

Disabled students and a VLE – Recommendations

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The **VLE recommendations** grouped below are summarised from those made within each of the separate ALERT guidelines, available from the project website at www.dur.ac.uk/alert. The guidelines are based on the analysis of student and staff interviews which comprise the case ALERT studies.

The aim of the **VLE recommendations** within each of the ALERT guidelines is to highlight ways in which use of the VLE can be adapted to support and encourage active transformation of knowledge in deep learning through the implementation of constructive alignment (Biggs, 1999). The **VLE recommendations** highlight the notion of the “context of delivery”, which enables students to achieve the maximum benefit from their study. This is a key factor in achieving pedagogical objectives as "the most stunning educational materials ever developed will fail to teach if the context of delivery fails," (Laurillard, 2002).

The **VLE recommendations** are geared towards use by academic and student support staff, rather than those whose main remit is technical or system administration support. Where possible or applicable, consideration of the following recommendations will allow for a more inclusive and adaptive approach to VLE use.

Holistic use of a VLE

Pedagogical

- Integrate the use of the VLE within the curriculum by including references to its capabilities in face-to-face sessions.
- Encourage students to work collaboratively by establishing online groups. Self-selection and assigning roles within these groups can be effective ways of encouraging students to participate.
- Build students' confidence by demonstrating VLE tools in face-to-face sessions. This visualisation will give students an overview of potential uses.
- Promote a more accessible learning experience by considered use of the VLE e.g. provide reading lists or announcements to assist students with mobility impairments or promote use of discussion boards for students who lack confidence in face-to-face sessions.

Practical

- Keep navigation obvious, intuitive and simple and ensure content is relevant.
- Try to ensure that navigation, appearance and the organisation of information are similar across courses.
- Establish inductions to the VLE for staff and students, and regular sessions thereafter, through liaison with your IT department or technical support.

Strategic

- Provide an extended community for students through liaison with student support bodies such as disability support services, and also pastoral and recreational organisations. In so doing, much of their learning support and recreational material can be made available from one location.
- Conduct a departmental / school overview of how the VLE is being used, and which tools support particular learning objectives. Not only will this enable staff to share practice, but also give an illustration of which different activities students are taking part in on a larger scale.

Asynchronous communication through a VLE

Pedagogical

- Encourage reflection by re-using discussion forums.
- Allow anonymous participation to encourage less confident students to participate.
- Accept that not all students will post to discussion boards, but may still be making use of them through passive interaction.
- Clarify how discussion boards will be used for the delivery of assessment related information to avoid confusion with use of assessment tools within the VLE.
- Encourage peer support groups by establishing smaller discussion board groups for informal interaction between students.

Practical

- To encourage students to extend classroom discussions, establish lecture topic specific threads.
- Use bespoke discussion boards to support placements and study external to face-to-face sessions. This gives students a central point of contact for tutors and other students in their cohort.
- Use meaningful subject headings and straightforward language in posts to highlight importance of ideas over format of response.

Strategic

- To allow students to participate more in a variety of different discussion topics, conduct a departmental audit of when and how discussion boards are used.
- Be pro-active in discussion topics, making your participation visible to students. By starting new discussion threads and responding to queries, students will observe your level of activity, and feel assured of a timely response and changing content

Synchronous communication through a VLE

Pedagogical

- To enable students to become familiar and confident with using the technology, provide a space for socialisation prior to the academic discussion.
- Highlight the extensibility of the synchronous discussion tools and encourage students to use it as a communication medium.
- Suggest that for assignments a transcription may be kept in order to minimise note-taking.
- Ensure that students are aware of when other students will be online in order for them to communicate. Schedule specific times or encourage students to schedule their own times.

Practical

- To encourage and give confidence to those students who might not normally contribute, allow anonymous postings.
- Ensure all necessary software and plug-ins are installed prior to a virtual chat session. Check institutional technical support.

Strategic

- Notify students when you will be available online to answer questions or queries in “virtual office hours”.

Assessment through a VLE

Pedagogical

- Identify areas where students' understanding is not fully developed though regular use of formative assessments.
- Provide tailored feedback to the students and allow the student to respond.
- Allow students sufficient completion time when using assessment.

Practical

- Use a variety of assessment types in quizzes, including open response text options.
- Establish dedicated discussion boards and informal online support groups to raise issues and provide support to supplement VLE based quiz activity.
- Consider the nature of the topic which is to be assessed and use question types accordingly.

Strategic

- For summative assessment, consult institutional policy on how to use online assessment.
- Encourage digital submission of assignments to increase flexibility and extensibility of VLE and explore the "gradebook" facility.
- Liase with your learning and teaching support unit to investigate the capabilities of third party software to enhance the assessment tools within your VLE.

Group work in a VLE

Pedagogical

- Highlight different levels of expectation of students' contribution according to task, e.g. a more considered thorough approach to reflective online group discussion rather than in spontaneous online group chat.
- To optimise group learning be active in monitoring student participation in online groups and encourage students to reflect on their individual roles.

Practical

- Make a wide variety of group tools available to optimise the group learning experience.
- To form active communities consider allowing self-selection of groups where applicable, and establishing relevant group pages. Students will be more likely to form active communities if comfortable with their fellow group members.

Strategic

- Encourage feedback from students on the dynamics of their group. By allowing students to reflect anonymously, they can develop their delegation or collaborative skills by identifying strong and weak points within the group without the discomfort of directly naming any classmates.
- Placing responsibility on individuals by assigning designated roles within group work can encourage participation of all students.

Delivery of learning support material

Pedagogical

- Enhance student learning by making lecture support materials available in advance of a face-to-face session to afford students preparation time and familiarisation with concepts.
- Allow each student to customise digital materials to meet their own needs by delivering lecture support materials through a VLE.
- Encourage independence by ensuring students know how to access class materials and where pertinent information is kept within the VLE.
- Allow students to look retrospectively at what they have studied over a module by archiving learning support materials.

Practical

- Put all materials in the VLE at the beginning of a course with timed release.
- Promote blended learning by using the VLE to support face-to-face sessions and vice versa.
- Encourage students to reflect on how content interlinks and promote extended reading, research and use of materials by making several sets of learning support materials available at one time.
- Link library and web resources to course materials.
- Make sure all documents are available in a flexible format that students can customise to their needs, e.g. for non-text based materials, provide a text alternative by way of explanation.

Strategic

- Establish effective and consistent methods of VLE use through liaison with your departmental colleagues based on considered use and student feedback.
- Consider requirements of individual learning objectives in designing inclusive and consistent VLE course appearances and navigation.

The guidelines are available at the ALERT website:

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

References

- Biggs, J., 1999, Teaching for quality learning at University, SRHE and Open University Press, Buckingham
- Laurillard, D., 2002, Rethinking university teaching : a conversational framework for the effective use of learning technologies, Second edition, Routledge Falmer, London