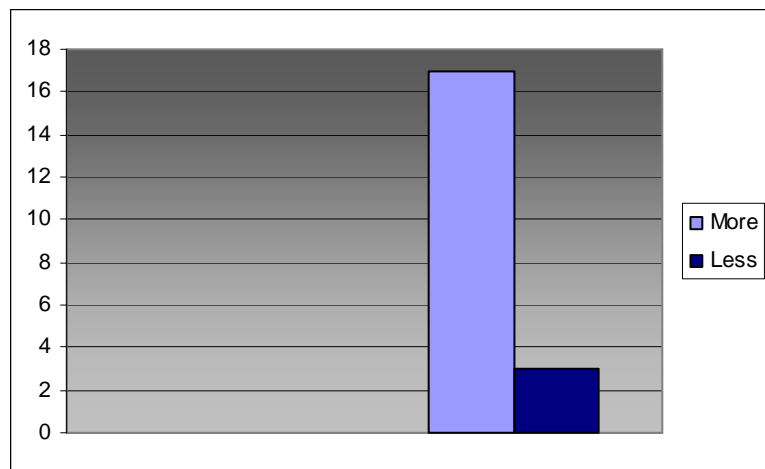
Opinions of virtual learning more broadly



Other online applications which are perceived as enhancing the learning experience



Would students welcome a move towards more or less virtual learning?

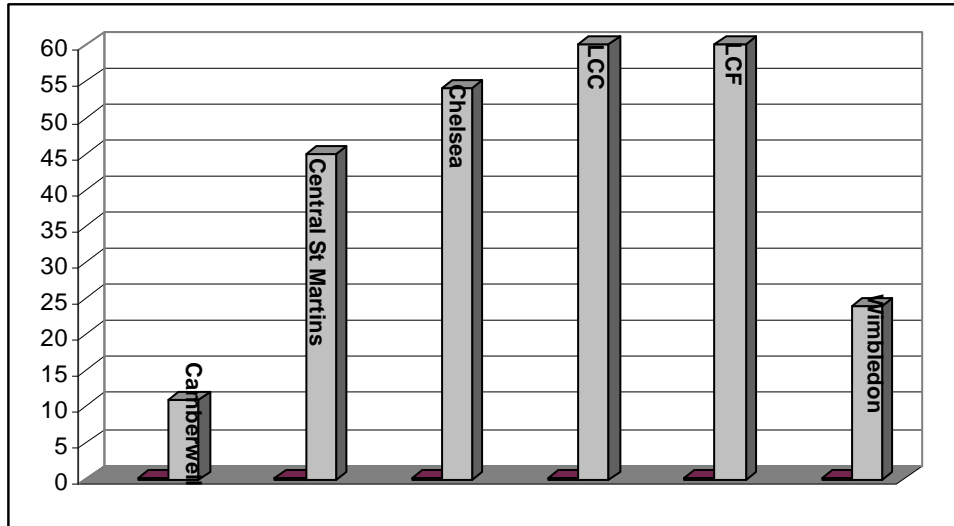


The qualitative comments are not represented here, for the sake of brevity, and because as a pilot run they are far less detailed than those in the actual survey. It was clear, however from the pilot, as is from this summary of its main points that students are willing to engage with Blackboard and VLEs more generally, and bring a readiness to appreciate the potential for these in enhancing their learning.

Appendix 2: Demographic data of respondents

Basic demographic information on questionnaire participants
(Note: where sums do not total 256, this indicates missing or unclear responses).

1) Response breakdown by college



2) Courses studied (as named by respondent)

Menswear Design	womenswear
pddf footwear	ma graphic design
BA FDT ST	foundation
PDDFI CLOTHING	FDT MENSWEAR
fashion promotion and marketing online	BAFM
Fashion Promotion	abc diploma hair and make up styling
Fda Buying and Merchandising	PT BA Fine Art`
Foundation - Painting	pattern cutting technology
jewellery	digital media production
PPDFi	foundation
part time foundation in art and design	ma fine art
Foundation Studies in Art and Design	fashion
BAMA with Media and Cult Studies	3dmcp
mada	bagd
Textile BA	Fda Graphic Design For communication
Foundation Diploma Art & Architecture	foundation in art and design
Fda Fashion Marketing And Promotion	History and Culture of Fashion
Public Relations	MA photography
fda interior design	Graphic Media Design
BA fashion design and tech womenswear	foundation fashion in art and design
media & cultural studies	fda footwear
Diploma in Cordwainers Footwear	bama
FDA Fdt Footwear	ba photography
FdA FDT Knitwear	Byam Shaw Fine Art Foundation
fashion management	mapr
FdA Marketing and Advertising	access to fashion business

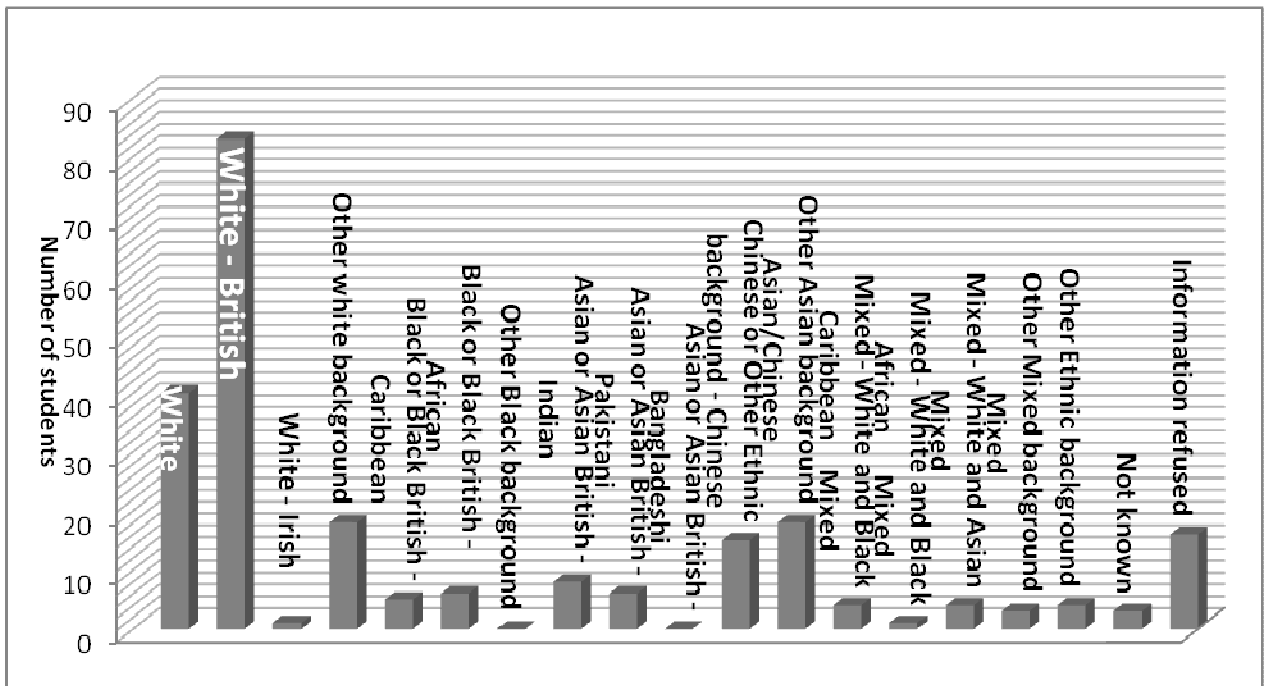
Media and Cultural Studies
 BA Graphic design
 ba pt
 sound arts and design
 BA Media & Cultural studies
 FDT top up
 BA Sound Arts
 FdA Design for Graphic Communications
 Marketing and advertising
 PGCE
 film and video ba
 Foundation studies of art and design
 BA Fashion Management
 ba (hons) g.m.d for advertising
 SURFACE TEXTIL FOR FASHIONDESIGN
 GMD TYPO
 gmd
 BA GMD TYPOGRAPHY
 Photographic arts
 product design
 PDDFI Footwear
 GMD TYPE
 BA Fine Arts (Byam Shaw)
 fine art sculpture
 marketing
 BA Graphic Design
 BA DIGITAAL MEDIA PRODUCTION
 PGCert
 foundation in fine art
 Graphic Design
 Foundation
 BA Fine Art
 foundation
 Foundation fine art
 B.A HONS SURFACE TEXTILES
 foundation
 Foundation Studies in Art & Design
 BA Interior and Spatial Design
 isd
 BA interior and spatial design
 ba fine art
 Vis Com
 Fine Art
 BA FINE ART P/T
 fashion promotion
 Graphic design for communication
 Fine Art Painting
 BA media & GD
 BA Fine Art
 Painting
 PTVA BA Hons
 BA Fashion Journalism
 BA Graphic Design

BA PR with Media and Cultural Studies
 fda fashion design & marketing
 Fine Art Foundation
 ba menswear
 Digital Media
 FDT womens wear
 interior design
 ma jewellery
 BA Product
 advertising
 ma textile desgin
 Foundation studies in art and design:
 Graphics pathway
 GMD
 baade
 coatume interpretation
 pddfi footwear
 Fda Pattern Cutter
 BA Fine Art:Painting
 BA typo
 BA Fashion Management
 Foundation Studies Art and Design
 BAFS
 painting
 Creative Advertising Strategy
 BA Graphic Design
 costume interpretation
 FDA FDT DPC
 Conservation
 BAGD
 PProduct design
 BAP2
 painting
 BA Marketing and Advertising
 cordwainers footwear
 FdA Graphic Design
 Public Relations
 BA part time
 Art and Design
 Set Design for Stage and Screen
 pgdip
 Fashion Design Technology
 Level 4 Foundation in Art and Design
 PGCE
 bafs
 Graphic design 2
 Cosmetic Science
 BAFS
 BA Markeitng & Advertising
 PDDFI- clothing
 PGDip Paper Conservation
 BA Marketing&Advertising
 Marketing and Advertising
 product design and development for the

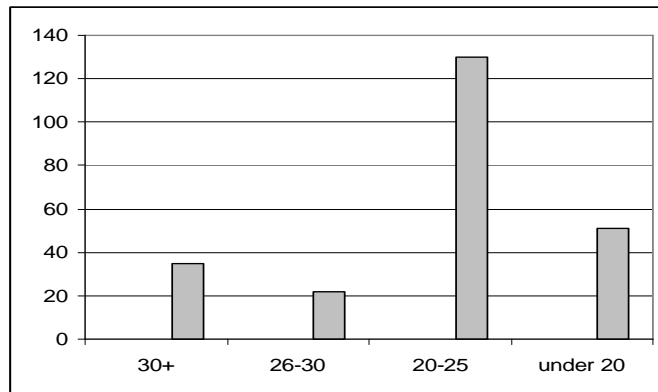
BAFA
 BA Honours Travel and Tourism
 Communications
 isd
 Foundation in Art and Design
 FOUNDATION
 Garphic design communication
 fine art painting
 BA Painting
 FdA Photojournalism
 textile design
 MA Marketing Communications
 Foundation in Art and Design level 4
 Ba Graphic Design
 BA Fashion Par Time
 ba photography
 MA MARKETING & COMMUNICATION
 Online Fashion Buying and
 Merchandising
 costume interpretation
 Foundation Art & Design
 costume interpretation

fashion industry: footwear
 BA (Hons) Digital Media Production
 Ceramics with critical studies in
 Sculpture
 fashion design women's wear
 MA Marketing and Coomunication
 ma fashion curation
 Graphic Design BA
 graphic design (BA)
 FdA Fashion Design Technology: DPC A
 design communication
 BA Graphic design
 Foundation
 BA fine art painting
 Conservation
 B.A.Fine Art Painting
 Foundation
 Media & Cultural Studies
 BA ISD
 PR with MCS
 interior and spatial design
 ba graphic design

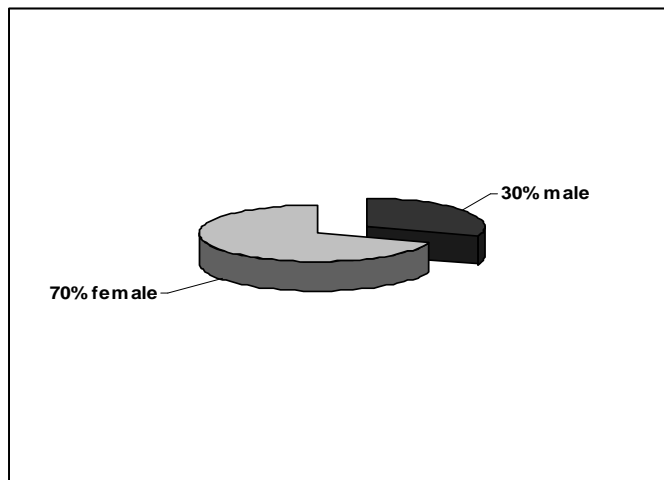
3. Ethnicity



3) Age range : 61 – 18
Breakdown by age group:



4) Male / female response rate
Of those who responded to this question (240) most were female.



5) Declared and specified disabilities:
Of those who answered this question, just fewer than 10% declared a disability.
Of these, 17 cited dyslexia, 3 mental health issues including bi-polar disorder, 2 Type 1 Diabetes and 1 deafness.

Appendix 3: Focus group interview schedule

Learning virtually or Virtually Learning: Focus group questions

A: Weakness of existing systems

- 1) What are the strengths of Blackboard?
- 2) What are its weaknesses?
- 3) What would you improve and how?

Prompt: are there any alternative systems that you know of?

B: Visuals and Communication

- 4) How should it look visually?
- 5) What are its layout and functionality strengths and weaknesses?
- 6) How is it functioning (or not) as a visual platform *relevant to students of art and design?*
- 7) How is it functioning (or not) as a communication tool?
- 8) How would you like it to function as a communication tool?

Prompt: should Blackboard increase its social function? (eg. Link with Facebook)

C: Enhancing not replacing

- 9) Does Blackboard enhance your learning? If so, how?
Can you give examples?
- 10) How *could* it be used to enhance your learning?
- 11) Would you welcome a move to greater or lesser use of Blackboard and virtual learning in your university course?

Any final reflections, thoughts, ideas?

Please note: this is a Word Document of the original on-line questionnaire, so minor alterations in layout and visual representation occur.



1. Please tick which college you are at.

- Camberwell
- Central St Martins
- Chelsea
- London College of Communication
- London College of Fashion
- Wimbledon

2. What course are you studying?

3. Which year are you currently in?

4. Are you a full or part time student?

5. Are you male or female?

6. Please tick which of the following best describes your ethnicity.

- White
- White - British
- White - Irish
- Other white background
- Black or Black British - Caribbean
- Black or Black British - African
- Other Black background
- Asian or Asian British - Indian

- Asian or Asian British - Pakistani
 - Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi
 - Chinese or Other Ethnic background - Chinese
 - Other Asian background Asian/Chinese
 - Mixed - White and Black Caribbean Mixed
 - Mixed - White and Black African Mixed
 - Mixed - White and Asian Mixed
 - Other Mixed background Mixed
 - Other Ethnic background
 - Not known
 - Information refused
- Other (please specify)

7. Please give your age.

8. Do you consider yourself to have a disability?

Yes.

No.

If yes, please describe

2. About you and Blackboard

9. Do you know what Blackboard is?

Yes

No (If you answer no, please go directly to question 16)

10. How often do you use Blackboard?

Every day

3-5 times a week

2-3 times a week

Once a week

2-3 times a month

- Once a month
- Once a term
- Only when I have to
- Never

If you have answered 'never' to this question we are very interested in hearing why.

11. Which of the following do you use it for? (tick any that apply)

- Accessing standard course materials (handbooks, timetables, assignments briefs etc.)
- Accessing any additional course materials (lecture materials, website links, additional reading etc.)
- Keeping up to date with course announcements
- Communicating with other students
- Communicating with tutors
- Participating in discussion
- Posting assignments
- Accessing grades
- Marking peers' assignments
- Submitting work to Turnitin

Other (please specify)

12. Can you rate what contribution the use of Blackboard has made to enhancing your learning experience?

- none
- a bit
- a fair amount
- a lot
- it has been very important

13. What aspect of Blackboard (if any) have you found particularly helpful?

14. Is there any facility you would like to see added to Blackboard which would help make Blackboard more helpful and/or interesting to use?

15. What aspect of Blackboard (if any) have you found particularly unhelpful and/or confusing?

3. You and your virtual learning

16. Please give your opinion of virtual learning - that is, any learning experience which is accessed via on-line means. This may or may not include Blackboard.

- a) It is a valuable way of learning.
- b) It adds to my learning in some way.
- c) It adds to my learning in a small way.
- d) It adds nothing to my learning.
- e) It wastes my time.

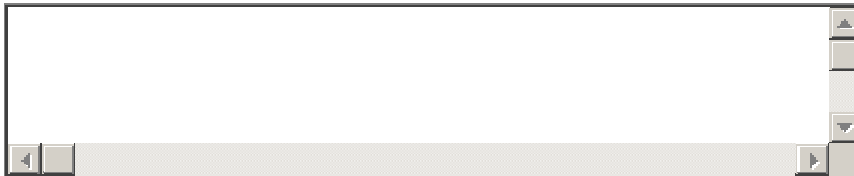
17. If you have answered d or e to the previous question, can you say why virtual learning does not add to your learning experience, and make suggestions as to how it could be improved? (Remember, we are discussing virtual learning as a whole in this question, NOT just Blackboard.)

18. Tick any of the following which you feel enhances your learning experience.

- The UAL website

- Your college's website
- Facebook
- MySpace
- Second Life
- Podcasts

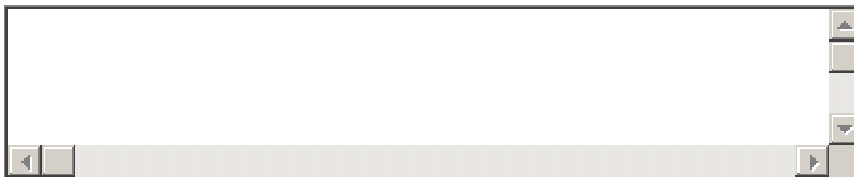
Other (please specify) and say, if you can, HOW it enhances your learning.



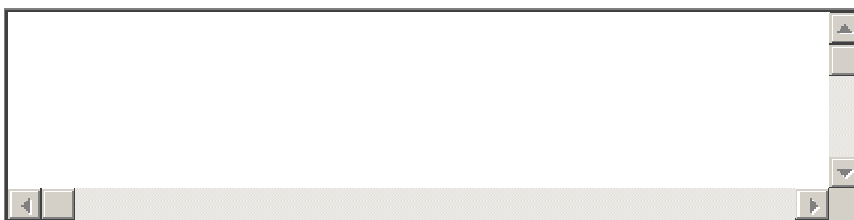
19. On the whole would you welcome a move towards more or less virtual learning?

- More
- Less

Add any further comments



20. Please give any final thoughts you have on how Blackboard and/or virtual learning could be developed in ways which would help you learn as a part of your specific course.



21. Would you be willing to be part of a focus group later on in the year, in which you can give further views on Blackboard and virtual learning?

- Yes
- No

If yes, please give your name, email address and/or telephone number.

