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# **E-LEARNING**

**AT UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS LONDON**

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## SUMMARY

This report is a systematic exploration of staff relationships with e-learning. It presents a renewed evidence base from which e-learning provision and related support can be planned particularly in a rapidly changing HE terrain and an institutional context where e-learning and academic structures are emerging from large change programmes. The research is based on 25 interviews with programme directors (PD) evenly distributed across the 4 colleges, with representatives from all discipline groups, and levels of study. The interviewees provided rich insights into attitudes to, practices in and aspirations for e-learning, but in some instances, were also limited by the newness of the PD role. While some PDs had an intimate understanding of their programme areas, others, understandably, given the newness of posts, were in the process of familiarising themselves with the work of their teams.

The overwhelming finding of this investigation is the interest in and willingness within programme teams to engage in e-learning. An assumption that e-learning improved efficiency, productivity and facilitated communication with students seemed to drive the adoption of technology across programmes. Many PDs 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). There was a keen interest in engaging in debate within the University community about what e-learning is or should be for a specialist art and design institution.

There was also scepticism about the use of technology for art and design based subjects and a perception that rich personal interaction could be subject to 'dumbing down' were this to take place via a digital medium. For some, e-learning was antithetical to making and could only detract from art and design practice. These points raise a significant question as to whether e-learning is a means to replicate existing learning experiences or, alternatively, to mediate new forms. Exploring this question requires an understanding of the affordances and applications of technology among a critical mass of staff and students. Such an understanding is best developed through e-learning practice itself coupled with reflection in and on action.

Many PDs saw a complex interplay between individual knowledge, skills and confidence in the use of technology and the cultural and political environment in which that use occurs. For example, it was often observed that a lack of confidence in the use of the tools can be exacerbated by the experience of unreliability in the infrastructure on which these platforms sit (e.g. networks and hardware). Developing e-learning at UAL will require an approach that recognises the complexity of technology use in this art and design higher education context and the interplay of staff agency with institutional structures.

While many PDs saw learning as an important area for development, this was often juxtaposed by their experience of 'still no time' for staff to consider, plan or engage with e-learning in a meaningful or pedagogically rich manner. This relates to broader issues regarding the resourcing of front line teaching teams to drive academic change and plan and implement curriculum enhancements.

Overall the findings suggest that there is much innovative and exemplary use of technology across the institution being driven by front line teachers and course teams. Use of technology is not, however, systematically visible at Programme level and is not therefore being enabled in a strategic manner at this or higher levels within the institution. Recommendations for action have been made at the level of the institution, college and programme and include the development of an appropriate vision for e-learning at UAL. Such a vision should be supported by the strategic development of e-learning through the resourcing of curriculum innovation, the definition of acceptable standards for reliability and availability of systems and hardware to support e-learning use, and the expansion of activities to share examples of what is possible in e-learning across and within cognate discipline areas.

# INTRODUCTION

## RESEARCH SCOPE AND AIMS

Understanding staff relationships with e-learning is fundamental to making well-informed decisions about how and why particular technologies should be adopted for teaching and learning. It is the aim of this report to present a systematic exploration of relationships with e-learning in order to:

- i) inform educational policy
- ii) inform staff development
- iii) understand the best way to integrate technology into teaching
- iv) inform investment in technology.

## CONTEXT

Institutionally, this study occurs at a time when UAL is emerging from an intense focus on improving course organisation and management primarily driven by National Student Survey results. A major programme of change has been undertaken to restructure and reallocate resources within course teams and the results of this are only beginning to emerge. As part of this course organisation and management drive, a policy on minimum use of the VLE was brought in in 2009, focused on use of the virtual learning environment (VLE) for student communication and provision of essential course materials. The implementation of this policy saw the use of the VLE increase over 75% in only a few years; however, a significant portion of the use is as an administrative and communication tool. While much work has been going on across the institution to broaden the use of e-learning, including the development and implementation of collaborative and student owned virtual tools, the perception of e-learning tools as aids to efficiency is thought to pervade. The implementation of Moodle alongside institutional tools designed specifically for student and staff communication and core information provision (MyArts) is an opportunity to shift this perception and develop the use of the VLE in more pedagogically rich ways.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is based on 25 interviews with programme directors evenly distributed across the 4 colleges, from all discipline groups, and levels of study. The rationale for sampling programme directors was two-fold. Firstly, the project team wished to take advantage of the introduction of the 'programme' as a newly formed unit of organisation in the University and anticipated that leadership in developing e-learning would take place at this level. Secondly, there was a degree of pragmatism in choosing to sample from a manageable population of programmes rather than courses. There were several limitations inherent in this decision. The first was that programme directors could not always give a comprehensive overview of practice within courses in their programmes as some were relatively new incumbents. We anticipated this and gave programme directors the questions in advance in a briefing about the project as a whole. Very few were able to make time to prepare for the interview and this led us to question our initial assumption that they will prioritise leadership in this area, a point borne out in the substantive findings. The second limitation was that the starting point for the interviews was often an unspoken assumption among programme directors that the researchers thought they 'ought' to be utilizing e-learning. Whilst some effort was made to dispel this notion, a variety of factors supported this assumption. These included the job roles of some of the interviewees and the vulnerability that some interviewees felt as a result of not having considered the issues prior to the interview. Thirdly, sampling only programme directors meant that we could only indirectly access the diversity of perspectives that is often present in course teams. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the interviews constitute a starting point for further discussion, for action, and for inquiring into student interaction with and attitudes to e-learning.

Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours. They were conducted by members of staff who were familiar with the college environment: Siobhan Clay for CCW, Darren Gray for LCF, Chris Linford for LCC, Jo Morrison for CSM. All of the interviews were recorded. A common interview schedule and coding structure were devised for all the interviews, which were then collaboratively analysed with the aid of the qualitative analysis software, Nvivo. The interview schedule that formed part of the briefing sent to all PDs before the interviews is included in the appendix.

### **A note on the presentation of findings**

Direct quotations are identified in the form [PD 101]. The first digit designates the college and the second and third a unique interview number. Where it seems relevant discipline areas are identified in the text.



## FINDINGS

These findings explore staff engagement with e-learning through an analysis of programme directors' (PD) views. Each section focuses on an aspect of engagement. Some sections relate to PDs' perceptions of the staff on their programmes; other sections relate to PD's understanding of the broader institutional environment within which they operate. There is particular focus on working concepts and assumptions that underlie engagement with e-learning.

### WHY SHOULD I? COMPREHENDING THE POSSIBILITIES

The need to have a clear purpose for e-learning came up repeatedly in the interviews. Some PDs had a clear sense of its purpose for their courses; only one saw no value in it at all whilst the majority seemed interested in having discussions about what could be achieved with e-learning, mostly about how it could be used to enhance student learning and explore the subject area being taught. The interest expressed was in exploring the possibilities in an honest and considered way that sets aside 'evangelism'. There was also an interest in coming to a common conceptual understanding of what e-learning is:

I think having some definitions of that, going beyond the tools and going into the white space of it is something that would be really useful to talk about and formalizing that as part of our review so that we can think about a unit or a certain kind of method of delivery sitting into criteria level three, for example, or whatever the definition might be.  
[PD 401]

As this interviewee points out, it is difficult to prise apart 'e-learning' from the technologies which are used to facilitate it. Clearly, how e-learning is conceptualised is central to on-going discussion and development of practice though these underlying assumptions are rarely made explicit. One study, drawing on 29 interviews with studio practitioners teaching undergraduates in 12 art & design institutions in the UK, identifies five conceptions of e-learning (Souleles, 2011: 105):

## Categories of conceptualising e-learning

Categories	Referential aspect (what)	Structural aspect (how)
A	E-learning enhances and complements traditional and face-to-face teaching and learning methods	Focus on instructional potential
B	E-learning is learning facilitated through electronic means	Focus on the electronic aspects
C	E-learning is distance education	Emphasis on nonphysical presence
D	E-learning provides access to instructional material and study related information	Emphasis on access and dispersion of information
E	No understanding of e-learning	Emphasis on vagueness of the term and lack of working examples

The distribution of these conceptions among Souleles' interviewees was as follows: just under a fifth fitting into category A, a quarter or so into each of the B, C and D categories and a small minority into E. Whilst the numbers in both Souleles' study and our own do not warrant quantitative analysis, we did find that these conceptions were present in our interviews:

...when I'm asked about e-learning, to me, I think... it's more like e-communication. [PD103]

...e-learning, you know, long-distance learning is the thing that's coming up. [PD104]

There were also PDs whose conception went beyond Souleles' categories and situated e-learning in an organisational and cultural context:

I actually think it is given quite a high priority. I just think it's slightly misunderstood as an administrative function when actually it's a part of normal contemporary experience... It's about framing the problem [of low engagement with e-learning], I think, and we still frame it in technical and administrative terms, when actually a lot of it's cultural. [PD 306]

Two interviewees summed up the need for debate within UAL to define what e-learning means for the University:

I think what makes e-learning possible is... an articulation of what that means. And learning, what is meant by learning, and what is meant by e-learning. I think if that's articulated then the resistance, if you like, could be less. [PD405]

And I think people would probably welcome staff development around that, definitely, but not so much how to, because you can always learn that via talking to the right people. More just what's available and what's the potential, what's the coming landscape going to look like and so forth. [PD 305]

There was frustration among some PDs that the use of e-learning tools was limited to administrative purposes of storing and communicating simple logistical information:

But I think if I was just saying, we use Blackboard, we have Facebook, we have blogs, we use Twitter, dah-dah-dah. That's just a kind of digital activity; it's not necessarily a learning activity. The majority of it is pure communication. Actual learning in terms of teaching students about how to reveal something about a subject and reflect upon it and then consolidate and test that through technology is a different thing, and it's a very particular thing. [PD 405]

there is no reason why it needs to be just shouting at somebody and just announcing things. [PD 204]

This frustration was evident in discussions within course teams about the ownership of virtual spaces and the intention behind their use. One course team, for example, had a wiki space outside the institutional infrastructure that was described as being the place where innovation, creativity and real learning, could occur. This was described as being wholly owned by academic staff and students:

Our wikis are a bit like this building and a bit like what you'd expect an art course to be, slightly chaotic. A little bit muddled, but full of interesting things around every corner. And that's what the wiki looks like. It's not very clean... our lead administrator hates it because she wants really clean, linear organization stuff and we just kind of throw stuff at it. And the point about the wiki is, it's completely open so the students can change it as well. They edit it as well. And that's important for us, an important principle for us. [PD 204]

Conversely, for some teams, the importance of administrators managing virtual spaces was clear, but the lack of involvement from academic colleagues resulted in the use of these spaces primarily for document storage and communication. In the example above, ownership of and active engagement by academic staff in learning technologies was crucial to reaping the benefits of these tools for student learning; there was, perhaps, unrealised potential for administrative support that was sensitive to academic rationale. In this case, it appears that the lack of constraints and the complete control of the space by staff and students is what made it work as a tool to support learning. One PD noted that administration was all that was possible with the tools given the large group sizes and the nature of the pedagogy:

I think one the barriers for us, one of the reasons we use it the way we do is 700 people in groups of roughly 35 to one tutor means the information giving is challenging but anything that requires a bit of nurturing, a bit of care, a bit of personality, needs to happen in the studio, and that's why we tend to use it for information giving, more. [PD 203]

There was an interest in exploring how colleagues were using the tools, particularly in order to understand how it has supported learning. This sharing of practice and the potential benefits of e-learning was supported as a means of engaging wider group of staff and programme teams:

...because we're coming to this reasonably late. And I think it would be very good for me and a number of other people to actually see the system working almost ironed out. Then you'd get a good idea of the potential. [PD 303]

and so there are obstacles. I think they're both physical and non-physical. But what makes the use of e-learning possible? I don't know. What makes it possible? I think having an understanding of how it works. [PD401]

#### UNDERSTANDING HOW 'IT' WORKS: BARRIERS AND ENABLERS

*students Skype a partner  
institution in the studio*



We place 'it' in parentheses to emphasise that there is not a commonly held conceptualisation of what e-learning is. Indeed, much of the foregoing discussion has sought to explore the most prevalent understandings of 'it', and many of the barriers and enablers relate to this range of understandings. As a PD observes in the quote below, the conceptualisation of e-learning is heavily mediated by the institutional environment and the investments in particular technologies that have been made. In this context, 'it' encompasses not only a technical understanding of e-learning but also a capacity to negotiate the social, cultural and organisational context that surrounds it.

That organisational context at once limits and mediates what e-learning is or can be:

But my experience has been at University level that your e-learning is your Blackboard, or it's your Moodle, and it's not; it's actually something much more considered and articulate. And if it's done that it can be interesting, because this space is out there and there's a million trillion things going on there.' [PD 405]

The barriers to the use of e-learning at UAL range from the personal to the institutional, to the socio-political and technical. There was significant concern about the infrastructure provided to support technology-enhanced learning. For instance, staff and students often do not have access to appropriate hardware or software, and many physical environments are not adequately designed for use of digital technologies. The solutions may be simple, such as putting black-out blinds in a studio, or may call for the re-design of a space. Technology, particularly mobile devices, should be integrated with working practices, ensuring that staff have access to the right tools 'at hand'. One interviewee suggested that associate lecturers (AL) may have particular barriers engaging with university systems:

...where you've got ALs that teach in different universities, they tend to use maybe their own blog or stuff because it makes sense for them to have something that is their stuff. [PD 306]

The perceived impermanence of technologies led to worries about investing time and effort adopting a technology, only to find it redundant or replaced. Interviewees were also concerned with the reliability of platforms and services, particularly those provided by the University. Staff recounted stories of being embarrassed in front of students when technology failed on them or losing work and time when systems failed:

The system went down when year two was being marked, and actually you can't do anything. So, in a way, if you rely too heavily on e-things then you can come a cropper, really. [PD 105]

Lack of time was commonly expressed as a reason for staff not being able to engage with e-learning. This is in line with other studies which quote lack of time as the greatest barrier to the uptake of e-learning in HE., (Walker et al. 2013):

This is competing for attention with lots of other things within the University that are coming from above saying you have to do this. You've got to sort this. I was in a meeting yesterday ...and the person before me was talking about the file networks that were also something else which you've got to get sorted. You've got two months to get it sorted, and I'm on then next talking about Moodle, and you've got to do this and you've got three months to sort it. [PD 403]

Time constraints and competing demands mean that staff cannot familiarise themselves with technologies and embed them in daily practice. Confusion over the multiplicity of tools available was raised as an issue for both staff and students – particularly in connection with communication. What was less clear was whether this confusion came from the tools themselves or their unfamiliarity to users:

We've got an official platform whether it's going to be Moodle or it was Blackboard, and then I think when you start adding other platforms into that, like a wiki or a blog, the lines blur then as to the expectations of what the student expects to see on the blog. So do they go to Moodle for more official information or is it the blog? [PD406]

So the biggest problem, I suppose is within the e-learning experience that the students have and the staff have, is confusion of mixed messages. The confusion of where to find things. [PD201]

For staff, it seems as if this is not a matter of a lack of training opportunities, but rather the lack of time to meaningfully engage with technologies to develop practice:

It's probably more of a perception that's the obstacle and affecting one's aspirations. But the reality of it is that a lot of it's fairly straightforward, and if we just need someone to show you how to do something, a bit like how we deal with our own students, I guess. [PD401]

Furthermore, past experiences of technologies within the University setting where students and staff have been let-down by technologies can lead PDs to distrust the technical capacity of the institution, be it hardware, software, signal or technical support. As a consequence, many have opted to bypass the technical infrastructure they perceived as unreliable and, instead, use tried and tested methods - often retaining an analogue approach:

You still need to be able to get online. You still need to have a battery in whatever device you're looking at the work in. It needs to fire up quickly but doesn't. Having a loose-leaf folder with paper is still more reliable. [PD106]

For an external project, the tutor's really keen on talking to everyone on the Facebook site. That's just because it's so difficult for him to talk to everyone on their virtual learning sites. It's across the courses. They can't do that. [PD 201]

On the whole, there appears to be a general readiness to integrate e-learning into course pedagogy, but a reluctance by many to do so is fuelled by experiences of unreliability or limited functionality.

## AUTHORITY, CONFIDENCE AND WILLINGNESS TO FAIL

At times, the challenges faced by PDs wishing to engage their staff in e-learning were framed as deficits in staff skills where academics were perceived as having less skill than technicians: academics were feeling they were 'on the back foot' in relation to colleagues and/or students perceived to be more able in use of technology:

Yes, I've got phobes on the staff. I sometimes feel there are more phobes than non-phobes' [PD 301]

And what does 'trained' mean? It means a number of things. In the first instance, no e-phobic. And I find it difficult enough to get the team using Outlook, so I think that's a generational thing, but I think soon I'm just going to have to wield quite a hefty stick to get them to do it. [PD 106]

The staff are all digital immigrants and there's a huge divide and it's about confidence and again, we've got a limited budget for staff development with such a big team and you end up not prioritising those things and some staff are very anxious about SafeAssign and actually it's very straight forward. [PD 203]

Occasionally, positioning fellow academics as lacking in or resistant to the development of technical skills seemed related to a perceived pressure to be seen to know about and be committed to e-learning. Emotional reactions of some staff to learning technologies included fear, scepticism and lack of confidence:

you've got the resistors and the resistors will go back to more traditional methods because they feel scared, and they need a certain authority for something they feel confident in. Everyone wants to be proficient. ... Everyone wants to stand in front of a class from a position of authority and confidence. [PD 403]

... so that is a major hindrance, if you like, technophobic, because a lot of staff, myself included, grew up... were taught art and design pre-digitially, so you need confidence in it, and that means it has to run smoothly, and you have to have support for it... it is not intuitive for them to learn, having to suddenly learn how to do something... [PD 405]

As these quotes demonstrate, PDs observe an inter-play between the technical skills and the affective dimensions of individuals' experiences of e-learning. The perceived instability and unreliability of systems seemed to threaten individuals' sense of authority in relation to students. In some instances there was also some scepticism about the motivations of 'the institution' in encouraging e-learning:

I think people want to do more, but there's a suspicion and a fear of it... Fear in the sense that they don't know enough, and a suspicion that they

might just be trying to create education on the cheap by getting people to follow Pearson-style e-learning packages. [PD 305]

One PD noted that the key to making e-learning possible was to have 'inquisitive staff prepared to take risks and fail. [PD 204]. Having staff willing to take risks and fail is predicated on the existence of an environment in which that risk is tolerated and perhaps even encouraged. Some PDs reported having created that environment and expressed a desire for staff to take action within it.

This sense of willingness to tolerate some failure was not raised by most PDs; in fact, the opposite was more prevalent as the quotes above demonstrate. This would indicate that this group of staff perceived, and perhaps contributed to the creation of, the context in which they were working as broadly not tolerant of risk in teaching and learning. This is an interesting contrast to the view often expressed that uncertainty and tolerance of unknown outcomes are intrinsic to art and design education (Shreeve, Sims & Trowler, 2010). If e-learning is to succeed in this context we may need to build tolerance and make more space for staff to 'have a go' without guaranteed success. The impact upon students would obviously need to be considered and managed in such an environment but experimentation in e-learning practice should fit with the broader values and goals of teaching and learning in art and design.

In describing stories where e-learning was perceived to have 'failed', there was little reflection on the reasons why an initiative may not have been successful; an unsuccessful outcome was often put down to students failing to engage. What we did not hear in the interviews were stories of sustained experimentation to diagnose failure and refine practice. One of our interviewees pointed towards institutional culture as perhaps playing a role in this:

I think probably it's the academic curse that may be the reason for it as we're required to predict the future, not in the R&D sense but in the sense that we're supposed to know what to do now in order to make person X viable for the future in whatever context they want to operate. And so our tendency is to sort of... if it doesn't work perfectly the first time is to bin it and start all over again, which is really a detrimental way to operate. And I think even though we champion reflection we very rarely apply it institutionally. [PD202]

Some PDs noted the impact of support in developing comfort and confidence in use of e-learning:

So, yes, it's mainly around about training and recognizing that staff who want to take these things a bit further need the time and space to do that, really.' [PD 203]

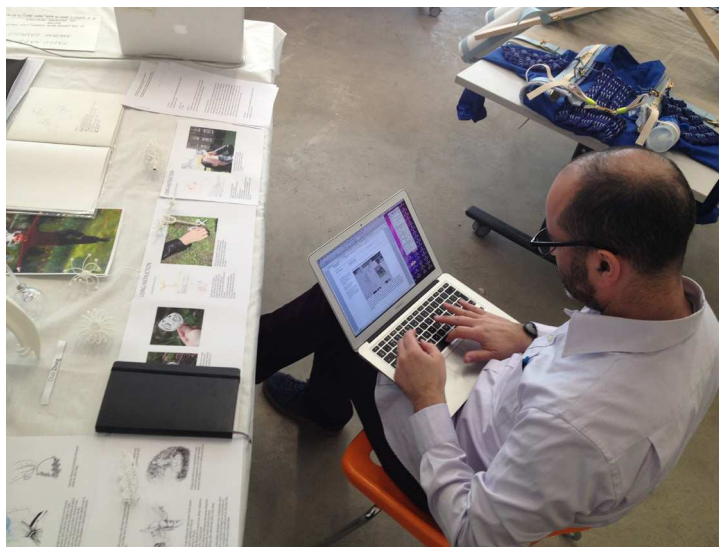
...it's like trying to understand the inside of a crab shell if somebody's just described it to you. Once you've opened it up and shown it to them, and seen what's in there and what the possibilities are, then you'd have a greater understanding... They'd need some support. That would



probably mean an allocation of hours. I don't think they should be done separately. I think people learn better in groups. And so if we gave them projects that they could work on and say how do you think they could do it? Go away for a day or two and come back with what you've done, especially with someone who could mentor them as they went through that. I think that would probably be a good way of managing it. But there would be a resource implication. [PD303]

### E-LEARNING IN ART AND DESIGN: SYMBIOSIS, SUBVERSION OR OXYMORON?

*marking digital and physical portfolios in the studio*



The relationship between e-learning and art and design was discussed along three dimensions: the first relates to the susceptibility of art and design practices and outcomes in terms of digital representation; the second is a concern with the preservation (or transformation) of tutor-student interactions; the third pertains to the possibilities subverting or reinforcing patterns of social inequality. This section takes each of these dimensions in turn.

Among some interviewees, learning technology was perceived to be an awkward fit with art and design practices and values. The argument often made was that the practices students are engaged in are not just cerebral but involve the whole person in conceiving and making, and the erroneous presumption of e-learning was that this could be replicated in a digital environment:

... [tutors] feel that online they're not going to get such a good view of textures and colours for, say, knit and print... it is seen as a dumbing down... there is something impersonal about it being on a screen. [PD 103]

I think all of us as tutors are more comfortable assessing the physical, in a sense, because then it's also we know what it is we're looking at then. I think sometimes, as well, with a digital submission, it's easier to be seduced by the presentation of something rather than the content, and it can be harder to get into that. [PD 102]

I'm not in favour of students downloading work onto a website or a blog system and viewing it only that way because in terms of art and design I think there's a certain aesthetic that can be missed unless you actually see something physically [PD 303]

*marking digital and physical portfolios in the studio*



It was not just that e-learning was antithetical to making; it was also perceived to diminish the possibilities for face-to-face interaction:

..we're very hardline about attendance and being in the studio face to face, so we're quite cautious about creating situations where we're sort of saying, well actually you don't need to be here....[PD 203]

In some instances, where individuals had seen how things could be otherwise in other courses, there was evidence of movement away from these positions. It may be that the organisation of courses into programmes seems to facilitate this kind of close-at-hand observation of alternative possibilities:

My course is very object-oriented. The kind of materiality of the object is really important, and I'm not sure how you deal with that on an online course, so I think a lot of courses you could run online, and have online crits and classrooms and obviously [our] MA is built round the possibility of being able to run multi-user crits, all looking at the same visual material.' [PD 301]

Others, however, positioned use of the digital as not in opposition to the physical but as a way to expand and enhance:

and that's also coming around this idea of it's non-physical, therefore it's non-art-and-design. It is physical, but it's using the physical and the virtual to create a new opportunity. [PD 405]

The affective dimensions of tutor-student interactions were perceived to reside necessarily, and only, in face-to-face rather than virtual interaction: Hiding behind a screen rather than being direct with students. Art and design is always more... emotionally charged, as an area to work in and for students to engage with than in many others, because people feel very personally exposed when they present work. I think face to face is a really good way to understand what's going on in those situations, it's nuanced. Both parties have to be aware of their vulnerabilities and that's emotionally charged as well. So I think...this is my suspicion and I haven't got any concrete evidence whether some people do hide behind the screen. [PD 106]

I think there are interesting moments, but I don't think they will ever fully replace the kind of genuine possibility that studios offer to a creative practitioner. And that's not about being in the studio all the time, but perhaps sometimes you need to have a face to face conversation. [PD 202]

Turning now to the potential interplay between e-learning and social inequality, some PDs argued that virtual interactions would disadvantage students with relatively less prior experience of the worlds of higher education and art and design:

[We] need to look into the work of WP students more to ensure one is judging fairly. This would be difficult to do online. One might miss out on additional signifiers of the attitude and care taken in preparing the work. [PD 103]

These views capture a complex understanding of face-to-face interactions between staff and students as encompassing the affective, as opposed to online interactions viewed as simplistic and incapable of supporting the kind of dialogue needed in the being and becoming aspects of art and design pedagogy. There has been little investigation into how online interaction might support the development of affective aspects of learning in higher education; however, some research has explored how digital environments create "networked publics [which] support many of the same practices as unmediated publics, but their structural differences often inflect practices in unique ways." (Boyd, 2008, p.2). In exploring if and how digital interactions might support all aspects of learning in art and design, it is important to consider how the same practices may manifest differently in digital environments.

At present, it is commonly assumed that Widening Participation students are at a disadvantage when it comes to access and experience of e-learning at UAL. There did not seem to be a nuanced understanding of differences in engagement with VLE's, blogs etc. among students from different backgrounds. Rather there was an assumption that students from lower socio-

economic backgrounds needed help to access the hardware in the first place and that e-learning can further disadvantage them unless the University addresses this.

I think because we've got such a diverse range of students, not all of them can afford to have kit at home. Not all of them can afford to have broadband. So I think there's an equal ops issue there as well...so I think enabling all students to have some form of access to e-learning, away and outside of the college [PD 302]

... the issue is there is an assumption that all students have computers at home... I've got one student who's very vocal about this all of the time and she's very proactive as well... but very anxious about the fact that she can't always book a machine out from the central loan store and she's dyslexic but it's not that serious and so severe that she automatically gets a laptop from anybody, and that's really highlighted for me this year because she's constantly telling me about it, that they don't all have computers or access to computers and you can say, oh, well, you can go to a public library, they're increasingly, they're closing more and more [PD 203]

A suggestion that the University could provide WP students with equipment and software to promote parity of access was made several times. Whilst this may not be viable (due to the difficulties of identifying students who would be eligible, for example, as well as cost) the suggestion is, nevertheless, significant in that it frames the interplay between e-learning and social equality as essentially material. Whilst there is anecdotal evidence of the possibilities for exacerbating social inequality, there is a dearth of systematic evidence that could inform the allocation of resources.

Contesting claims were made about the value of e-portfolios in the selection of students during the recruitment process. The debate centred on the relative merits of in-person portfolio presentation versus online submission. It was argued that the physical presentation of the portfolio would negatively disadvantage students who do not have the funds for expensive materials and that the subtleties of physical presentation can allow tutors to look for signs of potential that would not be obvious in a digital format. Some courses use online e-portfolios to screen students for interview and in these instances PDs described the value of levelling the playing field and saving students and staff time when they are 'absolutely not ready to get a place' [PD 205].

## STORIES OF SUCCESS

A number of factors seemed to characterise stories of success. Among these was early student use of technologies which resulted in high levels of engagement.

I think we slightly impose on them that they have to use blogs, in the first year, and gradually they see the benefit of them for collaboration throughout the years, so generally they use it as part of their toolkit of stuff to use. I think that's the difference. We don't have to badger them along to use their blog and keep posting. They tend to just do it naturally as part of their learning experience. [PD 302]

A similar approach was used to establish the students' use of Blackboard.

When they're finally in the building and working with their space we do encourage them to think about Blackboard, we make a really big statement about being a paperless course ... and that forces them onto Blackboard and it forces them to deal with problems that they're having on Blackboard and email addresses and so on... The other thing we do is we use SafeAssign for the first written assignment and that absolutely flushes out any of the last problems with Blackboard [PD203]

LCF students using myblog.arts for pre-entry and ISHE unit work

The screenshot shows a Moodle forum page titled "Runway" with a "2013" badge. The page contains several student posts about fashion accessories. The posts are:

- Zara Evening Bag** (Nov 12, 2013) by Yurain Ng, BA (Hons) Fashion Contour. Description: "My chosen object is a evening bag made by well-known high street brand Zara. The size is very small, which is only approximately 6.7x4.3 inch. It is smaller than normal purse and seems like hardly put things more than a phone in it. This is a bag shaped as a trapezoid and made of stiff material by casting skill and glued with outer fabric, which is downy velvet in color black. The bag also decorated by black lace on every edge. I personally like the peacock on the bottom with opening tails and two side view peacocks in the front."
- ISHE object** (Nov 12, 2013) by Anastasia Tetsuda, BA (Hons) Cordwainers Fashion Accessories. Description: "The chosen object is a key with a pendant, which is made in a shape of a shoe. I find it quite interesting to explore keys, its history and emotional meaning. I love the contrast between this simple key and a pendant all covered in crystals."
- ISHE OBJECT** (Nov 12, 2013) by Catherine Ojo, BA (Hons) Fashion Contour. Description: "The object I chose are Africa's multicultural multi-coloured waist beads. This object comes in all different shapes and sizes, texture and identity. I'm from Western Africa, Nigeria and I'm from the Yoruba tribe. It is what my people call the "ILEKE- IDI" (JEWELLERY OF THE WAIST). They can come in small powder glass beads with so much limitless colours to choose from and sizes that fit your personality and the comfort of your waist."
- Hat** (Nov 23, 2013) by Joshua Harrison Spencer Hale, Unspecialised. Description: "I chose this object for its iconic form. I love its simplistic and unique construction. It is made..."

Promoting opportunities to develop familiarity with the software is also an approach taken with the 'Runway' project at LCF, a pre-entry activity which introduces both Moodle and blogs.

Some interviewees talked about how they address the complexity and plethora of options by narrowing down and focusing on the careful and considered use of a small number of tools to support learning – this had the added advantage of keeping things manageable for staff as well.

There was an appetite among many programme directors to see e-learning embedded in curricula rather than a bolt-on or administrative exercise:

if you want an active genuine sort of experience with students, you've got to think perhaps of the way you structure your courses and programmes. [PD 202]

the aspiration is to use it more and more if it is useful, if it supports, what they're doing, because ... they're not interested in e-learning for the sake of e-learning. They're interested in learning. [PD 204]

The challenge in achieving embedded approaches related primarily to getting time for course teams to consider developments as a group. There was little time in the schedules of individuals and teams for this to take place. The challenge of engaging fractional staff and ALs was also raised given the limited time set for them to contribute beyond their set teaching time.

I don't think actually, as a teaching team, we've had enough opportunity to all talk together about that. Again, there are pockets of really good knowledge and some really good practice that goes on. But there aren't enough moments in our new schedule we've been able to say, 'let's get together and do that'. [PD 102]

It's everybody. We're really time starved, and that's got worse over the last year. [PD 106]

You need to have the discussion first, then the training and then the implementation and to really think about how that does contextualize within the teaching. [PD 406]

The importance of collective agency has been noted elsewhere in relation to student engagement with digital technologies (Jones & Healing, 2010). The importance of the context in which staff members operate and the priority (perceived or real) given to engaging with learning technology in relation to other activities is a key aspect of facilitating staff engagement. The perception of many that development in this area was important but that there was still no time to engage with it relate to broader issues regarding the resourcing of front line teaching teams to drive change and plan and implement curriculum enhancement.

Some courses engender familiarity with technology through embedding into the curriculum, not explicitly teaching students how to use particular tools but rather learning by doing. One PD described introducing students to blogs as an integral, assessed part of their course:

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 [PD 204]

This course embeds cutting edge technology, open source platforms and tools to support community and lecture sharing, seminars and activities as a core suite of tools. These students are not especially conversant when they sign up for the course but have to engage with the technology in order to engage in the course. The following quote refers to a mature student's exploration of digital media and web 2.0 tools which were entirely new to him at the beginning of the course: Is he interested in e-learning? No, he's just interested in learning. And it's facilitated him to find the space that he's looking for to challenge his own work, his own practice... I think it just provides the possibility to do what he wants to do and that's what's intriguing for him. [PD 204]

In the case of this particular course, the course leader accepts that things will fail, falter and break but the benefits of using the technology, making mistakes, discovering new solutions, far outweigh the negatives. Technology is not an adjunct to the course, rather an embedded resource necessary for the course to function successfully; its success undoubtedly relies on the time and dedication of a committed and digitally confident member of staff steering this forward. In this context, where e-learning is naturally integrated into the curriculum the PD sees it as a means to a pedagogic end rather than an end in itself.

There does seem to be an appetite amongst many staff at UAL to develop more innovative practices as described here, both to match their students' expectations of digital technology use and to be up to speed with how digital delivery can enhance the learning experience

## CASE STUDIES

Here are just a few examples of the many innovative and effective examples of learning and teaching we found in our conversations with staff whilst undertaking this research.

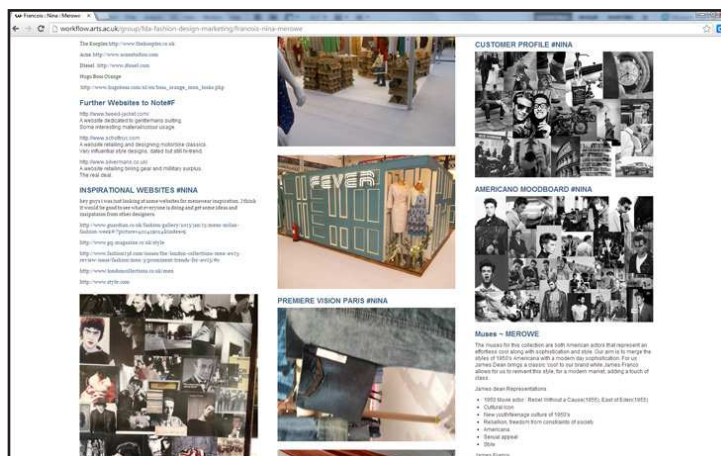
### WORKFLOW.ARTS.AC.UK

Workflow is the UAL e-portfolio platform which is also a flexible web authoring and collaboration tool. Workflow enables individuals and groups to construct web pages easily and allows users to define, on a page-by-page basis, who can view that content. It integrates closely with Moodle and content can be 'frozen' and submitted for assessment.

#### **Tim Williams, LCF, FDA / BA, Fashion, Design & Marketing, Year 1**

Tim Williams of LCF uses Workflow both as an area for sharing learning materials with his students and as a collaborative workspace for students to create content in small groups. Students co-author pages in teams of three or four sharing the documentation of their team project's progress along with research materials and contextual multimedia.

LCF students collaborate in Workflow



Having work visible to peers and seeing other teams’ work in this shared space encourages students to participate in creating content and helps raise the standard of research work. Workflow is an excellent solution for pulling in diverse visual content including blog and social media feeds, as well as more conventional web and text/imagebased content. This innovative use of Workflow shows how tutor initiated engagement can encourage collaboration.

**Cath Caldwell, CSM, BA Graphic Design Stage 1**

In this example, the primary function of Workflow is brought to the fore - enabling first year students to develop a digital portfolio. Students on Cath’s course use Workflow as a vehicle to present work for assessment in digital format alongside a physical portfolio. Cath sees Workflow as a safe starting point for her first year students to share their work. In subsequent years, they are encouraged to present work via their own blogs or websites linked via the Workflow tool.

CSM students create digital portfolios in workflow



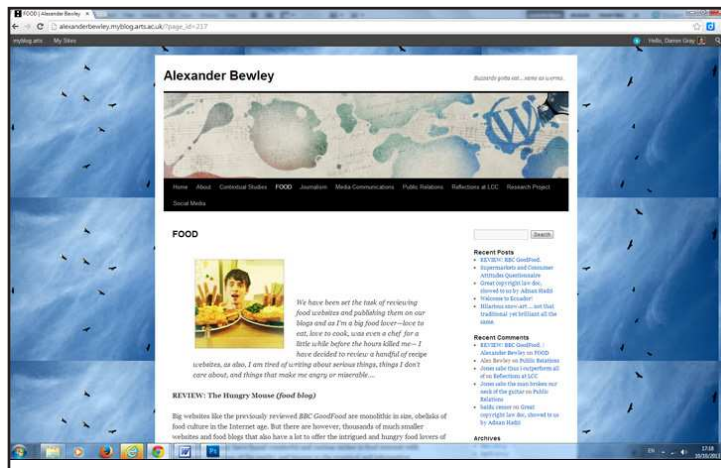
Students who lack confidence to share their work widely, or want to keep parts of their working process private, appreciate Workflow’s high degree of control over privacy and selective access to work. Students also report the ease with which they can embed multimedia and webbased materials and reference their group projects with other Workflow users.



## MYBLOG.ARTS.AC.UK

Myblog.arts, the UAL blogging platform based on Wordpress, can be used in many ways to support learning. Users can create individual and group blogs and limit access to staff and students at UAL or make it visible to anybody.

*LCC students use blogs to develop digital literacy and professional identity*



### **Anthony Parsons, LCC, Access Diploma To HE: Media Communication**

Myblog.arts was chosen by Anthony Parsons at LCC to encourage students to collaborate, develop, share and showcase their work. Students on the Access Diploma to HE: Media Communication have been communicating their work and presenting their assignment ideas across the three core course elements, Journals, PR, and Media Communications using the blogging tool.

Students gained experience from 'seeing' their work in the online environment as well as on paper and became proficient in developing their blog. Students also developed their digital literacy skills as they reflected on how their blog might be used to present themselves to prospective HE course tutors. The blogs also facilitated direct access for tutors to the evidence needed for assessment and tutors often included hyperlinks back to a student's blog in unit reflection sheets to illustrate how that individual had achieved specific assessment criteria.

### **Annick Collins and Michael Lehnert, CCW, The Eden Project / Play**

Annick Collins and Michael Lehnert at CCW developed and launched a learning and sharing community of practice on myblog.arts to enable and support innovative international knowledge exchange. This was the first CCW enterprise project of an international nature. It was also the first project that took place across all three colleges of CCW (Camberwell, Chelsea and Wimbledon) and with students and academics from different courses and disciplines.

Myblog was chosen to enable and facilitate the exchange of research and knowledge between students, tutors and corporate clients, based in London and in Tokyo. It allowed easy and flexible management of several subpages, creating metadata tags, and posting rich content either through embedded links or uploaded images.

### A PLATFORM FOR LEARNING?

In talking about the University platforms and services, a mixed picture emerges from staff. Some of the clearest examples of student learning came from interviewees' descriptions of the use of blogs as a means to promote collaboration, develop professional identity, and, most commonly, to facilitate critical reflection.

Blogs are used to publicise and promote the course and develop the student's own professional identity. They provide an opportunity to get students out of the course 'silo' and promote cross-course collaboration. It also provides an opportunity for students who are on placements, etc. to stay connected with the University.

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. The blog is absolutely vital..." [PD 204]

A number of the interviewees talked of the value of blogs to facilitate critical reflection and acknowledged the specific affordance of hypermedia to create connections that enhance such reflection:

And what we found was that the very process of making decision, here's my blog and here's my studio with all the mess of what I've been playing with. I've been told I've got to put something on this blog. So what is important to go on there? What is the important failure or success? Does it matter? But what's important? Just that process of having to make that decision of what do I photograph? Or what do I make a note about... that in itself is a deep reflective process...

And then, if you get them to think even deeper about what they've actually put on there, and you go to kind of a double reflection method where they just put first day, on the same day or the next morning, they put on just what they did, but then later, maybe the next day, they go back and reflect on it, then that takes it even deeper. So the tool itself, and all that constructive alignment idea and all that, is forcing them into a deep learning, deep reflective learning, which is really effective. [PD 204]

One interviewee pointed out that the freer writing style of blogs might be helpful for some students who have difficulty engaging with traditional

academic writing. Another pointed out that, for some international students, written communication was easier than verbal communication and thus a blog might enable participation:

As we have seen, blogs are used in UAL for a multiplicity of purposes, reflecting their flexibility as a tool for learning. But this flexibility can also bring challenges, including the connectivity of networked learning technologies itself.

One interviewee commented that the 'public' nature of the blog affected the students' interaction and their decisions on what to post,

"...we need them to be private, so that they're not trying to impress their friends to re-blog it." [PD 105]

Digital technologies were also perceived to be sometimes less efficient than physical artefacts:

sometimes it's more time-consuming to combine physical work and digital - you have to look at something 3-dimensional and then go over to a computer to look at their blog; whereas if it is all in a sketch book actually you can go da, da, dum and gather what they're doing fairly quickly. [PD 105]

These issues raise questions about the extent to which practitioners should look to learning technologies to replicate and remediate the 'real world' rather than develop distinctive learning contexts, (Thorpe, 2009). Of course, in order to do this, the affordances and application of technologies need to be clearly understood by both staff and students and explored and developed through the practice itself.

Sustainability is also an issue. There was dissatisfaction voiced over the University-supported platform; staff were concerned that access to myblog.arts is terminated after students leave.

I don't even tell them about the University system myblog.arts. I'd never tell them to go anywhere near it, because it deletes when they're graduating. And the blog is the most vital and useful tool they leave the course with. [PD 204]

...they want their blogs to have external portability, so they all use external blogs as well. [PD 301]

Staff talked in less detail about other tools in the University VLE. A few mentioned their use of Workflow, the e-portfolio tool, as a place to record and share individual activity and as a space for collaboration but most had either not heard of it or not used it. A number of positive comments were made about the Online Assessment Tool (OAT).

...once staff get into it then they're really keen on it because it's a much improved system. [PD 205]

Other, non-VLE tools and services were also mentioned in the interviews. The e-library service was also commented on positively in interviews, though staff thought it was underused by students. There were a number of positive comments about students' use of Lynda.com, especially where developing ICT skills through the online tutorials was integrated into projects. This confirms what we heard elsewhere in interviews - learning technologies work best when aligned with curriculum activity.

Whilst the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) in UAL is officially described as including a range of tools, (Workflow, myblog.arts, etc), it is obvious from interviews with staff that the 'VLE', in everyday parlance, is Blackboard. None of the interviewees talked of the role of Blackboard in facilitating learning itself. Despite the ubiquity of VLEs in HE, the jury is very much out, so far as the academic community is concerned, on the relevance of such systems to learning: 'it is disappointing to find that many institutions have not realised the expected benefits after implementing a VLE' (Inoue, 2007; Kennedy, 2009; McFall, 2008). Lingard (2007) makes the point that despite increased adoption of VLEs, uptake by academic staff appears lower compared with that by managers or administrative staff." (in Jackson & Fearon, 2013, p2)

In the interviews, staff said Blackboard was typically used for communication with students and as a repository for course resources:

It's used, not really as a learning resource, but much more as a simple communication resource. So I think that Blackboard, essentially, is a notification thing... And I suppose, occasionally, that there might... that some people might put up links, web links or reference material... it's really not used a learning tool. [PD 101]

For some interviewees, there is a feeling that Blackboard has been 'imposed' on them by the Institution and engagement with the platform is viewed as a compliance issue, a box to be 'ticked'.

...coming from the top or coming from the centre at Holborn, a complete lack of understanding of what we do and what we're about and how systems are used, rather than dictating how people should use them, which immediately sets people's backs up [PD 304]

...at University level... your e-learning is your Blackboard, or it's your Moodle, and it's not; it's actually something much more considered and articulate. [PD 405]

...what happens is, in order to just play it safe and to know that you've done it in terms of any kind of quality assurance mandate, that as long as it's on Blackboard, you're all right. [PD 401]

Unhappiness with the learning platform manifests itself in a number of ways from disengagement to more 'subversive' activity:

...it may well be that we will have the Moodle space as the much more clean... the administrators will organise it so the handbook's there and all that kind of stuff, so they know exactly where to go for that. But then we'll keep running this slightly anarchic off the grid space, which potentially makes more sense. [PD 204]

But is the failure to engage with the VLE the result of professional concerns with the effectiveness of the platform or simply a pragmatic response to students voting with their feet?

I would say if 50 percent use Blackboard, I'd be impressed. The vast majority... I mean, I have stood in rooms and asked how many people have used Blackboard and three hands out of 70 have gone up. [PD 202]

Students need a good reason to engage with technologies, (Selwyn, 2008) - a view echoed by our interviewees:

...they're not interested in e-learning for the sake of e-learning. They're interested in learning. And therefore if these things facilitate it... I am going to use it... Now if Moodle provides an easy space for that, then maybe we can move to that. But if it's just an online notice board, why would any student ever go to it anyway? [PD 204]

you're arriving at the University and you've got Twitter feed and you've got your own blog and you use these spaces regularly, and you're trying to do work in the studio and you're attending lectures and you've got all these other pressures that are working on you, really do you need another thing to have to engage with? You know that one of those things is going to have to go away and it's arrogance on the part of these

organisations as they come up, actually we want you to stop using Facebook now. Can you please use Moodle? They go, no. Why should I? [PD 202]

Whatever the reason, if staff are not inclined to use the VLE, there will be little opportunity for students to engage with it. Staff expressed the need for students to feel a sense of ownership over the technologies they used, be that platform or services:

...anything we do, in the terms of Blackboard or Moodle or anything we set up, they say, ah, well, we're being overlooked here. There's always this discourse of power. It's always just there below the surface. [PD 107]

...the problem with Blackboard otherwise is that it's really us talking to them. It's not them talking to them. It tends to be the authority of information. [PD 102]

What is clear is that students do not feel obligated to use the platforms provided by UAL and will not be deterred from using technologies that run counter to our expectations. Learners will turn elsewhere if they find that technologies do not meet their immediate requirements, or if there are usability issues, (Dahlstrom 2012; Conole et al. 2008).

## STUDENTS' ENGAGEMENT IN E-LEARNING

*Students work simultaneously with digital and analogue formats*



...the notion that we're the generation who are going to be overtaken by this group that completely find it very intuitive isn't my experience at all [PD 206]

They've obviously got their own platform. And we've got an official platform. [PD 406]

The two quotes above epitomise the overarching themes in how PDs perceived students' engagement in e-learning. There were diverse and contradictory assumptions in relation to students and comparisons were made between the engagement of staff and that of students. However, there was often tension between these assumptions and comparisons. Furthermore age-old pedagogic challenges were often re-imagined and attributed to the intrinsic features of particular tools or devices. Each of these themes is addressed in turn.

On the whole, it is assumed that students at UAL are familiar with a range of tools, platforms and social media: for instance, Facebook, Twitter, Skype, Pinterest, various blog platforms (internal and external), Photoshop, Illustrator, 3D printing, Rhino, online tutorials, lynda.com, Youtube and email. However, some interviewees presented a more complex picture of students' skills:

My experience is they'll be able to put up a blog, they will be able to link to their images from tumblr and create a twitter feed or whatever, or some RSS feed and all that stuff but they can't use Photoshop. Or if they are it's very rudimentary. They are not power users by a long shot. [PD 104]

Some of the diversity in students' experiences of technology was attributed to demographic patterns. For example, differences by age were observed: mature and post-graduate students tended to use email communication and institutional tools such as Blackboard regularly. In some cases, this preference was attributed to students' experience of using digital learning environments in their previous education. However, there was no one view on age influencing use of tools at UAL and the discussion varied enough in the opposing direction to suggest that this opinion could be simply a manifestation of a general assumption that mature students are less conversant with technology because they have not grown up immersed and exposed to it in the same way that younger students have. In fact, Bullen (2011) in a study on generational influences in the use of ICT in HE, found no stronger correlation between age and use of ICT than with other factors such as familiarity with tools, cost and immediacy, which more strongly frame levels of student engagement with digital technologies.

If students are not using University-supported platforms, where are they? According to some PDs, before they even start attending the University, many students organise themselves on Facebook:

The course hadn't started. And they'd already made a Facebook group of the new intake. So there's so much of that going on that to try and formalise that as part of the e-learning strategy for the course, I think, it would be just too difficult. [PD 401]

The problem with Facebook is that it is a kind of parallel universe of crowd sourced opinion that is not always factual. So they ask each other on Facebook what room are we in, when is this supposed to be handed in and I'm thinking, well, actually, if you looked on Moodle or Blackboard you would've found out the facts, rather than asking each other. We have to live with that, and I don't think it's a terrible thing... but it does cause one or two issues because there's an amount of duplication and error that creeps in with Facebook. [PD 107]

Tutors are struggling to find a way to engage with students who are reluctant to use University platforms in preference to their own. Some tutors respond by communicating with students using Facebook, Hotmail, etc:

...there's always a few people who can't access Blackboard. So in the end, we just went to Facebook because everybody's there already and you don't need to be enrolled, you don't need to have a number or anything, so that's the way we've been doing it. We still put things on Blackboard, but we also do the more immediate things on Facebook, or we tell them that a project has been uploaded onto Blackboard. But the second years also do a film project ... they upload their movies onto Facebook now, so they'll be handing in their project via Facebook. [PD 105]

Some interviewees are more hesitant about using Facebook to communicate with their students, whilst others felt that staff should not be using these channels at all:

...we tend to stay away from that because it's difficult because that's their environment, and I think there's a point where we have to say that's their learning place. That's their life out of here. And I think if we start crossing over into their world outside the University then I think it becomes quite difficult. [PD 302]

There is some confusion as to how tutors should respond to this challenge with some calling for a policy decision from the University. Their concerns range from privacy through to legal issues:

so that's the thing that is very unclear, how we engage in some of this un-UAL formalised social media... Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, that's where it's still a grey area. [PD 401]

The dilemma of whether to engage on 3rd-party platforms is further complicated by the subtleties in the dynamic relationship between staff and students:

On one level, some things have to be done officially. On another level it's more of a soft dialogue between the student and the tutor. [PD 406]

The reality that staff have to maintain a complex dialogue with students means it may not be possible to have a simplistic black and white policy on student-staff interaction in Facebook, etc. But it is also clear that some kind of further discussion and dialogue is required so staff can negotiate this issue.

...you have this kind of almost incessant feeling of cognitive dissonance as a tutor because you know that you're working with two very different, two realities. The University corporate reality and you've got the real reality of the students. And you're trying to force those two cultures of communication together, and they really don't sit easily with each other. [PD 202]

For some PDs who see 3rd party platforms as the domain of students and, thus, beyond the course, there was a clear line of demarcation in relation to their role:

And it goes back to that thing that they're doing as a sort of default community, coming together because of the course but also

engaging in e-learning with each other not through the course but as a consequence of the course. And I don't see that I should necessarily be the one who has to control all of that. [PD 401]



The argument here is that there are areas of activity relating to the course that should be considered private and should not be mediated by staff, indeed they are successful because they are student-owned.

A recurring theme in many interviews was the notion that digital presents (new) problems within learning and teaching: an implicit location of pedagogic challenges in the *medium* rather than seeing them as new manifestations of old challenges such as communication, criticality, reflection, research, and plagiarism. For example, the plethora of possible means of communication with students (texting, Blackboard, 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.

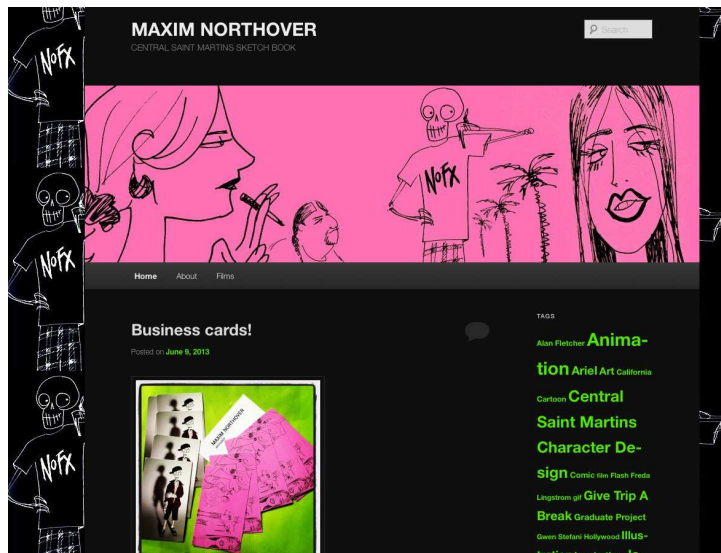
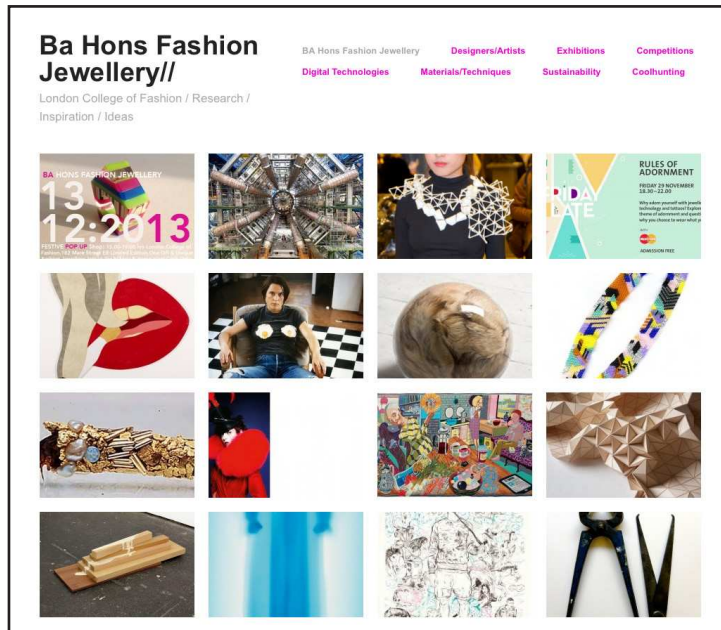
Another example relates to the depth of enquiry that students undertake which was thought to be under threat from the deployment of Google and other search engines. However, there was also recognition that pedagogic development was needed to enable tutors to teach discrimination and criticality in relation to these digital resources:

The cut and paste, Wikipedia thing is, certainly for dissertations, is a real problem. But that is more actually to do with pedagogy. I think we're quite lacking in terms of methodologies, research methodologies which both engage those technologies but actually engage the student in terms of what the process of research is. [PD 104]

A similar pattern of perception is evident in the use of blogs. There was discussion about the ways in which students use course based (assessed) blogs in their work that can sometimes demonstrate a lack of understanding of the requirements of assessment. However it is unclear to what extent assessment criteria and learning outcomes are being discussed in relation to this specific media:

And the other danger of the blogs, and some of my students that go on it, is that they tend to upload 500 images which is useless because actually we want them to be selective and we want them to be thinking about what they're doing rather than it just becoming a collection of interesting images which have nothing to do with what they are doing. [PD 105]

using myblog.arts to document curriculum content and reflective learning



There is also evidence that many courses successfully use blogs as multi-faceted reflective learning tools:

they've set up their own blogs and because they've done that, what we're asking them to do for assessment is to work out what aspect of that demonstrates their critical thinking and their reflection they want to submit. [PD 102]

some blogs are so brilliant, its really fantastic learning. I was in a tutorial with a student who showed me her blog...as well as her commentaries, both in a diaristic form and in a much more theoretical and it was absolutely brilliant. It was like a moving, flickering, interesting sketch-book, much better than a sketchbook [PD 206]

...because at the end of the unit I make them curate their blog. So they have to go through the learning outcomes and show how they've met the learning outcomes...And they said I couldn't believe how much I've done and I found things I'd forgotten about [PD 204]

## RESOLVING THE CHALLENGES

...can we as practitioners find ways to encourage learners to cross that border from "personal 2.0 to "tertiary 2.0"? And will they still enjoy – and still own – what they find on the other side (Petit & Kukulska-Hulme, 2011, p.205)

In the interviews, a number of possible suggestions on how to engage students with University platforms were put forward. Unsurprisingly, these were often framed as 'Facebook' type applications with student interaction at the heart of the service:

I think my priority list would be a Moodle that has all the functions I need in it. It's good with visuals, it functions as a student community, not just as something where they go and pick up instructions. It would be more like a social networking site [PD 301]

One interviewee points to creating connections between the University systems and students personal systems as a means of driving use:

There's an ecosystem of different information provision within the University and then it has to connect with stuff outside, which matches with students' expectations. I find that one of the ways of driving them back to Moodle or Blackboard was to make those kinds of connections [PD 107]

Another interviewee, expanding on this notion, presented an alternative vision of a platform which is an amalgam of personal and institutional services:

All you need to do is to link your Twitter account and follow this on Twitter and you link it to your Facebook account or link it to your various RSS feeds that you use, and you can get everything on there with the exception of leisurely activities. And so it would be there, and it would be just quick on one app and that might be one way of making it feel more fluid and dynamic, up to the minute. [PD 202]

These quotes allude to a 'Personal Learning Environment' (PLE), a flexible system configured by an individual learner. Bullen et al. (2011) question, given the availability of freeware and students' inclination to use 3rd-party tools, whether an institution should duplicate these platforms and services in the first place. This view was echoed by one of the interviewees:

all those alternatives are free, off the network. They're small, they're nimble, they're responsive, they can change quickly. Yes, there's a danger that they suddenly stop and then you've got to move on to something else. But that's the nature of the world out there... there's no guarantee that Facebook might close down tomorrow. What? Well, actually, yes, it might. So you've got to be aware of that, and understand how you're going to use all your different tools, [PD204]

But this approach is challenged by Sclater, (2008, p.7) who argues that, "Ironically, while the PLE is portrayed as a way to reduce central control, it is itself an attempt to systematize and bound the vast, dynamic, anarchic set of tools and resources to be found on the Internet." Sclater makes the argument that the institution has a responsibility to provide consistency of service for students as well as to fulfil its moral and legal obligations regarding accessibility. Whatever the solution, there is a need to somehow resolve this tension between institutional and 3rd-party technologies.

## LEADING E-LEARNING

The aspiration that UAL be at the forefront of work in this area was worked into narratives of identity as a leading arts institution, and for individuals as leaders of our disciplines:

we actually have a responsibility as cultural innovators, to work out how these things work. It's not like we don't know either. I would've thought people would be looking to us to say, well, you deal with interface and communication and technology and innovation and culture and all these things, you tell us what to think about this and how to understand this and what are the social norms. [PD 107]

Leadership of e-learning is explored here in two respects: first in terms of its salient characteristics within programme teams; secondly in terms of how University leadership and strategy on e-learning is perceived. Clearly, however, these two contexts for leadership are inextricably intertwined.

In some programmes, it seemed evident that there was one individual who was well-known for highly innovative practice and expert knowledge in relation to e-learning. These individuals were rarely recognised or rewarded,

but had quickly become indispensable to the colleagues they supported. Leadership on e-learning seems to reside not in formal structures but among enthusiasts, often giving of their time and working beyond the call of duty. PDs themselves varied enormously in the way in which they situated e-learning within their roles as directors of programmes. Some had an overview of practice within their courses, and many – often because they had only just taken up their posts – did not. Some brought staff development in relation to e-learning within their purview, others perceived fixed modes of 'phobic' behaviour. Almost without exception, they saw the potential for themselves and their staff to engage in e-learning as limited by higher level institutional leadership, policy and infrastructure:

...we've had such a battle with the University over acquiring server space for teaching [specialist skill] where students can test things and they can be viewed by staff... I'm very frustrated that a university that should be leading the way and that is talking all the time about how we distinguish ourselves from competitors isn't also seeing that if we're too bound... unless our IT systems can cope we actually can't offer what we should be... in terms of leading and innovating [PD102]

The PD above felt that his/her team had received inappropriate guidance about university procedures as well as feeling, over several years' negotiation with various central university departments, that what had been achieved had been 'down to determination...despite, rather than with, the support of [the University]'. This pattern of feeling hindered by the University was observed by those at the forefront of innovative practice in relation to e-learning and, in a more general way, with respect to reliability of systems, by those who were implementing what might be considered baseline activities in relation to e-learning:

...streaming of lectures is really important. That's something we'd like to do...so these talks where people have tweeted questions and all that sort of thing...could be developed. Whether there's back-up there to do it? I mean...our projectors don't even work in our lecture theatre so the prospect of doing something more ambitious is not possible. [PD 201]

In this instance, the PDs horizon of possibilities is diminished by the standard of maintenance of existing equipment. Another PD described the kind of environment that they would like to operate within:

We need a system that absolutely works and when it doesn't work, a message coming up at the centre about why it's not working and how long we can expect before it's corrected. [PD 203]

For this interviewee, the impact of poor implementation was vivid in collective memories:

...but the thing around passwords going out last year [and] they were all wrong, the whole lot were wrong initially and that's just catastrophic

because some students would just lose confidence, and staff do [too], 'oh well the passwords don't work so here I am going to hand you a piece of paper with your brief on it because I don't trust the network. [PD 203]

Many PDs would like to see UAL develop more agile, responsive, integrated and easy to use e-learning systems to facilitate staff engagement. At present, many PDs felt driven to use external systems that were more reliable and, more importantly, in the control of each course team:

In this particular area, I have to say I think the number one obstacle is the institution, is the university itself, because as soon as you've got a large institution with its multiple layers of management ...it becomes

this massive, slow-moving oil tanker of a thing, which can't turn.... I think our model of a much smaller community of practice is what creative work is all about. It's much more interesting. [PD 204]

It's the ease of an external system over a university system. That's why people use Google calendars for example, because it's easy. [PD 205]

There was also a feeling that the systems and culture of the institution did not support technology adoption. One PD noted that his son had been doing online submission of assessment in school for 8 years, whereas at UAL its use was in its infancy and had not yet been adopted across all contexts where it is deemed appropriate: 'that seems to indicate that it's an institutional problem and a cultural problem rather than a software problem' [PD 304]

On the other hand, the introduction of the Online Assessment Tool (OAT) was mentioned as an example of sound institutional practice:

Things like online assessment tool (OAT) was really well promoted. There was quite a structured promotion and training to that. And it was quite user-friendly...and there was someone that you could contact and get immediate troubleshooting or advice, which really helped the whole process and gave people confidence to go with it. [PD 406]

Whilst there were some negative experiences of OAT (due, for example, to wi-fi connections breaking down) on the whole, experiences of it seemed positive, and, as the quote above demonstrates, this was due as much to its technical functionality as to the communication and support processes set up around its introduction.

There seemed to be a much less coherent pattern of institutional leadership where e-learning issues intersect with ethical and quality assurance considerations. For example, as the discussion of the use of Facebook above (P.25) demonstrates, these can be complex situations. One PD had been told by a senior manager that having a course Facebook page was prohibited. Whilst it is not possible to verify the context of this conversation, it seemed a decision was made 'out of the blue', probably taken with very real concerns in mind – for example about communications regarding students' assessment – but somewhat in isolation from, and in the absence of, coherent holistic guidance in this area.

Some PDs held a suspicion of the motivations behind the University's interest in digital technologies in relation to learning, specifically, that it may be looking to replace academic and technical staff through the use of technology in order to cut costs:

What you would want to avoid at all costs would be a sort of learning which removed tutors and the personal interaction by some suggestion of economy. PD 103]

The suspicion was evident in an occasional undercurrent of mistrust and is, perhaps, symptomatic of the lack of a widely shared understanding of the purpose and strategic objectives regarding e-learning:

Why are we offering students blogs? What's the point? Because they can get them for free everywhere else, and then they can carry on with them afterwards. And it's theirs. Why are we even replicating what's already out there? I've never quite understood what the point of that was, and presumably it costs more money to set it all up. But why would you do what's out there because you're then going to be slow in responding to the new developments which are going on anyway. [PD 203]

There is clearly a desire for reliability but also a wish for greater clarity of communication about where and why institutional resources are being invested in IT infrastructure. The interviewee quoted above was typical in wishing to have greater confidence in policy and resource decisions. There is also an assumption here that good decision-making at that level would result in more routine experiences of reliability.

Looking towards the future of e-learning, the advent of ubiquitous computing, microprocessors and sensor technology means that the synthesis between digital technologies and materials is expanding. These relationships and possibilities are being explored daily by students and staff as part of their practice across subject areas and have long been a focus of learning research. There is much potential for the investigation of the possibilities of these smart-environments for e-learning at the UAL. A balance needs to be determined between exploring advanced future learning scenarios and concentrating on improving the more mundane applications of technology enhanced learning across the UAL. This was as much the case for those at the forefront of innovative practice in relation to e-learning as for those who were in the early stages of experimentation.

## CONCLUSIONS

The newness of the Programme Director role and the variation in levels of experience among PDs necessarily structure any overview of e-learning at programme or course level. For example, some PDs have an intimate knowledge of their programme as they have previously been Course Directors for one or more of the member courses; others are leading a programme whose constituent courses are a fair distance from their own subject specialism, and a few are new to the institution entirely. Consequently, understanding of e-learning engagement across programmes is patchy. This was evident in the ways that individual PDs spoke of the adoption of e-learning by different courses. While e-learning practices may be well-embedded in some courses, they are not systematically visible at the organisational level of the programme, and, on the whole not yet strategically driven.

A prevalent assumption inside and outside the University is that digital technologies improve efficiency, productivity and communication. It is evident that these are often the core drivers for the voluntary investigation and use of technologies for many course teams. Another driver for course adoption is an institutional mandate for universal use of certain tools, e.g. Blackboard, Moodle, or the new Online Assessment Tool. A management-led focus tends to concentrate minds on content and services rather than upon learning interactions. Moreover, whilst PDs recognised that the learning part of e-learning was not really being fully harnessed, there was significant uncertainty about the meaning of e-learning within an Art and Design and Design HE context and what types of activities are encompassed by the term. What is e-learning at UAL?

Although the descriptions of enablers and barriers to engagement were often described as coming from the context, for example culture, systems and support available or individuals, for example, e-phobes, it was clear that PDs could see the interplay between individual actions and the environment in which learning and teaching was taking place. As would be expected, some PDs took a very techno-rational approach in assessing e-learning engagement, positioning individuals as luddites or digitally literate and likewise positioning the environment as a barrier or an enabler. Some, however, did express a more nuanced and complex view of the interplay of the two, with learning technology use being shaped by cultural, affective and political factors. It will be important, in progressing discussions on what e-learning might look like at UAL, that a deterministic perspective is avoided and that the complexity of use of technology in art and design higher education is explored. This type of conversation and debate will not only avoid positioning staff and the institution unhelpfully in deficit, adding to the 'moral panic' gripping some parts of the sector (Bennett, Maton & Kervin, 2008) but will align more appropriately with the values that underpin art and design teaching practice in encompassing aspects of knowing, acting and being (Shreeve, Sims & Trowler, 2010).



How the institution informs itself about the impacts of new technologies, and powerful personal devices, on learning, teaching and assessment is a key challenge. Indeed, there are independent small-scale activities being undertaken in colleges that aim to shine a light on current e-learning practice, as well as offering students new e-learning opportunities. One example is CSM Researching Learning, and another is the forthcoming LCF tablet EMBA project. In addition, the Learning Studios - an initiative of LCC's Paul Lowe and CLTAD - aim to use a Communities of Practice model to encourage sharing of e-learning engagement amongst staff, and, at CSM, the Digital Present Blog is an attempt to collate and communicate College specific information pertaining to digital literacy. In compliment to this work, CLTAD provides support both to individuals, for example, through workshops and embedded practice on the units of the academic practice provision, or PGCert and to course teams through initiatives which include bespoke sessions and tailored support sessions. In addition, work has been progressing to involve students in influencing and informing digital developments at UAL through the CLTAD Student Engagement project, My Digital Life.

Experience of these varied-scale initiatives suggests that there is an opportunity for a broad 'opening-up' and sharing of e-learning practice, and potential, amongst students and staff. By positioning e-learning activities as an experiment that involves the participation of both staff and students, and by debating both the benefits and the potential pitfalls for subject areas, there is a greater chance that e-learning will be valued and embraced by the learning and teaching community.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are offered for the different organisational levels within UAL. At the institutional level, principles need to be set in relation to e-learning, which, to date, has had little presence in strategy documents relating to learning and teaching and quality enhancement.

### INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **UAL Vision for E-learning.** Development of a UAL vision for e-learning through a small working group that would situate the University VLE (including Moodle and integrated tools, myblogs, workflow and processarts) within a broader conceptualisation of e-learning as pervasive and far beyond the confines of institutionally provided tools. The role of technology in potentially changing the practice and outcomes of teaching and learning in art and design is paramount. This work could usefully be incorporated into the learning and teaching strategic vision led by the Dean of Learning, Teaching and Enhancement.
2. **Making explicit the collective aspirations of senior management for e-learning.** There is also a need for clarity on senior management collective aspirations for institutional use of e-learning (for example in developing pedagogic use of tools alongside administrative use and in developing distance provision). Whilst there are College based plans as regards development of e-learning and more particularly distance provision, there is no mechanism for compiling a collective road map for e-learning use across the institution. Concurrently, Senior Management should define, by drawing on the discussions of the working group (see rec 1 above), the kind of support it deems to be best provided centrally by the University and, conversely, what it sees as best accomplished in the wider collegiate university and determine how this support is best structured and resourced.
3. **Guidance on use of third party tools.** Currently, there is guidance on tutors' use of third party platforms such as Facebook for communication with students. This guidance should be revised through consultation within colleges and be disseminated widely. The presumption should be that the guidance will be followed unless a case of exceptional circumstances can be made. Reporting of such exceptional cases should be considered by College Academic Committees, with information forwarded to CLTAD to ensure the guidance can be continuously reviewed and modified, as needed, to keep pace with technical developments and College based practice.

4. **IT infrastructure.** The findings suggest that concerns about the reliability of centrally provided IT infrastructure (networks and hardware) are at the heart of many academics' reluctance to use technology that would enhance students' learning. This seems to be the bedrock of future development in staff's capacity. There is a need to define standards of what constitutes minimal reliability and ensure that these inform IT support down to programme level.
5. **Support for staff.** Support in a wide range of aspects of e-learning is already in place in the form of workshops, bespoke sessions and PG Cert units, for example. Awareness and access to this support needs to be increased particularly for Associate Lecturers who are arguably less motivated to engage with institutional tools. In addition, staff capacity to engage in technology enhanced learning should be considered at all stages of the lifecycle of a staff member from recruitment through probation and regular PRAs for teaching staff. This need not be a means of excluding staff who have subject or broader pedagogic expertise, but embedded as an expectation for development of capacity during their probation period and beyond.
6. **A structure for strategic development.** The findings suggest that there is little cross institutional momentum for pedagogic uses of e-learning. Resources are needed for both leadership at the top and implementation at programme level where competing priorities can cast e-learning into the shadows. Engagement with strategic planning and local support at College level has been shown to have an impact on administrative and pedagogic use of technology. Consistency in College based strategic leadership posts (Head of E-learning or equivalent), their relationship to each other and to university service providers like CLTAD and IT needs to be established alongside continuation of College based hands-on support (e.g. extension of VLE coordinator roles established for the Moodle project beyond December 2014).
7. **Exploring what is possible across and within cognate discipline areas.** The findings suggest a desire on the part of PDs to move beyond administrative use of e-learning. PDs indicated that hearing about instructive examples of e-learning embedding in the curriculum would help expand programme teams' understanding of the possibilities of using technology to enhance student learning. In conjunction with the conversations about what e-learning is in an art and design context, examples of such use should be captured and shared across the institution, building on existing work in this area (e.g. CSM Digital Present project, CLTAD case studies). This recommendation would support recommendation 12 for discussions within programme teams.

8. **Resourcing curriculum innovation.** A clear message coming from PDs was that involvement in embedding e-learning in the curriculum took time that most felt course teams did not have. This may either be the time required to reflect and plan or the time to engage in research or development of specific technology related skills as individuals or, more effectively, as a course or programme team. The Moodle phase 2 project has allocated funding to support curriculum development to address embedding use of learning technology to support student learning. This funding will only address needs in the next year. It may be prudent to consider on-going and targeted funding to support embedding e-learning in the curriculum and/or more flexible/online delivery modes for part or all of a course. This may be a refocusing of existing curriculum development funding and/or additional funds directed at supporting minor modifications or the validation or revalidation processes that would need to be aligned with the strategic aspirations of the institution in this area (see recommendation 2).

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONSIDERATION WITHIN COLLEGES

9. **Strategic resourcing.** Colleges need to consider how best to target resources strategically for the development of e-learning. At one end of a scale, they may wish to see a 'minimum kit' within all courses; and, at the other, may wish to support individual projects where there happens to be an obvious pedagogic opportunity and staff enthusiasm. A balance between these different ways of promoting e-learning enhancements may need to be struck; and this is bound to be informed by the different subject and student profiles within the colleges.
10. **Impact on Widening Participation.** Colleges may benefit from exploring the interplay between the use of digital technology and their widening participation aims. There are conflicting views, for example, on the impact of using digital portfolios.
11. **Physical Infrastructure/Facilities.** Colleges should be cognizant of the close dependence of e-learning on physical infrastructure and ensure that investments in the former are not undermined by insufficiencies in the latter: for example, window blinds not working in a room equipped with a data projector. In addition, a shortfall in resources to maintain equipment seems to have a huge impact on staff's confidence in using it. Systems need to be in place to regularly check equipment where this is not already the case. Experiences of consistent reliability should become the norm

## RECOMMENDATIONS AT PROGRAMME LEVEL

12. **Programme level priorities.** Programme teams are newly formed and under pressure to establish many new systems and ways of working. Whilst this is a challenging time, it is also opportunity for considering how digital technology might be integrated into curricula over the medium to long-term. Programme and/or pathway teams should be encouraged to identify their priorities for developing e-learning and the kind of support they would value. These discussions could take place with the aid of advice from a college e-learning specialist or invited specialist from another part of the University. These priorities should then be collated and feed into institutional and college discussions (recommendations 1,3,5, 7 and 8)
  
13. **Reward and Recognition.** Individuals who have contributed to the development of e-learning within courses and programmes should be recognised and rewarded. Whilst innovation and excellence in this area is not excluded from use in PRAs, sabbatical applications, evidence for promotion and/or teaching awards, it is clear that it is not pervasively understood that this type of work could be used within these existing reward and recognition frameworks. This should be made more explicit within documentation and awareness raised about how the institution rewards and values this work. The longer term goal of this work would be engagement with e-learning becoming the norm rather than an addition to pedagogic practice.

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## APPENDIX

### RELATIONSHIPS WITH E-LEARNING: BRIEFING FOR DISCUSSIONS WITH PROGRAMME DIRECTORS

The discussion with you is intended to explore your programme team's relationship with e-learning. We assume that within all programme teams this relationship would encompass different levels of awareness, curiosity, exploration, enthusiasm, anxiety and aspirations for your future use of e-learning. The purpose of this study is to get an overview of staff's relationships with e-learning in order to inform future policy and planning.

We are using the following definition of e-learning:

learning facilitated and supported through the use of information and communications technology (ICT)<sup>1</sup>

**In preparation for the discussion, please read through this briefing and using it as a guide, please ensure that you have an overview of e-learning in the courses within your programme before we meet.**

Among the e-learning tools you may be aware of are:

- The University's VLE, at present, Blackboard and its integrated tools
- The e-portfolio, Workflow
- The blog service, myblog.arts
- ProcessArts
- External tools (e.g. wikis, blogs, facebook, Ning, social bookmarking tools, etc)

However, the discussion questions below focus on the cycle of students' experience rather than any particular e-learning tools. This is so that we can be led by the educational relevance, utility and potential of e-learning rather than on the capabilities (and limits) of current e-learning tools, though these two lines of inquiry are of course intertwined.

Our discussion will focus on 5 central questions:

1. Where in the programme is e-learning used? Who uses it and at what points in students' experience?
2. Where else in the programme is there potential to use e-learning? What would be the benefit? (This may be an area where e-learning addresses a specific problem or develops a course curriculum).

<sup>1</sup> Definition adopted by JISC for E-learning Pedagogy Programme  
<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/e-learningpedagogy.aspx>



3. Drawing on the examples given in the previous two questions, what makes the use of e-learning possible? And conversely, what are the obstacles to using it where it would be beneficial?
4. What are the aspirations of staff in your programme team in relation to e-learning?
5. What do you know about students' expectations and aspirations in relation to e-learning?

These five questions should be addressed in the context of the cycle of students' experience. It is not necessary to go through every aspect of students' experience – the object of the list is to get an overview of which stages and aspects of students' experience are currently making use of e-learning, and also which ones would benefit from doing so.

### **An indicative description of students' experience in undergraduate and postgraduate courses**

What follows is not an exhaustive or definitive list – it is intended as an aid to discussing the five questions above.

#### **Application experience**

- Students' public information – beyond the Key Information Sets
- Open days and interviews
- Pre-entry Summer projects

#### **Orientation on arrival and initial groupwork**

##### **Academic engagement and curriculum**

- Professional practice (e.g. research or presentation of work)
- Tools for producing work
- Day-to-day interaction (from announcements and project briefs to discussion and critical evaluation)

##### **Social engagement**

- Facilitating collaboration between students (within course or across courses)
- Networking beyond UAL

##### **Assessment**

- Submission of work
- Assessment process
- Receipt of feedback

**Employability or 'imagining future selves' /personal and professional development**

- Participation in industry projects
- Placements and internships
- Preparing for professional practice, enterprise or job market



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