

Disabled students and VLEs – Introduction

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Introduction

The aim of the ALERT (Accessibility in Learning Environments and Related Technologies) project was to examine the role of a VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) in disabled students' attainment of pedagogical objectives. The project was based on a series of case studies with disabled students and academic staff, and guidelines were developed from their opinions, comments and observations. The project ran over a two year period, from July 2003 to July 2005.

ALERT was a Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funded project under the Strand 2 initiative for 'Improving Provision for Disabled Students'. The project was run between the Universities of Durham and Bournemouth and also supported by the National Disability Team (NDT).

The ALERT guidelines are targeted at members of academic staff, student support units and staff development and support professionals. These groups include learning technologists and disability support staff. The guidelines aim to promote discussion, reflection and where appropriate modification of existing practice and provision.

Each of the guidelines is divided into sections relating to pedagogical, practical and strategic considerations of VLE use.

Background

ALERT was primarily concerned with how individual and institutional use of a VLE can pedagogically impact upon disabled students' experience, and in particular, support the achievement of learning outcomes.

Many studies to date have focussed largely on technical aspects of VLE use and how these affect the educational experience of disabled students. VLE software companies, such as Blackboard and WebCT, have high profile accessibility policies which ensure that their products are in compliance with international legislation, such as SENDA in the UK, Section 508 in the US and the Disability Services Act in Australia.

Though the focus of the guidelines is the pedagogical support of disabled students, the recommendations that are made will apply to all students. Based on the principles of accessibility and universal design, the guidelines promote a considered approach to the application of VLE capabilities, and thus the establishment a more diverse and inclusive learning experience and adaptive learning materials.

What is a VLE?

The term VLE refers to "the 'online' interactions of various kinds which take place between learners and tutors," (JISC, 2005). A VLE allows a flexible approach to learning and teaching through access to resources, communication between both lecturers and students as well as between students, and methods of assessment. This wide range of capabilities enables the provision of an environment for a rich online learning experience.

Why VLEs and disabled students?

Students benefit from the capabilities of a VLE in a variety of ways, including the flexibility afforded to them through the digital delivery of learning support materials, the ability to take part in various types of online communication and the learning opportunities offered by online assessment. Advance provision of lecture support materials, for example, enables students to prepare for face-to-face sessions by familiarising themselves with terminology, vocabulary and

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concepts. This is particularly helpful for some disabled students who have problems with reading or writing speeds, as a skeletal structure of the lecture will afford them more time to listen and understand (please see ALERT guideline 'Disabled students and VLEs – Learning support materials' for further information).

How to use the guidelines

Main body

The format of the guidelines has been designed to present first hand experiences of both staff and students and align these within the context of research literature and practice to give a holistic overview of effective VLE use. The quotes and context comprise the body of the guidelines.

Recommendations

On the first page of each guideline, the 'Recommendations' box summarises the main points from the pedagogical, practical and strategic areas. If a member of staff quickly picks up a copy of a guideline, the most pertinent points are immediately available. These are expanded and developed in the main body text.

Quotes

Each of the quotes used has been specifically chosen to complement the accompanying text. This illustration of first hand experience provides a personal aspect to the guidelines, reflecting how different issues have affected students and staff. If you are viewing the guidelines in colour, student quotes are presented in blue boxes and staff quotes in white boxes with a broken edge.

VLE recommendations

Throughout the guidelines are yellow 'VLE Recommendation' boxes. These are suggestions of ways in which practice can be adapted to impact upon the topic which has been discussed in the preceding text.

Discussion / Reflection points

These questions are designed to prompt and promote individual and collaborative reflection on what had been presented in the guideline and how it might impact upon existing practice. Again, topics are divided into pedagogical, practical and strategic areas, and though no direct answers are given within the text, it is hope that enough background information is provided to form an effective basis for discussion.

Action points

The 'Action points' give examples of further activity which may benefit adapting existing practice to be more inclusive, and refer the reader to resources on the ALERT website. Encouragement is also given to forge links, if not already in place, with other specialists in student support, such as learning support units or disability support services, to create an improved and extended community of practice.

The guidelines are available at the ALERT website:

<http://www.dur.ac.uk/alert>