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The digital student experience at UAL

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Contents

Summary	02
Introduction	05
Methodology	06
Findings: Survey Results	07
Q1: How important is the following information to you?.....	08
Q2: Which of these things make you anxious about your course?.....	09
Q3: The following stops me completing my coursework to the best of my ability	11
Q4: My tutors are positive about Moodle	13
Q5: My tutors are positive about Facebook	13
Q6: I would prefer to use a UAL blogging platform than one available on the wider web	15
Q7: I can easily find course information on Moodle	17
Q8: I always receive the right information about deadlines and assignments	19
Q9: Select the UAL services you are aware of	20
Q10: Select the UAL services you choose to use as part of your course	20
Q11: Choose the UAL services you are required to use as part of your course	20
Focus Groups	23
Conclusions	27
Recommendations	29
References	31

Summary

This report presents an investigation into the student experience in digital contexts at UAL. It provides insights into areas of practice and communication that are high in students' minds, and explores how we can make better use of technology to manage and meet students' expectations. It is intended as a companion to the staff-focused E-Learning report (2013), and provides a valuable student perspective on shared issues. The research is based on a University-wide survey, which received 433 responses across all colleges and a wide range of disciplines. The survey design was informed by the opinions expressed in a series of small-scale focus groups. Conducting the survey at this later stage enabled us to elicit more detailed data about the themes that emerged during the focus groups. Moodle was a focal point of the work as it is the most frequently used and well-known element of the Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) services provided by UAL. However findings were also made about Myblog.arts and Workflow, UAL's blogging and e-portfolio platforms.

We found that students' primary expectation for institutional TEL systems is the provision of well-organised, easily accessible course information, particularly about assessment results and timetabling. Students expressed high degrees of anxiety where this information was unavailable or hard to find. As Moodle is the primary tool for information delivery, used by 96% of courses, the findings indicate that improving course teams' structural, editorial and communication processes on Moodle would reduce students' anxiety and improve their overall experience. While Moodle does not preclude pedagogically interesting teaching and learning, the primary or initial goal should be to serve the 'basic' content and information needs of students. The findings from this research have informed improvements which were made to Moodle in July 2015.

Aside from accessing course information, students were more concerned with their technical skills than with what staff might describe as 'pedagogy'. They said that a lack of technical skill was the biggest barrier to completing coursework to the best of their ability. This suggests that we cannot use the now discredited notion of the 'Digital Native' (the idea that younger people are naturally good with technology) as a rationale for delivering technology to students without explaining the reason behind its use. We need to communicate the pedagogical value of engaging with technology if we are to evolve our teaching and learning in digital contexts. Students' anxiety or frustration about not knowing how to use a particular software package could be alleviated if they understood that the pedagogic focus is actually on collaboration, discourse and open practice, rather than just on technical expertise. This is not to imply that we do not need to provide technical support and foster technical ability, but rather that it should be balanced with a shared understanding of our broader pedagogic purpose.

Focus group participants tended not to see the benefit of using Myblog.arts in comparison to web-based blogging platforms like Tumblr. In the survey, 32.17% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they would prefer to use a UAL blogging platform, and 21.07% agreed or strongly agreed, which suggests there is an overall preference for non-UAL blogging platforms. Despite these indications, the value of institutional platforms that 'mirror' the web was not clear from our data, as the research was UAL wide, and the use of Myblog.arts (and Workflow) is not evenly distributed across the colleges. The students expressed a wide range of views about blogging; many thought of it in terms of networking, visibility and identity creation – and thus saw the wider web as more valuable as it has a bigger reach. Others were grateful for a 'safe' online space where they could experiment with blogging in relative privacy. Clearly, students' preferences, characters and confidence levels are in play here. Meanwhile, staff decisions about whether it is pedagogically appropriate to use institutional or web-based blogs are contextually specific and influenced by scale. Given that Myblog.arts and Workflow support forms of pedagogy that are not necessarily appropriate or desirable across the board, the figure of 23% adoption represents a significant uptake, and effective practice in these platforms could be propagated further to strengthen the pedagogical approach of more courses. The availability of a range of privacy settings and the fact that blogging is geared towards the individual (as opposed to a course structure) provides rich pedagogic and creative potential for students, which goes far beyond the information deliv-

ery model implicit in Moodle. For a more detailed discussion on this see the '3 Box' model of digital learning (White, 2015), developed by the Teaching and Learning Exchange, which maps key technologies with their modes of use and digital capabilities.

Focus group participants spoke of a wide range of tools used in all aspects of their lives. The boundaries between general uses of technology and uses for learning seemed to be fuzzy. Additionally, students were clearly undertaking complex negotiations between institutional and non-institutional technologies, practices and social spaces. The research suggested that students' experiences of the web can create expectations that are difficult for the institution to meet, particularly when courses need to be delivered at scale. In an environment of apps and real-time notifications, students can struggle to see the reason for doing things according to institutional protocol.

Overall our research indicates the importance of being explicit about the role and value of the digital in our learning and teaching. We need to be explicit about how our courses are organised and reflect this logically in the technology we own. Beyond this we need to explain why we are asking students to engage in particular ways online and how they will benefit if they do so sincerely. Emphasis should be placed on the 'why' rather than the 'how' because if students understand the value of engaging they are much more likely to be motivated to develop the required technical skills. Recommendations emerging out of the findings have been made for consideration at University and College levels. The data from this research informed us advocating for a new TEL-coordinator role to be based at each college. We are pleased to confirm that these are newly funded 2 year grade 4 posts at 0.6 FTE, which will be locally based with strong links to the Teaching and Learning Exchange.

Introduction

Research scope and aims

Understanding students' experiences of using digital technology for their learning and in their lives is fundamental to making well-informed decisions about our future plans for technology enhanced learning (TEL) development and support. This report presents insights into the student experience in digital contexts in order to:

- Provide an evidence base for future UAL policy and practice in this area
- Increase UAL's ability to respond to the needs of students whilst informing our approach to supporting staff
- Improve the student experience as a result

This research did not exclusively review the functionality of UAL tools and services, but focused on students' experiences of and attitudes to the use of technologies for their learning.

Context

As our relationship with networked digital technology continues to dominate many aspects of our cultural and social lives, it is clear that the digital intersects the personal, educational, professional, creative, and leisure aspects of students' experiences. This is especially true in art and design disciplines, where students' creative practices and professional identities are highly intertwined. The outcomes of this research are presented with this in mind. Although our interest was in students' experiences of using digital technology, many of the findings allude to the student experience more generally. As the most frequently used and well-known element of the TEL services provided by UAL, Moodle was a main focus of the work (96% of students surveyed said they use Moodle as a course requirement). However findings were also made about Myblog.arts and Workflow, UAL's blogging and e-portfolio platforms.

This research builds on the 2013 report '[E-Learning at UAL](#)', which focused on Programme Directors' perceptions of e-learning. The 2013 report was contextualised by the introduction of institutional policy in 2009 that mandated [minimum use of Moodle](#), and focused on its use for student communication and the provision of essential course materials. The authors noted that Moodle use increased by 75% in a couple of years from 2009, but that the nature of this use was mostly limited to administrative and communicative (as opposed to pedagogic) functions. They also noted that the pervading perception amongst staff was that e-learning tools are aids to efficiency and that improved efficiency, communication and productivity are drivers for adoption. Many programme directors 'acknowledged that the pedagogic benefits of e-learning were not being harnessed and they expressed uncertainty about what pedagogic use of technology would look like for their discipline(s).' (Clay et al, 2013) [Recommendations](#) were made at college, programme and institutional levels, and are drawn on where appropriate in this report. By combining insights into programme directors' perspectives with the knowledge gained about students in this research, we have been able to gain a better overall perspective on Technology Enhanced Learning at UAL.

As well as UAL's own institutional research, this report was informed by the 2013 Jisc report, '[Students' expectations and experiences of the digital environment](#)', commissioned by the Jisc co-design programme. Our aim was to nuance the Jisc findings so as to offer insights into students' experiences of the digital environment in an art and design context at UAL. The Jisc report clearly outlined students' baseline expectations about the digital environment, and encouraged all institutions to meet these. It was noted that universities need to do more work to inform students about the services, resources and support available to them. Our research showed that awareness varied for different tools and across disciplines, indicating that in some areas, clear communication about the availability and purpose of tools would be beneficial for students.

Methodology

Our overarching approach was to conduct a University-wide student survey, building on opinions expressed in a series of small-scale focus groups. 10 student participants attended in total. A full description of the focus group structure is presented in the 'Focus Group' section below. A thematic analysis of the focus group transcripts informed the design of the survey, which received 433 responses across all colleges and a wide range of disciplines. The themes that emerged were:

- Tools
- Barriers
- Tutor attitudes and approaches
- Positive learning experiences

The survey questions were designed to elicit more detailed data on each theme apart from 'Tools', as the data here tended to be descriptive of what students were using rather than how they were using it. The survey is included in Appendix A.

Findings: Survey Results

The survey results are presented first, as they represent our most immediately relevant data. Supporting quotes from the focus groups are interwoven to give a richer picture of the overall findings. The survey included Lickert scale questions, which offer a useful 'agree-disagree' approach to measuring attitudes and values (Johns, 2010). This method was chosen as the research aimed to gain insight into students' experiences and attitudes, rather than to look at the functionality of technologies. Likert scales are 'summated' - so respondent's answers on each question are summed to give their overall score on the attitude or value. We used a 5 point scale in our survey in order to calculate respondents' overall scores. In the question 'How important is the following information to you?' 'Extremely important' was coded as 5, and 'Not at all important' was coded as 1. Response numbers for each answer option were multiplied by the weighting and then summed. The weighted total was then divided by the number of respondents to give the weighted average.

Students were enrolled on a wide range of courses across all colleges, so it was necessary to simplify the data for reporting purposes. The discipline areas were determined by broadly categorising the courses students were enrolled on:

College

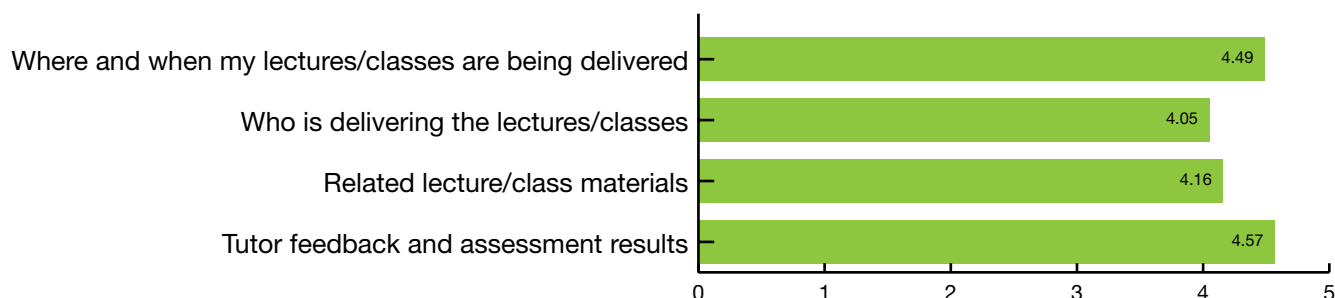
Camberwell	42	10%
Wimbledon	21	5%
Chelsea	32	7%
CSM	140	32%
LCC	152	35%
LCF	46	11%
TOTAL RESPONSES	433	

Discipline Area

Design/communication/media	150	34%
Fashion/textiles	130	30%
Fine Art	52	12%
Foundation	18	4%
Other	85	20%

Q1: How important is the following information to you?

This question attempted to gain more insight into problems students expressed during the focus groups around accessing information. Each answer option is something that courses could potentially make available via Moodle. The high rating averages indicate that students place a high degree of importance on obtaining all the listed pieces of information.



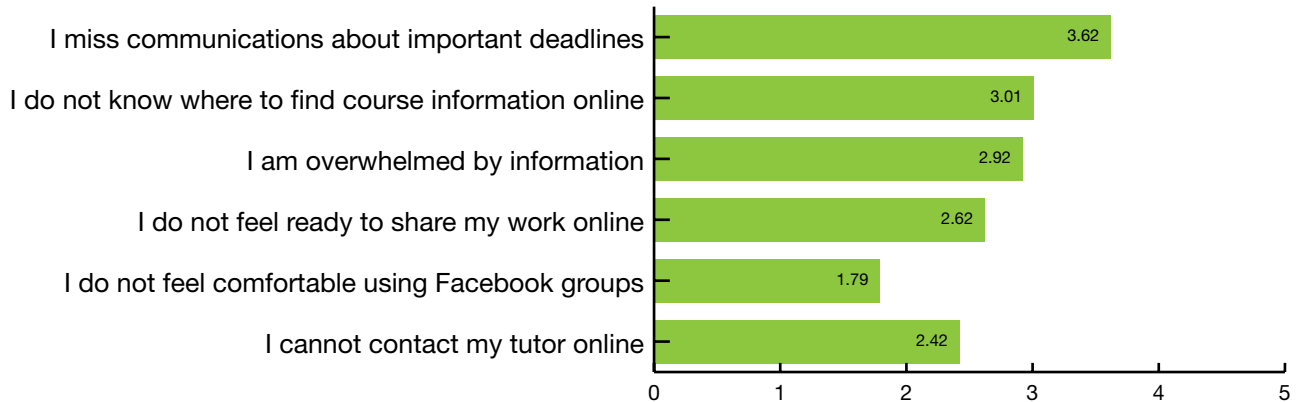
	Extremely important	Very important	Moderately important	Slightly important	Not at all important	Total	Weighted Average
Where and when my lectures/ classes are being delivered	63.45%	24.60%	9.89%	1.84%	0.23%	435	4.49
Who is delivering the lectures/ classes	36.55%	37.47%	21.38%	3.45%	1.15%	435	4.05
Related lecture/class materials	36.78%	45.75%	15.17%	1.61%	0.69%	435	4.16
Tutor feedback and assessment results	64.98%	28.11%	5.99%	0.69%	0.23%	434	4.57

Recommendations:

- Although there is a slight emphasis on tutor feedback and assessment results, the high importance placed on all these pieces of information means we need to ensure we support the provision of all of them.
- Moodle can perform a very useful function in communicating essential information to students. Course teams should be supported to ensure course information is easily accessible in Moodle, and that the course site neatly reflects the course structure.
- As students place greatest emphasis on tutor feedback and assessment results, extra care should be taken to ensure that this information is very clearly signposted in Moodle. (Recent developments with the Online Assessment Tool (OAT) have addressed this to an extent).

Q2: Which of these things make you anxious about your course?

This question aimed to gain an understanding of what matters to students regardless of how much they are using technology. We wanted to understand what is high on students' minds as they undertake their courses. The question options covered both practical issues such as accessing information, as well as other issues that were raised in the focus groups such as information overload, and self-consciousness about sharing work.



	Extremely anxious	Very anxious	Moderately anxious	Slightly anxious	Not at all anxious	Total	Weighted Average
I miss communications about important deadlines or assignments	32.26%	26.27%	21.89%	10.37%	9.22%		
	140	114	95	45	40	434	3.62
I don't know where to find course information online	12.04%	26.62%	28.24%	16.44%	16.67%		
	52	115	122	71	72	432	3.01
I am overwhelmed by information	11.34%	20.60%	31.94%	20.83%	15.28%		
	49	89	138	90	66	432	2.92
I don't feel ready to share my work online	8.10%	18.52%	25.23%	23.38%	24.77%		
	35	80	109	101	107	432	2.62
I don't feel comfortable using Facebook groups	4.15%	7.14%	13.13%	14.98%	60.60%		
	18	31	57	65	263	434	1.79
I can't contact my tutor online	8.10%	16.67%	18.06%	23.38%	33.80%		
	35	72	78	101	146	432	2.42

Students were significantly more anxious about missing important deadlines or assignment information than anything else. This correlates with the finding in question 1 that accessing practical course information is very important to students. Badly structured or edited course sites result in students having to 'hunt' for content, whereas the most successful sites involve course teams planning the structure, and agreeing on the location of information, their editorial and ownership processes.

It is useful to consider this in relation to the [student engagement section of the 2013 e-learning report](#):

“...the plethora of possible means of communication with students (texting, Blackboard [the predecessor to Moodle], face-to-face announcements) seemed itself to engender an expectation among students that important information will reach them regardless of their own efforts to obtain it:

“I’ve resisted that [communicating through multiple channels] in the meantime because it causes the problem... that you didn’t beam the message into my dreams, so to speak and they expect (that)... **PD 107**

This can be seen as either the result of the proliferation of channels of communication or, fundamentally, as a question of how far students are expected to take responsibility for their own participation in a course.”

This potential disconnection between staff and student expectations could be exacerbating anxieties and frustrations amongst both groups. Having multiple official and non-official communication channels is a feature of our techno-social culture that can be difficult for staff to manage and confusing for students. However, it is necessary to meet students’ reasonable communication needs, particularly if official channels are not used efficiently and adopted by the whole student cohort. Setting reasonable expectations with students and establishing communication needs may be beneficial early in a programme of study.

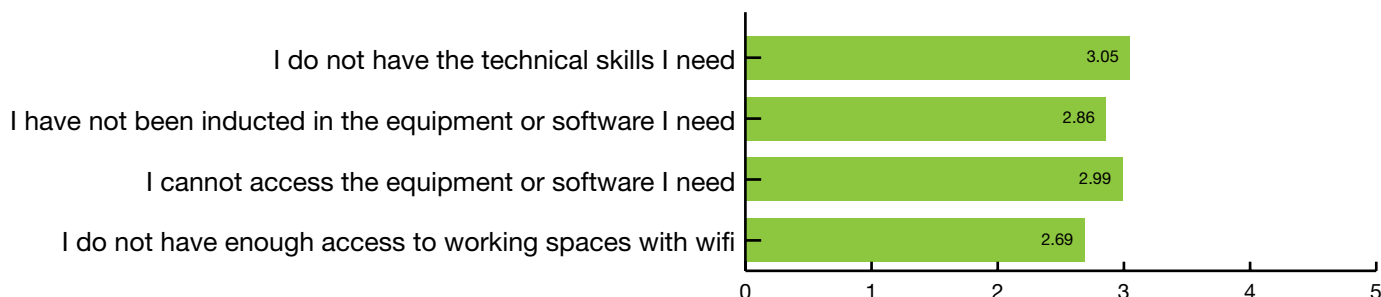
The responses were filtered by discipline area in order to see if this had an impact on anxiety levels, but students expressed similar patterns and levels of anxiety across all disciplines. This may indicate that these issues are always in the minds of students and can therefore be managed or mitigated more or less effectively, but can never be eradicated.

Recommendations:

- Support is required for course teams in planning the structure, information location and editorial processes for their course sites.
- Support is required for staff in managing multiple communication channels, and setting reasonable expectations about communication with students.
- Support is required for staff in improving the organisation of course information course on Moodle.
- Advice and guidance should be provided on using email through Moodle, so as to avoid ‘spamming’ students with unnecessary communications and risking important messages getting lost.

Q3: The following stops me completing my coursework to the best of my ability

This question aimed to gain more insight into problems students expressed during the focus groups around skills, equipment and software induction and accessing equipment.



	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Dis-agree	Strongly disagree	Total	Weighted Average
I don't have the technical skills I need	11.60%	26.45%	28.31%	22.27%	11.37%		
	50	114	122	96	49	431	3.05
I haven't been inducted in the equipment or software I need	9.05%	22.74%	27.61%	26.68%	13.92%		
	39	98	119	115	60	431	2.86
I can't access the equipment or software I need	13.23%	22.04%	26.45%	26.91%	11.37%		
	57	95	114	116	49	431	2.99
I don't have enough access to work-spaces with wifi	9.53%	16.51%	25.35%	30.47%	18.14%		
	41	71	109	131	78	430	2.69

The even spread of rating averages suggests that all these factors can contribute to students being hampered in completing their coursework. The fact that students struggle with different things perhaps represents the general challenges of HE, where support has to cover a broad range of student needs. As such, this kind of response should be understood as relevant in a much wider context than Moodle. The answers correlate generally with the 2013 E-Learning at UAL report finding that [‘a lack of confidence in the use of tools can be exacerbated by the experience of unreliability in the infrastructure on which these platforms sit \(e.g. networks and hardware\).’](#)

During the focus groups, students indicated that not knowing how to use a tool was the biggest barrier to engagement. Several comments alluded to the need for proper inductions:

“I think that at the very beginning of the year, just something that is done, ‘Welcome to UAL it’s the new year, this is how you connect your iPhone’ or whatever it is - like a small leaflet that you give out, or a small 5 minute presentation - if you literally solve these things from day one, at least from my experience from this year, so many problems could have been avoided” **Q123** (Foundation)

“The Adobe package is everywhere in UAL so they expect you to know at least Photoshop. But some of my colleagues know how to use InDesign and my tutors didn’t show me how to use InDesign - how do I go about it? Do I ask questions (of) my classmates or do I go to something like Lynda.com?” **Q139** (Communication Design)

“I think the staff are very quick with their inductions, if you go to them and say ‘I really need this’ then they are very, it should not matter really because it’s a very small college and a very small course, but they get very frustrated if they have to give you a one-on-one and it’s quite annoying.” **Q76** (Fine Art Time Based Media)

The question of how much time staff should spend inducting students into software is both pragmatic and pedagogical. If students were comprehensively inducted into all the technologies available, this could take up the entirety of a 3-year degree course. Perhaps there is a need for a shared understanding of TEL not only amongst staff, but also staff and students. Student anxiety or frustration arising from not knowing how to use a particular software package could be alleviated if students understood that the pedagogic focus is actually on collaboration, discourse and open practice, rather than on technical expertise. It is important to be explicit about the role and value of the digital in our learning and teaching. Emphasis should be placed on the ‘why’ rather than the ‘how’ because if students understand the value of engaging they are much more likely to be motivated to develop the required technical skills.

There are examples of good practice where this approach is being taken, as indicated in the 2013 E-learning report, where one programme director commented:

“We just tell them why they’re using it and we focus on the reflection bit and they learn the technical stuff, because they’re not focused on that. If I taught that, then they’d all get panicked about that. I’m focused on what they’re using it for as a tool and they just learn the stuff and they become experts in no time at all.”

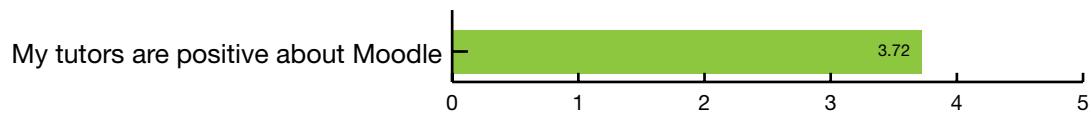
Students’ emphasis on their lack of technical skills provides a counter-narrative to assumptions that all students are ‘good with technology’, as suggested by the now discredited ‘Digital Natives’ concept (Prensky, 2001). This assumption may be held not only in relation to technical skills, but also (perhaps even more) in relation to social practices such as using social media and content creation platforms on the web (Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram and others). Feedback from ‘[Digitell](#)’, a recent UAL event on online identity, supports this, as it suggested that students and staff feel the need for additional support, workshops, continued research and dialogue.

Recommendations:

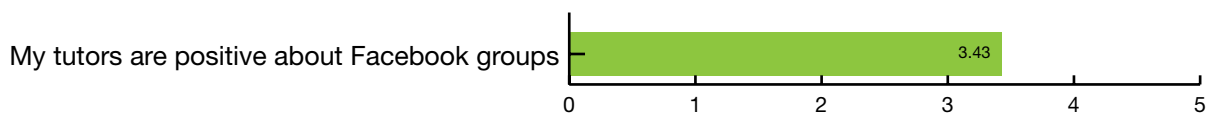
- Communicate the role and values of technologies in terms of learning and teaching, rather than technical aptitude in isolation - answer the ‘why’ as well as the ‘what’.
- Recognise that different groups plug in different technologies and cannot be expected to use all tools and services.
- Encourage independent digital learning by communicating to students that there is an expectation for them to adopt technologies such as Lynda.com or YouTube, with a rationalization of why and how these will be of value to them.
- Develop a shared understanding of the boundaries, limitations and possibilities of TEL between staff and students

Q4: My tutors are positive about Moodle, Q5: My tutors are positive about Facebook

Questions 4 and 5 aimed to gain a better understanding of tutors' attitudes to UAL-supported and non-UAL supported tools.



	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Dis-agree	Strongly disagree	Total	Weighted Average
My tutors are positive about Moodle	21.20%	41.24%	28.11%	7.14%	2.30%	434	3.72
	92	179	122	31	10		



	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Dis-agree	Strongly disagree	Total	Weighted Average
My tutors are positive about Facebook groups	12.00%	31.53%	46.82%	7.06%	2.59%	425	3.43
	51	134	199	30	11		

The high numbers of students who selected 'neither agree nor disagree', particularly for question 5 could indicate that tutors do not talk about Facebook to students, which would reflect the fact that it is not a UAL-supported tool. It could also be that students did not know how to gauge tutors' 'positivity'.

Overall, however, students indicated that their tutors were positive about both Moodle and (to a slightly lesser extent) Facebook. This conflicted with some of the statements made in the focus groups about tutors publically expressing negative attitudes about Moodle:

"Tutors don't actually know which bit they are meant to put their stuff in, like, even if there's like lots of headings, I don't think the staff are like particularly, are aware of which one is the most useful to put it in for the students, they just kind of stick it anywhere and they just say 'oh it's on Moodle'." **Q72** (Fine Art Sculpture)

“They don’t really know how it works and it’s like ‘it’s on there somewhere and you can probably find it’ and also, I think, our tutors, refer to it as ‘Blackboard in a different font’ because it’s basically exactly the same” Q66 (Fine Art Time Based Media)

“Sometimes, you know the tutors don’t even know like how to use it so that kind of transfers to us and we are not really sure.” Q102 (Communication Design)

The reason for these conflicting findings may reflect the fact that tutors’ positivity is not an indicator of how well a course site has been structured, organised or used to communicate. The comments suggest that the technology itself does not solve the problem of effectively communicating information to students. This is only achieved when course sites are well organised and structured.

This is echoed in the minutes from a recent Student and Deans’ forum meeting:

“In comparison to the 2013/14 Student and Dean Forums there was a reduction in the discussion about Moodle this term. When it was discussed very similar issues were raised; it is hard to navigate or it is not utilised fully by staff and students. The steps taken by some colleges to increase both student and staff knowledge and confidence with Moodle was very much welcomed by reps who explained that Moodle has potential to be a great learning resource but currently levels of understanding on how to fully utilise it remain low. “

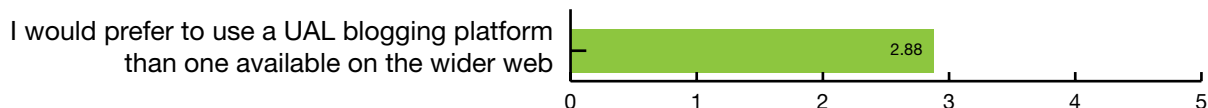
Recommendations:

- If we assume that tutors are key opinion influencers, the above indicates that improving tutors’ attitudes towards Moodle would help improve students’ attitudes and use.
- Clearly instructing staff in how to organize their course sites and articulating the benefits of efficiently using Moodle would be beneficial and is required to support the recommendation above.
- Tutor attitudes towards and uses of Facebook is perhaps an area for further investigation. It may be useful to better understand the use of Facebook groups in course settings, both from an organisational (course delivery) and pedagogic (critical) perspective.

The 2013 Jisc study states that ‘the ICT capability and know-how of staff has the strongest positive impact on students’ experience of using digital technologies for study’ (Jisc, 2013: 5) If we consider the ability to properly organize and communicate through a Moodle course site to constitute capability or know-how, the JISC finding can be seen to correlate with our own.

Q6: I would prefer to use a UAL blogging platform than one available on the wider web

This question aimed to gain more insight into focus group comments indicating that students did not see the benefit of using Myblog.arts in comparison to more established platforms like Tumblr.



	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total	Weighted Average
I would prefer to use a UAL blogging platform than one available on the wider web	5.79%	15.28%	46.76%	25.46%	6.71%	432	2.88
	25.00	66.00	202.00	110.00	29.00		

Focus group comments included the following:

“a lot (of) people in terms of blogs would favour sort of more readily available stuff like Wordpress or Tumblr” Q44 (Fine Art Sculpture)

[Student would not use MyBlog.Arts] “unless the format became quite a bit more competitive with what’s already out there because I think there are already so many more well-established blogging spheres.” Q60 (Fine Art Time Based Media)

“An artist you’re researching might make use of Tumblr, but it’s very unlikely they’d make use of Workflow which is a specific University platform - and there is a social media aspect of that – you maybe will start a Tumblr and I don’t know, get a follow or a reblog from an artist you are a fan of.” Q53 (Fine Art 4D)

The high percentage of students who neither agreed nor disagreed could be interpreted in a number of ways: they do not know about Myblog.arts, they do not blog, they don’t mind whether blogs are internal or external.

32.17% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they would prefer to use a UAL blogging platform, and 21.07% agreed or strongly agreed, which suggests there is an overall preference for non-UAL blogging platforms.

This question received 49 comments expressing a range of views. Some students saw Myblog.arts as an alternative to Facebook, which they are not comfortable with. Some felt that the possibilities for connecting and networking were more valuable on the wider web, where they would be more likely to gain visibility. Some said that Myblog.arts had limited appeal because it wouldn’t be relevant after graduation. Several of the comments suggested that students were not aware that Myblog.arts exists.

It appears that students often think of blogging in terms of networking, visibility and sociality, and are perhaps less

focused on the pedagogic aspects of blogging. In some cases, this could present challenges for course teams, as was reflected in a programme director's comment from the e-learning report: *'...we need them [blogs] to be private, so that they're not trying to impress their friends to re-blog it.'* In other cases, course teams may see the public nature of blogs as something that can be used to help students develop their professional identities: "The blog is their reflective journal. It's their experimental space. It's their public space. It's the space where they put all their work for us to assess, to show each other, to make collaborations, to meet people around the world who may be doing stuff with it." (e-learning report).

Myblog.arts can provide a safe space or 'walled garden' for students to start blogging, and in this regard it may be particularly appealing to students who are less confident about sharing their work with a wider public, and/or who have privacy concerns. However, it is important to ensure that it is easy to move content out of the platform so that students can retain it after graduation.

As well as the pedagogic possibilities offered by blogs, such as reflection, tutors may be more concerned than students with administrative issues, particularly if they are working at scale and need to create logins for large cohorts. For large courses, an institutional infrastructure may be more necessary than for smaller courses who have more ability to use external platforms.

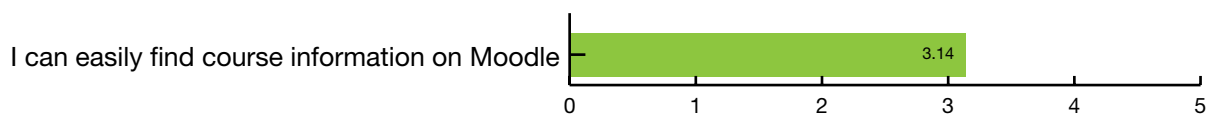
As can be seen below, 23% of UAL students said they were using Myblog.arts as part of their course, either as a requirement or by choice. As such, we need to equip students with non platform-specific blogging skills, as well as providing support for Myblog.arts.

Recommendations

- Acknowledge that decisions about whether it is pedagogically appropriate to use institutional or external blogging platforms are contextually specific and influenced by scale.
- Clearly articulate the pedagogic benefits of using Myblog.arts and make a distinction between blogging for social visibility and for developing critical reflective practice.
- Clearly communicate about the ability to move content out of the platform easily, creating pathways in and out of the walled garden.
- Provide academic support for developing non platform-specific blogging skills
- Promote awareness of Myblog.arts across all colleges

Q7: I can easily find course information on Moodle

This question aimed to build on students' frustrations expressed in the focus groups about the difficulty of finding information on Moodle.



	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total	Weighted Average
I can easily find course information on Moodle	8.84%	36.74%	22.56%	23.72%	8.14%	430	3.14
	38.00	158.00	97.00	102.00	35.00		

It is clear that many students struggle to find information on Moodle, with less than half saying they can easily find course information. Comments made during the focus groups echoed this:

“There’s like five different options you can click on and then there’s another sign that says ‘if you’re a Fine Art Pathway click here to start’ and it’s like there’s way too many places that you can kind of click on it and they will take you to completeTELY unrelated things” **Q67** (Fine Art TBM)

“There are a lot of components that don’t work so you are searching, but then you reach a dead-end and then reach another dead-end.” **Q104** (Foundation)

“I think if it was laid out better, sort of in a way that made sense, it would be a really good tool. Say, for example, finding the briefs for the project – I had three projects last time and only one of them had a brief attached to its section, and the other two didn’t. It’s like, I felt like there should be more sections that you could go along the top, ‘cause it seems like the only thing that’s relevant is this list down the bottom, and that doesn’t seem like a great way to lay out a website...just label (tabs) clearly, what things are and where to get things from.” **Q182** (Graphic & Media Design)

Similar comments were included in the survey:

“I don’t know where anything is. It’s very poorly organized, nothing can be accessed quickly. There are a lot of clicks to content, and the content is static. If I can avoid using Moodle, all the better. It is a labyrinth. Instead of clear and clean page, you have system that shows us all its guts with all these widgets and features that are prominent in the page but irrelevant to the user. Course content should be first and foremost, but you have to compete against different pathways and static content to get the most relevant and up to date information.” **R428** (Graphic Design)

“My course has many pathways and sub-divisions and finding relevant info on Moodle takes forever. its a trial and error process of clicking everything you see till you end up in the right place.” **R426** (Fine Art)

This indicates that improving how staff set up courses on Moodle would not only improve student satisfaction, but also reduce pressure on staff. As noted above, this was echoed in a comment made during recent Dean’s forum:

“The steps taken by some colleges to increase both student and staff knowledge and confidence with Moodle was very much welcomed by reps who explained that Moodle has potential to be a great learning resource but currently levels of understanding on how to fully utilise it remain low.”

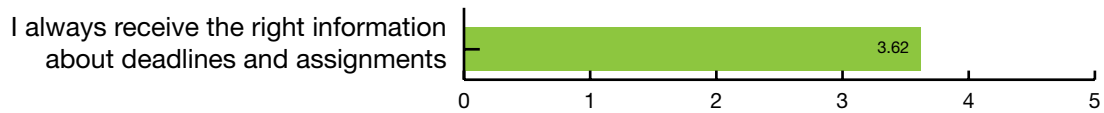
This echoes the point made in relation to question 2 that on its own Moodle will not ‘solve’ the problem of how to effectively communicate with and teach students. Badly structured or edited course sites result in students having to ‘hunt’ for content, whereas the most successful sites involve course teams planning the structure, and agreeing on the location of information and their editorial and ownership processes.

Recommendation

- Making best use of Moodle requires staff to be skilled at setting up course sites so information is easily accessible. Ongoing institutional support should be provided to enable this.
- Course sites can be improved if course teams go through a process of agreeing on the structure, location of information and editorial process of their course site.
- Inducting students into where course information can be accessed and using Moodle consistently throughout a course would be beneficial.
- Reviewing and tidying Moodle sites should be an integral part of the annual course cycle.

Q8: I always receive the right information about deadlines and assignments

This question aimed to build on students' frustrations expressed in the focus groups about the difficulty of finding information on Moodle.

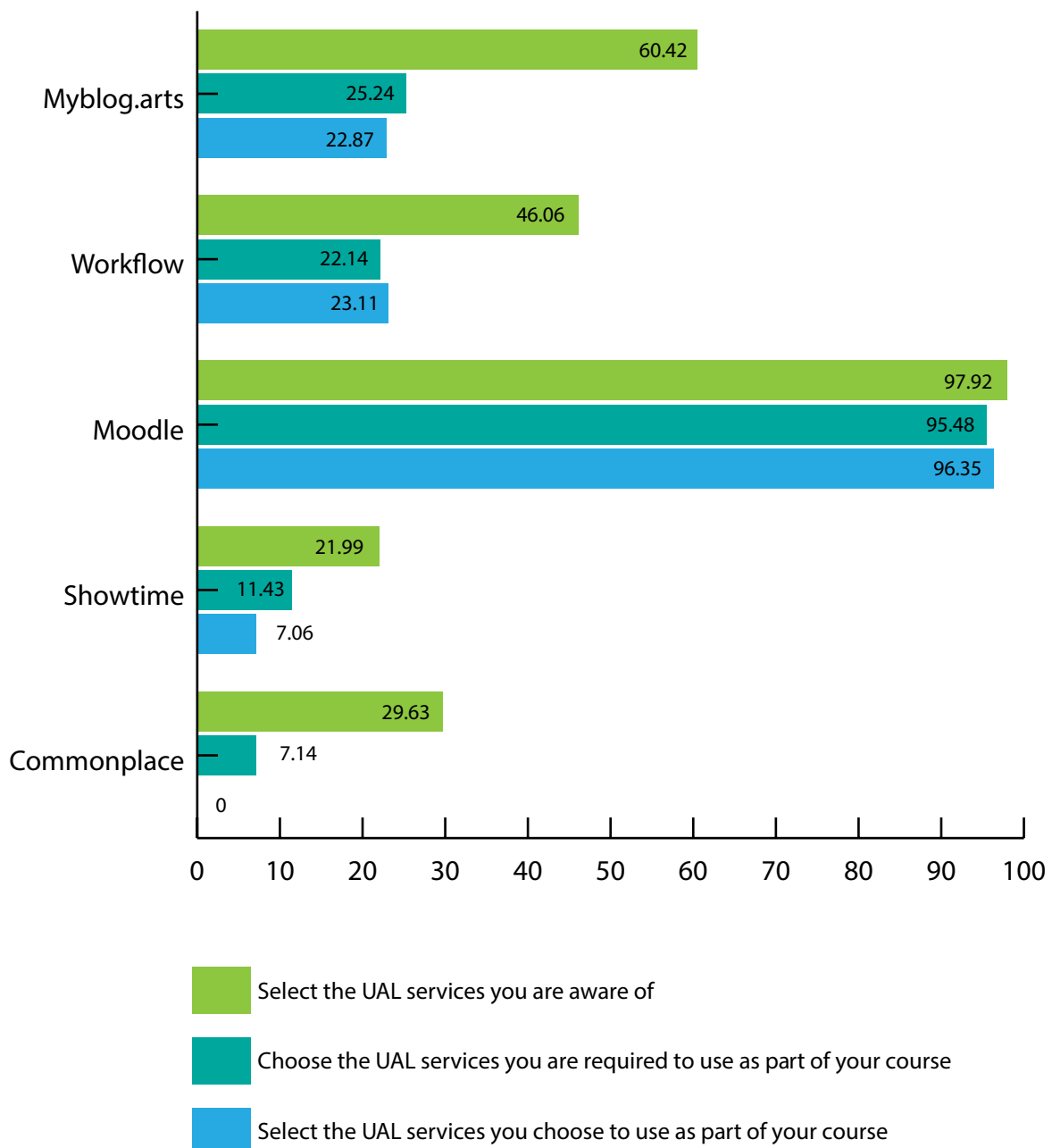


	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total	Weighted Average
I always receive the right information about deadlines and assignments	12.35%	52.21%	22.14%	11.42%	1.86%	429	3.62
	53.00	224.00	95.00	49.00	8.00		

The sentiment expressed here appears to conflict with earlier statements of anxiety around missing assignment information. This may be an indication that assignments are inherently anxiety-inducing, and that even if students do receive the right information, they will still feel nervous about assignments.

Q9: Select the UAL services you are aware of, Q10: Select the UAL services you choose to use as part of your course, Q11: Choose the UAL services you are required to use as part of your course

The responses to questions 9, 10 and 11 aimed to get a better understanding of students' overall awareness and use of tools, both as a mandatory course component and as a matter of choice.



	Select the UAL services you are aware of	Select the UAL services you choose to use as part of your course	Choose the UAL services you are required to use as part of your course
Myblog.arts	60.42%	25.24%	22.87%
Workflow	46.06%	22.14%	23.11%
Moodle	97.92%	95.48%	96.35%
Showtime	21.99%	11.43%	7.06%
Commonplace	29.63%	7.14%	

The responses were filtered by disciplinary group in order to see whether particular tools were heavily adopted by particular groups of students. This revealed some useful college-based insights. The overall patterns of awareness and adoption were consistent across all discipline areas, with Moodle being the most known and used, followed by Myblog.arts, then Workflow, then showtime.

Moodle

- Overall, 98% students said they were aware of Moodle, 96% said it was a requirement, and 95% said they chose to use it. It may be that by 'choose' students they mean are 'required to'.
- 4% students said they were not required to use Moodle for their course.
- The only area where less than 94% students said it was a requirement was fine art (89%).

Awareness and adoption of Moodle is very high across the institution, as would be expected. In the comments section for question 11, students frequently referred to Webmail, Myarts, e-library and Turnitin as technologies required for their course. Some also noted that they were required to use college-based technical resource booking systems, such as Otter (CSM). This demonstrates that Moodle is seen as one component in a larger ecology of essential functional tools that support students and facilitate course delivery. Understanding how these components interrelate is useful for gaining a clearer picture of students' overall experiences. Students expressed frustration at being forced to use their UAL email address, which is perhaps symptomatic of a broader disconnect between institutional and broader web practices. Expectations and precedents set through students' use of non-institutional tools may be impacting on their tolerance for the limitations of institutional tools. We therefore need to understand students' digital engagement and 'learner owned literacies' in the broadest sense to ensure we design our services appropriately.

Myblog.arts

- 23% of students said they use Myblog.arts for their course.
- 61% of students said they were aware of Myblog.arts.
- There is a more even awareness of myblog.arts across the disciplines, with the best awareness across the 'other' disciplines (68%) and fine art (65%).
- Less than half of students who know about Myblog.arts choose to use it, or are required to use it. This may tally with the results of Question 6.
- 6% of design students and 7% fine art students use Myblog.arts, even though it is not a requirement.
- Overall 22% of students said Myblog.arts was a requirement, and 25% said they use it out of choice.
- 3% fashion students do not use Myblog.arts, even though it is a requirement.

Currently 23% of students are using Myblog.arts, a tool with rich pedagogic and creative (rather than just functional or administrative) potential. With a student population of approximately 19,000 this represents over 4300 student users, which demonstrates the need for ongoing resource in the Teaching and Learning Exchange (formerly CLTAD) to support this userbase. As noted in relation to question 7, the decision over whether it is pedagogically appropriate to use Myblog.arts is contextually specific and influenced by scale. 100% adoption of Myblog.arts is therefore not the goal. Where the platform has been chosen according to the needs of the course and students and is being used to good pedagogic effect, lower levels of adoption are more desirable than mandated tokenistic use.

Workflow

- 23% of students said they use Workflow for their course.
- 47% of students said they were aware of Workflow.
- Design students are the least aware of Workflow - only 33% compared to 62% fashion students, 56% foundation students and 50% fine art students.
- 44% fashion students and 41% foundation students said Workflow is a course requirement, compared to 12% design students and 13% fine art students.
- 3% fine art students use Workflow, even though it is not a requirement.
- 6% foundation students and 4% fashion students don't use Workflow, even though it is a requirement.

As with Myblog.arts, 23% of students said they are using this pedagogically rich tool. The use of Workflow appears to be largely driven by LCF (In this case is it often used to make student practice across shared units and multiple physical sites more visible and collaborative), which suggests that if increased adoption is desired, it may be beneficial to raise awareness and focus training, support and communication of the benefits of using Workflow at the other colleges.

Showtime

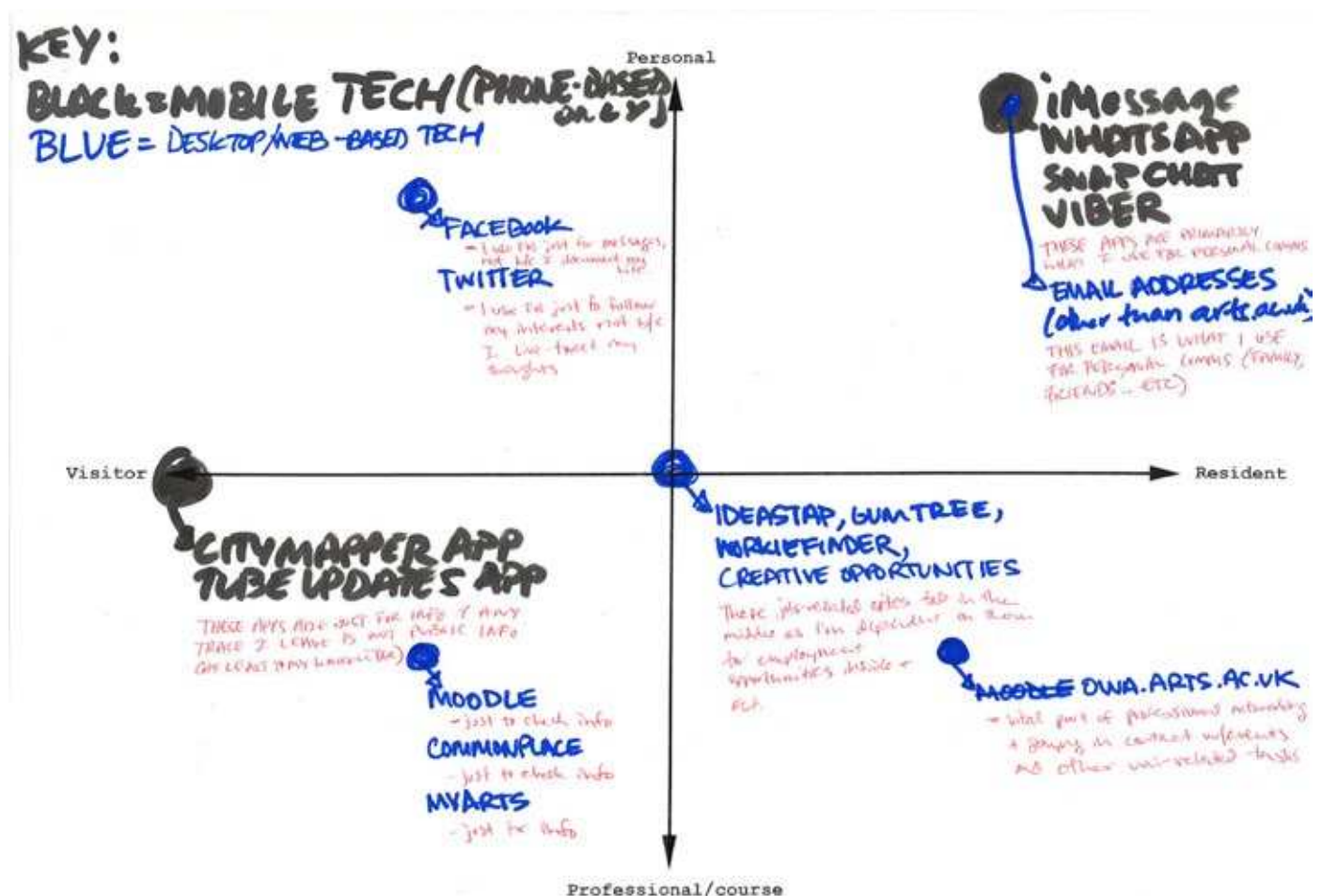
- Overall, 22% of students said they were aware of Showtime.
- Fashion students are the most aware of Showtime - 43% of fashion students know about it compared with 21% fine art, 15% other, 9% design, 6% foundation.
- A very small number of courses require the use of Showtime, except for in fashion, where 20% of students said it is a requirement.
- In all areas apart from foundation, slightly more students use Showtime than are actually required to do so.

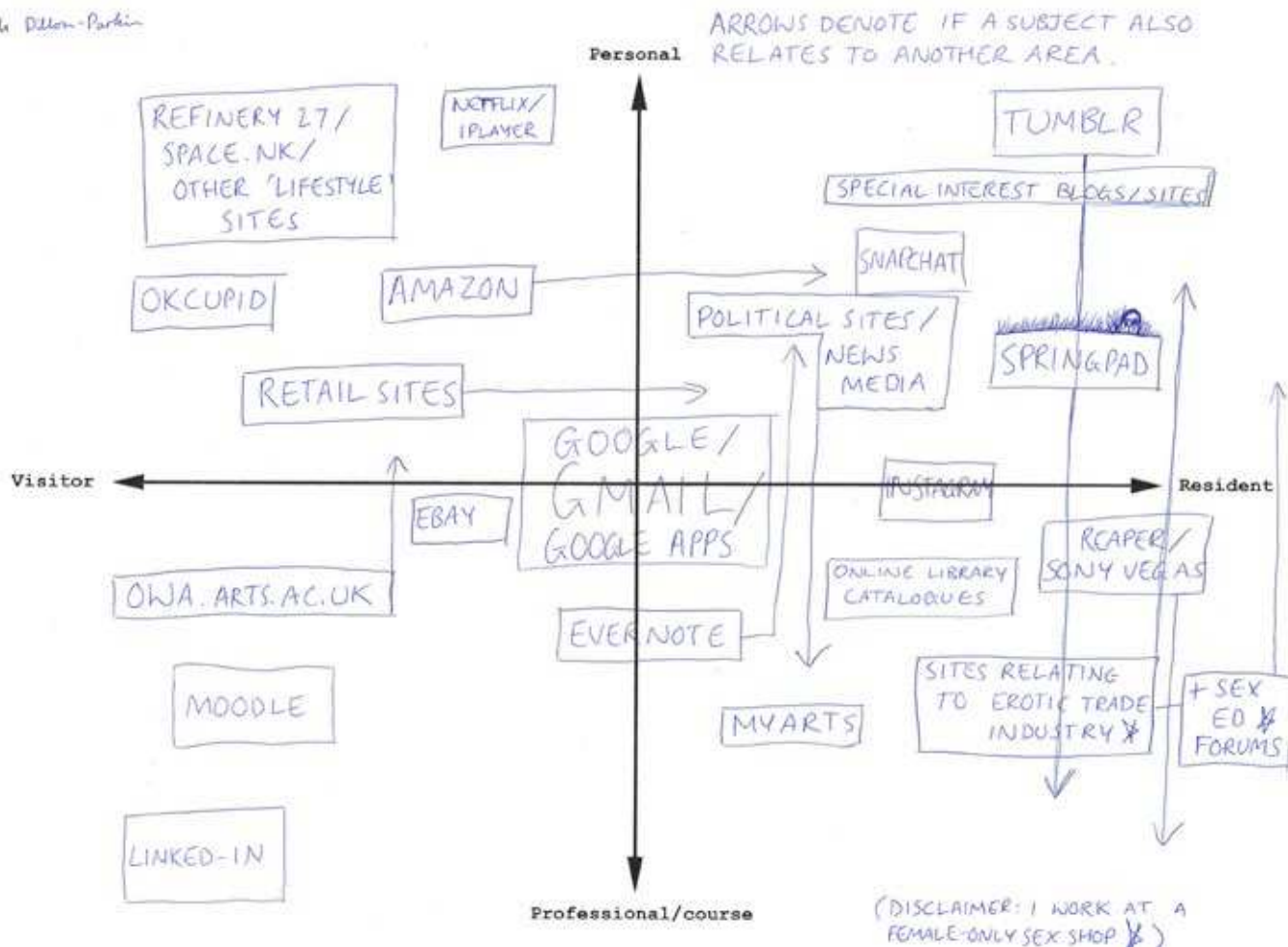
Focus groups

Four focus groups with a common schedule were held in the 2014 summer term, with 10 student participants attending in total. As noted in the introduction, the main function of the focus groups' was to inform the design of the survey rather than to provide an autonomous data set. Initially, we aimed to recruit 2nd year students, who we thought would have enough experience of the digital environment at UAL to make meaningful contributions, but not be overwhelmed by the pressures of final year assessment. Following poor attendance of the first 3 focus groups, however, we extended the invitation to students in all years.

Students were asked to undertake a mapping activity based on the [Visitors and Residents](#) approach (White and Le Cornu, 2011) (V&R), which uses a metaphor of 'place' to understand modes of online engagement.

The mapping activity allowed us to gain a picture of students' overall engagement landscape and to understand not just what technologies they use but how they use them. The students were asked to briefly discuss their maps, which encouraged them to articulate their ideas verbally as well as visually. Following the mapping activity, there was a structured discussion based on prepared questions about UAL-supported tools (Moodle, Myblog.arts, Workflow) and external tools.





The focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed. The collection of both maps and recordings allowed us to develop a new approach to presenting V&R maps, by appending them with audio and text in a browser. Visit the map pages to view the [text maps](#) and [audio maps](#).

The transcripts were broken down into a series of quotations and re-grouped under thematic headings every time reference to the same topic was made. The thematic headings were:

1. Tools
2. Barriers
3. Tutor attitudes and approaches
4. Positive learning experiences

1. Tools

All the tools (digital and non-digital) students referred to were listed, though in view of the research focus there was emphasis on the digital. The tools were categorized as 'UAL-supported' and 'external'. As students often talked about 'everyday' uses of technology, such as online banking or shopping, quotes regarding external tools were sub-categorized as being for 'general use' or 'for learning', though we realize this is a distinction with fuzzy boundaries. Students talked as much about general uses as uses for their learning, which indicates that their experiences of technology need to be understood as a general feature of their lives, rather than as something which can be split into 'learning' and 'not learning'. The potential for positive and negative experiences in relation to technology exists across these areas.

2. Barriers

This theme covered the barriers students encountered in relation to the tools they talked about. These barriers were sub-categorized into 'barriers to use' and 'barriers during use':

Barriers to use

Quotes from this category were further sub-categorized as resulting from a 'lack of time', 'lack of interest', or 'lack of awareness/knowledge'. 'Lack of interest' aimed to extricate the students' own agency in refusing to engage with tools, while 'lack of awareness/knowledge' indicated shortcomings that might be attributed to the UAL learning experience. The quotes suggested that not knowing how to use a tool was the biggest barrier to engagement. Some students were unaware of the existence of UAL-supported tools, which was also seen in the survey results. Several quotes alluding to the need for inductions can be seen under question 3.

Barriers during use

Quotes from this category were further sub-categorized as indicating 'negativity and frustration' and 'embarrassment and self-consciousness'. The notable cluster of quotes under 'negativity and frustration', mostly refer to problems with Moodle's navigation and architecture, and are referred to in question 7. Quotes about embarrassment and self-consciousness were less frequent, but referred to students not being ready to publish work, and having identity, privacy or security worries:

[Referring to Myblog.arts] "I don't really feel that I want to share the things I do yet" **Q14** (Fashion)

"I don't really use the Internet to put a lot of personal things, because I'm quite nervous about what information we put online - who is actually looking at it? Who is actually storing it? And in any case could that be used against us, especially in our professional career?" **Q98** (Communication Design)

3. Tutor attitudes and approaches

This theme aimed to explore how tutors behave in relation to tools. Tutor behaviour was sub-categorized into how tutors communicate to students about UAL-supported tools and how tutors use them. Quotes referring to tutors' behaviour in relation to Moodle are included in relation to question 5.

4. Positive Learning Experiences

This theme aimed to identify positive sentiments about tools, whether UAL-supported or external. There were over twice as many positive statements about external tools than about UAL-supported tools:

"Definitely Twitter - the university posts something up like 'hey we have an event tonight', and that's quite nice because you find out what's going on not especially what's going on CSM." **Q127** (Communication Design)

"Yeah, I mean a lot of the work that I make springs forth from some kind of programme. For instance I recently did a lot of work with sound and which I was using Ableton the DAW app, Digital Audio Workstation. Used Ableton Live to create these pieces" **Q81** (Fine Art 4D)

"Studying at CSM encouraged me to use software much more." **Q83** (Fine Art 2D)

“Most of the programmes I kind of had the most success with aren’t Adobe programmes.” **Q86** (Fine Art Sculpture)

This indicates that students are navigating across a range of non-institutionally supported technologies and tools, as well as social spaces. Setting expectations about the kind of pedagogy this necessitates and the kind of learning we need to support is important.

The focus groups represented a very small sample group, so the findings could not be broadly generalized, but the themes identified were used to inform the development of the survey, demonstrating how an iterative relationship between qualitative and quantitative data can be analytically productive.

Conclusions

UAL students' primary expectation of institutional technology is the provision of well-organised, easily accessible course information, particularly about assessment results and timetabling. Students expressed high degrees of anxiety where this information was unavailable or hard to find. As Moodle is the primary tool for information delivery, used by 96% of courses, the findings indicate that improving course teams' structural, editorial and communication processes on Moodle would reduce students' anxiety and improve their overall experience. While Moodle does not preclude pedagogically interesting teaching and learning, it is perhaps best used to serve the 'basic' content and information needs of students.

The functional role of Moodle should be understood in relation to a larger ecology of essential functional tools that support students and facilitate course delivery, such as the library, Turnitin, webmail and the Myarts portal, all of which feature prominently in students' experiences of the UAL digital environment. Understanding how these components interrelate is useful for gaining a clearer picture of students' overall experiences.

Since improved efficiency, communication and productivity are drivers for staff adoption (as indicated in the 2013 E-Learning report), it is important for the Teaching and Learning Exchange to attend to the functional aspects of Moodle so that staff can focus on utilising it effectively. As well as agreed standards for the reliability and availability of systems and hardware, colleges would benefit from the resources to define and proliferate acceptable standards and practices within their local context. Devolving responsibility for this at the college level with input from the Teaching and Learning Exchange (formerly CLTAD) where needed, would enable colleges to use standards in ways that are suitable for their own context and courses. In order to support this, the Teaching and Learning Exchange has successfully advocated for a new TEL-Coordinator role to be based at each college. These are newly funded 2 year grade 4 posts at 0.6 FTE, which will be locally based with strong links to the Teaching and Learning Exchange.

Beyond getting the basic functionality and effective use of Moodle right, it is vital that we clearly articulate the value and purpose of more pedagogically rich technology for both staff and students, and make clear the complementary role of our various services. Moodle uses the 'course' as its main organising principle whereas MyBlogs and Workflow centre on the individual, and as such present a richer range of creative and pedagogic possibilities. Moodle is a closed system for UAL whereas Myblog.arts and Workflow can be used in an 'open educational practice' manner to convene groups, enact social practices and facilitate critical reflective practice. Whereas Moodle functions within the 'walled garden' Myblog.arts and Workflow offer pathways in and out of that garden to the web. It is important to articulate the benefits of using the right tools for the right pedagogic or functional purposes, understanding them as part of a larger ecology of provision.

The 2013 E-learning report indicated that staff were unsure how to make best pedagogical use of digital technologies, and it was suggested a road map and strategic vision would help to address this. Looking at things from the student perspective, we found that the orientation of students' thinking was on accessing essential course information and their technical skill rather than with what staff might describe as 'pedagogy'. This implies again that we need to communicate the value of collaboration, discourse and open practice as well as technical skill. Student anxiety or frustration arising from not knowing how to use a particular software package could be alleviated if students understood these broader pedagogical aims. This is not to imply that we do not need to provide technical support and foster technical ability, but rather that we need to explain why we are asking students to engage in particular ways online and how this will benefit them if they sincerely engage. Emphasis should be placed on the 'why' rather than the 'how' because if students understand the value of engaging they are much more likely to be motivated to develop the required technical skills. This needs to be done at college level with support from the Teaching and Learning Exchange.

The technological challenges faced by staff and students are clearly distinct, and context specific; students' use

of technology is not limited by having to deliver courses at scale, and staff are not concerned about completing a course assignment, for example. The different demands on each group create different needs which can be exacerbated by expectations students develop by using the web in day to day life. Understanding how expectations are set by students' use of the web is important if we want to understand why they may be frustrated by or choose not to use institutional provision. Students may, for example, expect communications to be 'beamed into their dreams', because on the web they are used to receiving notifications directly to any email address of choice via a mobile app. They may not be aware of the institutional limitations that make this difficult for staff to implement. In these instances, it is important to articulate and rationalise institutional limitations and provide support for alternatives that may be reasonably adopted.

As noted in the introduction, the digital intersects the personal, educational, professional, creative, and leisure aspects of students' experiences. As such, the boundaries between general uses of technology and uses for their learning are fuzzy. Their experiences of technology need to be understood as a general feature of their lives, rather than as something that can be split into 'learning' and 'not learning'. This in turn relates to the complex negotiations staff and students have to make between institutional and non-institutional technologies, practices and social spaces in their teaching and learning. It appears that as well as understanding uses of individual tools and platforms, it is necessary to understand the interrelationships between them, and the domain specificities they entail. Understanding the students' techno-social journeys in and out of the institution would help gain a better understanding of the student experience in a digital context.

Institutional platforms are never going to replace platforms and services that exist on the wider Web, so aiming for 100% adoption is undesirable. Decisions about when it is pedagogically appropriate to use institutional platforms depends on context, scale and pedagogic aims. Clearly articulating the pedagogic benefits of institutional platforms may help staff and students understand what distinguishes them from what is 'out there', and why this might be of use or interest. At the same time, it is important to communicate that the Teaching and Learning Exchange (formerly CLTAD) understands how course-specificity and scale issues influence decisions about what platforms are adopted. The 'safe space' created by UAL-specific platforms can be highly beneficial, but pathways out of the institution need to be laid out clearly, so that students understand that they are able to migrate content if they choose to. Blogging and website development should also be understood as social activities that play a significant role in the creation and maintenance of a professional identity. As students may choose certain technologies and platforms because of their social as well as technical functions, we need to understand that choosing which technologies to use is a matter of social and political expression. Some technology supports institutional structures, such as the curriculum, while others support individual practice. Both are important.

The 2013 e-learning report recommended the development of a UAL vision for e-learning that situates institutional tools '[within a broader conceptualisation of e-learning as pervasive and far beyond the confines of institutionally provided tools.](#)' In accordance with that recommendation, we suggest that ultimately it is important that we continue to try and understand students' digital engagement in the broadest sense to ensure we design our institutional services appropriately and situate them in relation to the wider digital context that pervades many aspects of our students' lives.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are offered for consideration at University and College levels:

Ongoing development of our 'open source' platforms and services

While more a statement of 'business-as-usual' than a recommendation, it is of note that we do have the ability to continue to improve and evolve our core platforms. This work will be undertaken in response to University and College needs, and take into account feedback from staff and students via research such as this. For example, the Moodle upgrade scheduled for launch in July 2015 has been greatly informed by this research. In particular, our findings informed design decisions about the new version of Moodle, which is much easier to navigate. The main driver for improving the design of Moodle was the need to improve the navigation and clarify the location of content. The site has also been better optimized for mobile devices.

Supporting Moodle best practice

The most successful Moodle sites involve course teams planning a structure, agreeing on the location of information and establishing editorial and ownership processes. Badly structured or edited course sites result in students having to 'hunt' for content. Providing more local college-based support for course teams in this process would be beneficial as 'best practice' varies according to context. In order to support this, the Teaching and Learning Exchange has successfully advocated for a new TEL-Coordinator role to be based at each college. These are newly funded 2 year grade 4 posts at 0.6 FTE, which will be locally based with strong links to the Teaching and Learning Exchange

The right tools for the right jobs

Promoting a better understanding of the complementary roles of institutional tools would help ensure they are used most effectively, and that resource is put in the right place for developing them. Efforts to improve Moodle should be focused on ensuring it effectively performs essential content and communication functions, particularly when it acts as a hub for feedback and assessment results, and on providing support for staff into how to best utilize Moodle (see recommendation 1). While Moodle can support more innovative pedagogical approaches than it is currently being used for it is likely to be more effective to use it as a well-organized hub, linking out to more engaging pedagogy facilitated by platforms such as Workflow of Myblog.arts.

Raising awareness

As stated in the report, 100% adoption is not the goal for Myblog.arts and Workflow. However, making more explicit the pedagogic benefits of these tools to staff and raising students' awareness of their availability would be beneficial. This is part of a more general need to articulate the role and value of TEL across UAL. Possible ways the Teaching and Learning Exchange (formerly CLTAD) could do this would be:

- Collate and highlight examples of good practice amongst staff – these could be located in a resources area on TLE webpages.
- LTE actively acting as a 'broker' for successful practice across UAL.
- Highlight pedagogic benefits of tools when communicating about their e-learning workshops and on the e-learning support blog.
- Ensure that the new TeL-cordinator roles have a pedagogical as well as a technical focus.

College-level ownership

It is clear that decisions about when it is pedagogically appropriate to use institutional tools are context specific, and dependent on scale and pedagogic purpose. In light of this, the Teaching and Learning Exchange (formerly CLTAD) should encourage and support college-level ownership of institutional tools to help counter the ‘mandated from the center’ misnomer which retards effective adoption. This aligns with TLE’s strategic aim to act as a ‘broker’ for successful/innovative practice rather than to ‘police’ activity. The new TEL-coordinator roles will help support this recommendation.

Holistic thinking

We need to understand students’ digital engagement in the broadest sense to ensure we design our services appropriately. Support should be provided for non-platform specific digital activities such as blogging and consideration be given to how students journey from the wider web to within the institution. Possible ways the Teaching and Learning Exchange (formerly CLTAD) could do this would be:

- Collate and highlight examples of good practice amongst staff – these could be located in a resources area on TLE webpages.
- Undertake further research into how students are undertaking learning in digital contexts, including mapping journeys from institutional to non-institutional technologies. This aligns with our learning and teaching strategy which states an aim to undertake “ongoing investigations into the appropriation of digital technology by students to inform the development of services and to keep colleagues up to speed on evolving approaches to learning“
- Ensure TEL-coordinators understand that they can talk about the Web as much as UAL tools and platforms.

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