

Disabled students and technical aspects of VLE use

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Use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) can be adapted and extended to allow a more inclusive learning and teaching experience for all students and provide particular support for disabled students. This guideline presents key issues related to technical aspects of VLE use, based on perspectives of disabled students and academic staff. Pedagogical, practical and strategic implications have been identified and set in context within discussion and action points to encourage extended reflection on individual, departmental and institutional practice.

Technical aspects of VLE use

Though the ALERT project was primarily concerned with the pedagogical implications of VLE use, the guidelines and recommendations still recognise the potential impact of technical issues on disabled students' experience. Major VLE software companies have an integral and high profile commitment to making sure that their products comply with international disability legislation such as SENDA (UK), Section 508 (US) and the Disability Services Act (Australia).

"...accessible web design is a lot more than just meeting sort of criteria...standards."

ALERT Student

By consulting such companies' accessibility policies as well as guidelines promoting good practice in the development of accessible materials, it is possible to build a representative image of how the VLE can be effectively used. Effective feedback channels through which students can comment ensure that varying needs are being addressed.

Recommendations

Pedagogical

- Think about how students are using the VLE and find out what assistive technologies they may have. Decide how this may impact upon the materials you prepare – how do you envisage the materials being used?
- Building students' confidence in VLE use can be instrumental in combating technical problems. Through regular, engaging and extensive use, students will become more at ease with the capabilities and likely to experiment.

Practical

- Encourage students to be open about their requirements and provide a feedback mechanism whereby they can discuss any technical issues that arise in their use of the VLE.
- Familiarise yourself with the accessibility statement of the VLE package you use and make this available to students.
- Remember that the application of universal design principles for usability improve the experience of all students, not just those with disabilities.

Strategic

- Liase with colleagues in disability support roles or those with specialist knowledge of assistive technologies to establish how the VLE works in conjunction with these technologies.
- Establish a departmental strategy on what level of technical or academic support might be offered in terms of the VLE, and to what extent this is supported by the learning support or disability support unit.

Discussion / reflection points

Based on the issues considered, below are some discussion points to encourage reflection on existing practice and provision.

Pedagogical

- What aspects of VLE use do you think might provide the biggest technical barrier for disabled students?
- Are there any aspects of the VLE you use that your students have found problematic technically? Or any which your colleagues have had difficulty with?

Practical

- What technical considerations do you currently implement before making any lecture support materials available through a VLE?
- In what ways do you use the VLE to communicate with students? Do you use any of these to ascertain student opinions on the user-friendliness of the VLE?
- What technical aspects affect your use of online assessment tools?

Strategic

- Do you have a departmental policy on technical and academic support for the VLE?
- In what ways do you work alongside students to improve provision within the VLE?
- Do you have an extended community of practice with colleagues in disability support or specialists in assistive technologies?

Action points

- Consult W3C (<http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG10/>) and TechDis (<http://www.techdis.ac.uk/index.php?p=3>) recommendations and resources on developing accessible web content
- Consult your departmental and university policy on strategic use of a VLE.
- Make contact with your disabled students' support unit, and establish what VLE support is provided.
- Review the extent to which the recommendations within these guidelines are already embedded within your own use of a VLE
- Liaise with software supplier to ensure maximum accessibility is possible.
- Explore the other guidelines at the ALERT website – www.dur.ac.uk/alert