VLE review report 2020

Analysing the VLE reviews we completed with our members. What can we learn from these interactions?

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This report highlights the VLE review service’s findings within the sector and helps to highlight common mistakes, misconceptions and good practice. All the quotes are taken from meetings with the VLE user groups.

We conducted 72 face to face focus group interviews with over 600 academic staff, professional services staff, learners and students:

- 16 further education
- Eight higher education
- 200+ academic/teaching staff
- 200+ students
- 200+ professional services/support staff

**Just having a VLE doesn’t enhance learning or generate interaction**

In summary, we found it’s important that all staff buy into a clear approach for the VLE. The lack of a clear identity can confuse learners and students at all levels, whereas a defined role can guide staff, learners and students about how they could be accessing, using and benefiting from such a platform. Key findings include:

- The staff we spoke to in professional services, as well as the teaching staff, were committed to develop their VLEs. The barriers and challenges they face are often related to a culture of practice within their teams or departments. Engagement with platforms depends on familiarity and confidence with the procedures and functionality

- Finding the time needed to learn and develop content in the VLE was high on the list of teaching staff’s challenges – the time to attend training or find their way through a ‘journey of self-discovery’

- Staff want a space to try things, out of view and in a safe environment

- Learners and students were unanimous in their frustrations with an inconsistent experience when using their VLE; their teaching staff use the platforms in very different ways due to variations in confidence or motivation

- Learners and students found accessing the VLE frustrating on mobile devices

- Learners and students want to be able to use the VLE to feed back their thoughts, communicate and engage with teaching staff as well as their peers

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**Pre COVID-19**

We have been running VLE reviews with our members since January 2018. We’ve based this analysis on data collected before the pandemic started in the UK but this doesn’t mean the report is obsolete.

In fact, many of the observations are relevant to FE and HE now more than ever.

The VLE as a platform, tool or link to learners and students could be the constant that many users will rely on, whether for remote, hybrid or on-campus learning.
Our findings show that many organisations feel their platform is inadequate and needs change, but the challenges or barriers are often connected to people, practice or culture. Deciding on a way forward through user engagement, vision building, aims and a strategy can be a robust and thorough response to the question:

**What does success look like?**

### How does a VLE review work?

We have designed the review service to explore the VLE with the member and discuss any current issues and plans for the future. Most importantly, the review looks at the role of the VLE and how the organisation feels the platform fits the current practice of its users. Defining what success looks like is paramount to understanding what vision, if any, the member has for a VLE platform before running the review. Enabling the institution to understand these factors helps them make decisions that will build on the skills and talent within the organisation to aid the development of a richer student experience and enhance curriculum delivery.

The service is not a review of the different platforms available and then a recommendation to a particular platform or vendor. It is an external voice that can either feed into a review process that the member is already running internally, or it can provide support and guidance that facilitates a new review.

Each review assesses the current state and perception of the VLE by engaging with academic and professional services staff and, mostly importantly, students to give a voice to the people who use the platform. We capture their comments and opinions within user group meetings. The final output details good practice, challenges, barriers and recommendations for next steps.

We conduct a VLE review over a two-day period:

- One day on site, when separate groups of students, academic and professional staff are invited to focus group sessions using semi-structured question sets to guide discussions. In addition we have formal discussions with members of the senior management team if they are available
- During the off-site day, we access the VLE remotely to observe the student/staff user experience. This includes looking at accessibility, responsive design, layout and navigation

Each review has an output in the form of an observation report that captures both qualitative and quantitative findings. The report is produced in a presentation format via a video conference call with senior staff at the institution, providing an opportunity to explore the results further and identify any processes, capabilities and tools necessary to meet the institution’s goals. The final report is also a useful tool to build a business case for changes in IT infrastructure and staff development activity and to create an ongoing mechanism for dialogue between departments.
When running a VLE review we asked the organisation to arrange a focus group session with staff who are responsible for teaching learners and students. Our questions aimed to find out where the VLE fits into their teaching and learning approaches. Does the use of the platform fit with the leadership’s goals?
We asked them:

What do you feel is the role of the VLE at your organisation?
This question is key to understanding if there is a disconnect between how the leadership want the VLE to be used and how the teaching staff see it as a tool to aid their job of teaching their learners or students.

“It should be seen as the DNA of the university, a resource we should exploit more effectively”
Lecturer response in VLE review session

Other key comments about the VLE:

“A repository for material for students”

“A place to deposit coursework and get marks”

“Does the basics”

“First port of call for students and staff to get an overview of what is in a module”

“Useful data and metrics can be produced (if time allowed)”

In nearly every session for teaching staff it was clear that they saw the VLE as the place where items are put for learners and students to access learning content. There was rarely any indication of how items should be ordered. Many staff felt that the VLE’s main role was as an online repository.

Some saw the platform not just as a communication tool, but as the link to the institution that the learner or student could access any time. When this came up in discussions it led to conversations about the sort of content a student may want to find on a VLE page. Many teaching staff said there was an opportunity to engage learners and students more through the VLE but they didn’t have the time to produce (or learn how to create) new content. Some were using slides, handouts and resources from previous years. Some documents we saw in the reviews had old organisational logos, old organisation titles or were dated as early as 2014.

Some institutions used more than one VLE platform, sometimes due to differing needs of academics/teachers or legacy pages that were still being used. We learned that confidence and familiarity with a platform meant some staff, given the choice, were reluctant to move to a new platform. The role of the VLE was the same across multiple platforms but the staff running them needed to spend more time on management, communications and planning.

Do you use the VLE for assessment?
The use of tools/activities for assessment (formative/summative) within the VLE was very much dependent on the culture at individual organisations. Quizzes and drag/drop formative assessments were a common form of assessment discussed; how much they were used depended on which VLE platform was in use. We observed that the better the functionality, support and ease of use of a platform, the more use was made of interactive elements like quizzes.

While a large proportion of the teaching staff did use the VLE for assessment, this was primarily for submissions.

“We don’t use the VLE for assessments. Just uploads”
Lecturer response in VLE review session

There was a common feeling in many of the reviews that, while the VLE was capable of many functions and activities to support assessment, some teaching staff didn’t know how to create them or feel confident to use those functions.

“People don’t know what it can do, so they will work within their own constraints”
While not the VLE specifically, marking assessments via plugins within the VLE was discussed frequently. The experience of marking online was often very negative. Although the difficulties were not necessarily an issue with the VLE itself, it was often the platform that got the brunt of the complaints. Different plugins or platforms for marking seemed to create more barriers and negativity around using the VLE for assessment. Some teaching staff asked students to upload work via the VLE then asked them to print it out so it could be marked. There was also confusion and frustration about how assessments should be set up and the restrictions in place. Some staff felt the platform was not able to accept different formats or large sizes, which meant using a third-party tool and effectively bodging it.

**Do you use the VLE for any collaborative activities?**

Many teaching staff had moved away from the VLE for collaborative work and were using third-party tools such as social media. They said learners and students were much more comfortable in these spaces and were more likely to engage. Even where new functionality for chat, group work or file sharing was available within the VLE, there was still reluctance to move back. Staff suggested they had found a process that was working and didn’t want to change it.

"I’ve used VLE-based forums but students are not keen to engage, but they are happy to use their own social platforms"

"Students often set up Facebook groups to interact and collaborate instead of using the VLE"

"Easy to use/set up collaborative spaces supporting documents would be welcomed"

"No known set policy mandating VLE to be used"

When asked about organisational policies around using third-party tools or social media some staff did not know what they were allowed to be using, or where to find out. In many conversations there was a feeling that there are too many hoops to jump through in getting permission to use external tools. Some felt there was a substantial barrier to being creative and using external tools, particularly for group work.

Many organisations have moved to the introduction of platforms that allow real-time communications and cloud-based document editing. Again, while this is not a part of the VLE, teaching staff said this functionality was an enhancement to working collaboratively when used with the VLE. Some of the teaching staff we spoke to felt the VLE was being replaced by such platforms.

Not all teaching staff said they asked their learners or students to work in groups. It was not always clear if the VLE was a barrier to this.

"Group work has a lot going for it but shoehorning into the VLE, why are we doing that?"

Lecturer response in VLE review session

**Do you feel supported in exploring different teaching approaches using the VLE?**

Many teaching staff said there is support but it is not always available. Often, they work with learning technologists when developing VLE resources or activities but these were often busy or they were low in numbers, and accessing their help was not always easy. There was sometimes a discussion around the cost of a learning technologist against new equipment for teaching spaces.

"I’d rather spend the money on our lab than ask for another LT"

Lots of organisations are working with their teaching staff to help their confidence grow. Running projects that identify areas where there’s a lack of digital confidence does seem to engage staff, which in turn helps build confidence in using a broader range of VLE tools (or third-party tools that can be embedded in the VLE). Support from the organisation about possibilities and showcasing successful content were both well received – and often rewarding if a staff member’s content was shown. Academic staff welcomed creative ideas that can be used across the organisation but sometimes a lack of consistency in what was allowed in different departments caused frustration.
“There used to be more access to support, there is less available now and it feels more distant”

“Some support feels a bit invisible, we have to actively find it”

“We are passed around between different departments to get support”

Some teaching staff referred to their VLE experience as being a ‘voyage of self-discovery’. They would like to see what is possible from other staff, programmes and courses or elsewhere in the sector. Many said they were worried about breaking something and had decided to stay in the safety of what they knew, which was often working in Microsoft Word and uploading the file to sit on the VLE in a list.

“Attending training becomes impossible, it’s too much time away from the day job”
Teacher response in VLE review session

What is the greatest advantage of using a VLE?
Often, teaching staff were positive and intended to develop their use of the VLE.

When we asked about the positives of the VLE, comments like ‘24/7 access to learning’, ‘accessibility from mobile devices’ and ‘connecting with the students’ were common. Some teaching staff said the VLE enabled them to send out messages or update information quickly. Other teaching staff (sometimes at the same organisation) said they struggled with the lack of ability to communicate, that the VLE was too ‘one way’ or the learners and students never checked it. The differing opinions show how difficult it could be for organisations to create a culture for successful and satisfied use of a VLE.

“The VLE was often seen as a key pillar in the experience for learners and students. Although many staff felt there was room for improvements, the VLE’s role was seen as essential.”

“It enables deeper interactions in class”

“Allows you to flip the classroom more effectively”

Teaching staff often said their learners or students rely on the VLE as a repository for learning. This was especially the case during revision. Having the session handouts, slides and supporting resources meant that learners and students could catch up on any missed content or go back over work they struggled with. Where available, staff who could access data on usage statistics said they found it very useful to see what resources were used the most and which were now obsolete. However, this was not widely available according to many of the reviews we conducted.

What are the biggest challenges and barriers to using your VLE effectively?

We wanted to hear about frustrations and find out if the VLE was either under-performing or causing some issues with delivering learning content. This question led to some key conversations.

Lack of time was the most common discussion point when we asked about the struggles with developing VLE content. A lot of the teaching staff wanted to learn and develop their own skills so they could be less reliant on learning technologists or other colleagues. But the time factor was hard to overcome with other priorities and tasks to complete. Many said there were training sessions available but these didn’t always fit with workloads or timetables. Some felt that while continuing professional development (CPD) time was available, it wasn’t enough to really make a difference.

Inconsistencies in the use of the VLE were often credited to a lack of identity in the platform. In many reviews the VLE was being used in very different ways across organisations which meant that some staff were unsure of how or why a particular function or method was being
used. Some felt this stemmed from an unclear direction from the organisation’s leadership or unclear strategy around digital use. Many staff did not believe in or know what the strategy was for using the VLE.

Some suggested that the VLE was a low priority in their workload. It was clear from many conversations that staff had not been shown the potential advantages of using the VLE effectively or how it could save them time. Also, how it could save learners and students time and enable them to interact in ways that could enhance the learning experience.

“Don’t underestimate the nervousness of staff who are not confident using the VLE”
Lecturer response in VLE review session

Nonetheless, we often found confident use of the VLE. As staff became familiar with processes and functions, these were used widely across the teaching. But those who were nervous of making mistakes or lacked confidence could feel left behind. As we said before, where support is available many staff felt they were able to ask for help. But when help was hard to come by, some staff said they didn’t want to look unprofessional by making mistakes that could be seen by learners or students. They said that a test space for trying new things would be a big help in learning from mistakes, out of view of others. They also agreed that online resources or short help videos about different VLE activities and uses would be a great help when support staff were unavailable.

Other common barriers to effective VLE use included:

- Difficulty in using the system
- Too many systems, not sure which to use
- Lack of connection with other systems such as student records or portal
- Poor accessibility
- Page inconsistencies
- Poor design
- Lack of functionality such as messaging, collaborative or notifications
- Fear of losing work if it fails

A common challenge was around enrolments and housekeeping. Organisations often require learners or students to self-enrol into module pages. Some staff suggested that their VLE was not connected to other systems which made enrolling learners or students to their pages a very time-consuming exercise. But further problems would present themselves when learners or students weren’t unenrolled when the module finished, so they would receive notifications and updates from modules they were no longer taking.

“50 staff and 30 modules that need manual enrolment, it needs to be more efficient”

“A big barrier is time, if it was made a priority to do it”

When asked about page housekeeping on un-enrolling and auditing page content, many staff said they didn’t have time or didn’t know how to complete the task. Again, this points to the VLE being a lower priority in very busy workloads.

Some organisations were rewarding VLE engagement by staff. Pages that were regularly updated, featured different elements of interactivity or had a high volume of hits were awarded a recognition or badge that could be displayed on the page. A page could be a gold, silver or bronze. While it may motivate staff to work on their pages more, some teaching staff said it was causing stress or a negative experience with their pages. In a few organisations teaching staff felt the criteria for judging a page was decided on information that didn’t necessarily mean a better experience for the learners or students.

“It is based on footfall and not pedagogy and I really don’t like it”

Observation conclusions with teaching staff
Teaching staff are an obvious key group in VLE usage. If the teaching staff are losing faith in the platform it is difficult to see how learners and students will feel enthusiastic about using it. The teaching staff we spoke to were keen to find ways to engage their learners and students and provide the highest learning experience. The VLE was not always top of the list of tools to provide that learning experience.
The VLE is often part of an ecosystem at an organisation that the learners and students move through to access different elements of their learning. Organisations use the VLE in different ways. While some only have taught session content, some have everything added. Some are accessed via portals or hubs; some are only accessed by typing in the URL or searching on Google. When running VLE reviews we have found that, whatever other systems, platforms or connections are used alongside the VLE, it is often the VLE that gets the blame.

“Our VLE is so slow and clunky. It isn’t fit for use. We can’t connect to it at all in the other building”

Our VLE review process is designed to capture comments from VLE users and unpack the details. The comment above led to an investigation into the organisation's wireless network, which was faulty in some areas causing a slow or intermittent connection. But the teaching staff had condemned the VLE as useless and they were not using it.

When visiting a campus, we will often comment on how the organisation has taken pride in the physical estate and how learners and students are welcomed into their spaces for taught sessions, revision and self-facilitated learning. It is important for organisations, and the users within, to take as much pride in the digital estate, with the same welcome and the same attention to detail. The VLE is not an add-on, not an extension to the organisation. To many learners and students, the VLE is as much a part of their college or university as any other component.

We have found that a well-defined role, vision, goals and strategy around use of the VLE is a key starting point to make a robust platform for the organisation. Teaching staff are then able to buy into a vision and understand why they’re being asked to devote time and effort to the VLE.

It’s essential to have a working group to develop a strategy that includes the teaching staff voice. Pedagogy and user experience from an educator’s perspective should inform decisions made around the running of the VLE. So, too, should understanding how teaching staff may want to engage with the VLE. We have seen how teaching staff become more confident and engaged when they have more direction and support in using a VLE. Templates and best practice can be seen as limiting creativity but, when speaking to students about the VLE, their biggest frustration is a lack of consistency in layout, experience and content.

Providing teaching staff with support, guidance on what’s possible and an understanding of how it may feel to use their VLE pages, rather than setting ‘minimum standards’, could prove more beneficial to the continual development of the VLE, the skills and the confidence of the teaching staff using it.
Learner and student users

Engaging learners or students in our VLE reviews often gave a good snapshot of how the VLE is positioned in their learning. Many of those we spoke to were passionate about their opportunity to lend their voice to a review.
We asked them:

What do you see as the role of the VLE in your learning?
Defining the VLE was an important starting point. In more than one review, the definition of the VLE was slightly different because some of the learners and students were required to use more than one platform. This was a key observation about the roles one or all of the platforms should have. In these circumstances, it was down to the teaching member of staff to decide which platform they wanted to use.

"My first port of call for services and learning”
Student response in VLE review session

Many of the learners and students saw the VLE as an essential part of their learning. Their ability to access their learning content as and when they needed it was clearly something they valued and expected. Accessing session materials both before and after a learning session was seen as a key advantage to having a VLE, especially when revising for approaching exams. They saw this as the VLE’s main role.

“Helpful to go over lectures before the actual lecture”
“Useful to catch up on missed sessions”
“For looking back at what I have learned, revision”
“We are able to go and see notes from the first or different years”
“Accessing student services like the library is useful”

Accessing other services such as timetables or calendars was also seen as useful and, where this facility was available to learners and students, they used it often. Some learners and students did mention that the information within other systems did not always match the information in the VLE and they worried which platform they should use.

A common comment was that, while they understood the VLE could be used more to enhance the learning experience, this was not a common experience. They said their experience of the VLE greatly depended on how their teaching staff were populating the pages. Learners and students whose teachers were confident in using the platform would receive a very different experience from those whose teachers were less so.

"It depends on what course you are studying as to what you get access to, session recordings and e-portfolios are not always available”

Throughout all of the VLE reviews, the learners and students expressed frustration at a lack of consistency across the VLE. Different teaching staff could have very different practices in using the VLE, lecture capture or external tools.

How do you access the VLE and the content?
The answer to this question should inform how content is provided through the VLE. If most are connecting via mobile devices then the content should be accessible on those devices. Likewise, with data connections. Creating all video content at 4k may look sharp and impressive on organisational wifi but if the users are accessing it on their ‘paid for’ data connections, they could easily decide not to engage and to save their data.

Some learners and students said they could not look at some of their content on their phones so they would wait until they had access to a laptop or computer.

"Easier to access on a desktop not a mobile. It is clunky on a mobile and an iPad, it doesn’t load properly, not coded well for mobile”
Student response in VLE review session

Many learners and students we spoke to said they accessed the VLE on their phone for notifications, calendars and timetables and used laptops or desktops for accessing learning content.
"I bookmark the VLE on my phone and laptop"

"I have to go back to Google and find the VLE"

"I keep a page open all the time"

"Most of the time I go through the app"

We also asked about the route used to access the VLE. Some arrived at the VLE via a hub dedicated to college or university users, others accessed a link on the organisational website. Where a link was not provided, some learners and students use Google to search for their VLE. This caused some frustration as many VLEs in the UK share the same name and they have to scroll through the results to find their own organisation’s VLE.

Many learners and students had very little training or direction on the best ways to connect to the VLE. Some were not aware that they could access the VLE outside of their organisation’s network.

What is the greatest benefit from your VLE?
Listening to how the learners and students were using their VLEs was important to build the picture of how a VLE can be more successful. We wanted to capture which elements they liked using in the VLE and why.

"Being able to access from home"

"The VLE is the college in my pocket"

"Where time and effort is made by staff, we have engaged and benefited from a greater experience"

The most common characteristic discussed was the ability to access the content at times and locations that suited their lifestyle, whether that be at home, on campus, on the bus or on breaks at work. Where available, the learners and students enjoyed being able to communicate with peers and teaching staff, whether through the VLE interface or through links on the VLE.

"Great to have all my resources in one place"
Learner response in VLE review session

Many of the learners and students described how they liked having everything in one place. They also mentioned access to library services or careers resources alongside course content as a big benefit. But this did rely on teaching staff inputting these links, and they didn't always do so. This includes access to all their learning material, session notes and session recordings without having to navigate around different systems or platforms.

Is anything missing from your VLE?
When a learner or student’s benchmark could be social media or huge corporate environments it is important to understand where their needs may be being missed in the VLE.

"Needs some creativity. Needs to be much more visual and inviting, it currently feels bland, fonts and colours could be more bold"
Student response in VLE review session

While many learners and students felt they had all their content they often suggested the experience of using the platform lacked some inspiration. Many said their VLE was quite dull, uninviting or difficult to navigate, lacking in colours, images or any interactivity. We often discussed how learners and students could feed back on their learning experience through the VLE and they said that it would be useful to have a system to offer feedback at module level about taught sessions, resources within the platform or on their experience of a module page.

"A ratings system"

"Guidelines for teachers"

"Interactivity is missing"

"More information on career progression"

"No chat feature so we need to go to social media"
Learners and students spoke about their desire for other services at their organisations to have a bigger presence in their VLE module pages. Libraries were frequently mentioned. We were told that reading lists and useful resources were not always up to date or weren’t always easy to find. They felt that up to date information about how the library could help their work would be a useful thing to have on module pages. We learned that additional reading based on the books in the reading lists or information on relevant library taught sessions like academic skills were rarely found at module level on VLEs.

“Sometimes I wish we had more places to find articles or more books... or to find more information for your report”

**What are the biggest challenges or barriers to using the VLE for your learning?**

Understanding the frustrations of user groups is paramount to improving successful use of the VLE.

Without doubt, the most common comment about challenges and barriers to using the VLE was about the lack of consistency across an organisation. This isn’t just inconsistency in how the VLE is laid out on module pages, but also in which VLE is used or even if a VLE is used at all. Many learners and students said there were too many platforms, tools and technologies being used. They did not know which to use. They understood that organisations were keen to innovate and develop ways to engage but it had become too much. Some expressed anxiety over looking at the wrong platform and missing important information. Some learners and students were not using the VLE at all due to staff members preferring to use paper handouts.

“Some teachers are good with the VLE, others do not use it”

“Different courses are using too many different ways and tools. It’s confusing”

“Time is wasted looking for resources as I have to open them to see if it is the one I want”

“We did not know we could access the VLE from home”

Learners and students said that the layout of information in a module page is often very different to the layout in their previous module. When things are in an unfamiliar order it means lots of scrolling to find the elements they are looking for. We were told about different uses of tabs or topic boxes compared to collapsible sections or picture box navigation. Each often reacts differently to different devices – whether mobile or desktop.

Many said they thought templates would help. Where templates have been introduced already, learners and students said they have felt more comfortable using the VLE.

“If a lecturer has no confidence then they don’t use it, and less and less is on the VLE”

Student response in VLE review session

The process of using a platform to download notes or access resources should be simple but we heard that tasks are made much harder for some by poor navigation, a lack of order in the document lists or the wrong information. Each module will have common elements such as:

- Contact information
- Module handbook
- Assessment details and submissions
- Reading lists
- Session materials
- Forums
- Useful resources

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“Different courses are using too many different ways and tools. It’s confusing”

“Time is wasted looking for resources as I have to open them to see if it is the one I want”

“We did not know we could access the VLE from home”
“It feels like staff have not been trained in using our VLE. There is a lack of consistency”

“People’s teaching styles really do impact on the VLE experience. Some may have major time constraints, as students we see that people do not have time to create good content or do more with the VLE”

“No quizzes, we are not allowed fun”

In many cases, learners and students were frustrated to hear about different experiences in other areas at their own organisation. Hearing that some learners or students had access to recorded lectures or access to interactive activities led to questions about why they couldn’t have the same experience. In a similar situation, some staff communicated with their learners or students in different ways. Some posted on the VLE, some sent notifications via an app, some sent emails. This meant that, in some cases, learners or students had to check multiple channels to ensure they didn’t miss information. Many learners or students stopped checking their organisational accounts.

We also learned about inconsistencies in what content would work on mobile or touchscreen devices. As many staff used different approaches this meant a difference in what devices could be used. Accessibility on devices for all users was often brought up. Particular tools that can be embedded within a VLE can provide interactive objects but may require a mouse to be used. Some students we spoke to were not able to use a mouse or only had a mobile device with a touchscreen and found it frustrating and isolating. They often said VLE pages were just being rolled over each year with old content.

Old content was a frequent source of discontent. There were a lot of instances where learners and students would find old forums, quizzes or handouts that had previous years’ comments, posts and content. Also, there were some who had not been un-enrolled from old modules so they were still getting notifications from modules they were no longer taking.

“Our course has previous years’ information so comes across as a bit disorganised”

“It needs to be updated more regularly, old classes and teachers still in the system”

“Un-enrolled with a course and months later I am still getting notifications, this is poor”

Many learners and students said their VLE was not somewhere to share their opinions. Forums or wikis were used but this was often considered clunky or a poor experience. Because they’re used to the ‘real-time’ experience of using social networks learners and students often said their VLE did not meet their expectations. They had to refresh pages or wait a few hours to see their question published to the group. Also, notifications would be received on every post, reply or like. So, after a short time, inboxes or devices were full of notifications that were not always welcome and quite frustrating. This was not limited to one organisation, it seemed to be a characteristic of default settings on many VLE platforms being used. Many said their teaching staff had set up social media groups on different platforms that allowed two-way conversations.

Observation conclusions with learners and students

While not all learners and students had a VLE to compare to, most were happy to use the platform and felt it was an effective tool in their learning. The role they saw was primarily about access to supportive documents and session content while allowing submission for the assessments.

Many learners and students wanted to see the VLE develop further. Better communications with peers and their teaching staff were commonly requested improvements. Their experience of using social media platforms set the benchmark for their expectation of a digital platform, and this was clear in many comments about the speed or ease of use of their VLE. They wanted to be able to access their learning content, timetables and updates easily from their own plethora of devices. It seemed a negative point that only some devices worked for particular content and
they had to wait to access the rest, depending on what
device they had. In a world of ubiquitous digital for
entertainment, banking, family and socialising, the
restrictions on their learning access seemed unreasonable
to them.

It was clear that inconsistent experiences were a frustration
that reflected on the organisation and/or the teaching
staff. Learners and students had an expectation of what
they required from their platform and when their experience
fell short, it became a barrier to engaging with the
content in their module.

“We have different types of lecturer – the VLE either
enhances great lecturers or does nothing for bad
lecturers”

The platform’s identity and role were often confused
when there was more than one VLE or different tools for
group work. Learners and students having to guess
which platform they were going to be using for the next
module could be a negative experience when starting a
new module or with a new member of staff. Should an
organisation or staff member be doing their best to
reduce any anxiety or confusion for their learners or
students? Finding the right balance between effective use
of a VLE, because the staff member is confident with
this platform, and a consistent experience to support
learners and students is an important choice to make.

Many suggested they would like more ways in which to
feed back on the VLE and their learning experiences
during their studies. This could be a useful operation for
organisations to run alongside organised meetings such
as staff and student liaison groups. Capturing the voice
of the users, at this level, to feed into working groups and
decision making across the organisation can authenticate
the vision, goals and actions that arise. Learners and
students we spoke to were enthusiastic about their
opportunity to voice praise, concerns and frustrations
during our review.

While the VLE could be a capable connection channel for
teachers to their learners and students, many that we
spoke to were disappointed with the broadcast style

limitations of their VLE. One-way announcements were
often used with little opportunity to respond. Using social
media or third-party tools to communicate with teaching
staff or peers may bridge the gap but it can put the
organisation at risk of other issues such as GDPR or a
lack of ownership of content.
We wanted to capture the opinions of VLE users who were not specifically teaching staff but who often used it or were involved with back-end administration or content management. In the review sessions we spoke to staff from libraries, student support, faculty administration as well as content developers, management information systems (MIS) designers and technologists.
We asked them:

What do you feel is the role of the VLE?
Their thoughts about this match many of those we heard from teaching staff, learners and students; they said the VLE connects staff with learners and students and provides access to learning resources. Many saw the VLE as a place to share resources, presentations and videos with learners and students before taught sessions. This is especially useful before practical sessions or revision. They commented that, when distance programmes were using the VLE, these pages were the ‘classroom’ and should be more interactive than pages for learners and students on campus.

Where available, the communications in a VLE were there to notify learners and students about events, changes or issues relevant to their courses or programmes. Many suggested that their VLE was only able to do one-way announcements and didn’t offer a platform to converse with the learners and students. Some said the VLE isn’t the place to communicate or interact.

“Leave the element of interaction to social media. There are lots of interactions on WhatsApp. The VLE is more of a formal set up. The students don’t feel they can speak as freely”
Professional services staff response in VLE review session

“Faculty staff use the VLE to signpost for handbooks and other information but there’s a huge amount of change between pages”

“The interactive handbook. An interactive link between staff and students”

A lot of professional services staff commented on the use of the VLE for assessment submissions. In many organisations the VLE was used to organise and facilitate the submissions for all handins and they felt this was the main role of the VLE at their organisation. While there was a repository of old resources, the learners or students rarely interacted with them.

“It is not an assessment tool but is an enabler for online submissions/assignments. There is not huge use of the tools within the VLE”

In some sessions professional services staff said there was more than one platform being used as a VLE.

“There are other platforms that kick around and social media is being used”

Where does the VLE sit in your job role priorities?
Often, the VLE is not a first priority due to other responsibilities of their roles. We wanted to understand how often their role requires them to interact with the VLE. With such a diverse range of responsibilities in these groups it was clear that some use it daily and others will only use it sporadically.

The learning technologists were often the more frequent users of the VLE in this group. Their roles were very much about supporting teaching staff with content creation or training staff in VLE use. They were often required to run housekeeping tasks as well as setting up formative assessments. Some felt frustration with repeating tasks that they felt teaching staff could be doing.

“A lot of academics feel this is not part of their day job and that is the issue, not the VLE”
Professional services staff response in VLE review session

One element that was often mentioned was the use of handbooks and module information. Many professional services staff said this content was useful for the learners and students when starting a new module but there was a huge difference in what was in those resources and where they were positioned across their organisations.
Some staff only encountered the VLE when supporting learners and students. If someone was struggling with work or not able to find a resource, they may need to look at the information on the VLE. There was often a feeling that their services could have a bigger presence on VLE course pages, particularly around additional materials that could support a reading list or assignment brief. They felt they could manage their areas of the content rather than add to the teaching member of staff’s workload.

“We do go in the VLE and help academics or use the tools within reading lists and teaching”

How do you feel the VLE is perceived at your organisation?

Across many organisations, the professional services staff felt there was some confusion around what VLEs are for. Their comments often identified a lack of direction or guidelines for teaching staff on how they could or should be used. They felt learners or students could be using the platforms better and that teaching staff didn’t use the VLE to its full potential.

“Lack of a defined identity for the VLE”

“A lack of vision, what’s it for”

“A tool staff need more time with, to learn and grow in confidence”

Some professional services staff thought that a lot of out of date content was a big issue and that this influenced how the VLE was perceived. Lots of the content was not checked for broken links or to see if was still relevant to the taught sessions. Lots of legacy resources were still on module pages from previous years and previous staff who no longer worked at the organisation.

“Out of date content is the biggest problem”
Professional services staff response in VLE review session

The impact of the learning was thought to be positive if there was access to learning resources. Some felt that, as the experience was inconsistent, it was difficult to say either way. Learners and students would be impacted more positively if their pages were more developed. These staff also mentioned other positive impacts, focusing on collaborations and ease of electronic submissions for both staff and learners or students.

What are the challenges and barriers to using the VLE effectively?

From accessing module pages with learners and students in support or library sessions, to auditing and creating content with teaching staff, the experiences of professional services staff are as insightful as the other key groups.

With so many staff and different departments all working to support the VLE in many organisations, some felt there isn’t enough sharing of knowledge and experiences. They said this was reducing the ability to achieve consistency, develop best practices and learn from each other. Different technologists and developers were often not aware of how others in different schools, departments or faculties at their own organisations were working.

“No training given to staff, all done by word of mouth”

“Staff do not currently have time to share developments”

“Many different ways to use the VLE. It is dependent on school, person and user”

“Departments have different approaches”

Some professional services staff said that many teachers aren’t aware of what is possible in the VLE. They will often stick with what they know. If teaching staff had not been exposed to good practice, they can develop bad habits. Some suggested that they had seen teaching staff decide on using platforms outside of the VLE because they don’t have time to learn.
“Time needs to be set aside to discover how the VLE can positively impact on learning and teaching, and most importantly, time to experiment, fail, learn, without fear”
Professional services staff response in VLE review session

Many spoke about the lack of consistency when working with different teaching staff. They said that templates could be a good way to standardise the layout of module pages. While there was the concern that some teaching staff may get frustrated if more boundaries are added that could make them feel restricted, the learners and students would prefer to use a VLE that was more organised.

Observation conclusions with professional services staff
The professional services staff we spoke to were clear about how the VLE can be developed into a robust platform. It was their common opinion that the VLE was there to aid teachers and connect the content with learners and students. If it was there to enhance learning, its success very much depended on the way staff made use of it and how the curriculum was designed around it.

“We should move away from one to one support and move towards self-help resources”

The role of supporting VLE development was often described as never ending. Some professional services staff felt the daily tasks or housekeeping fell to them when it could be done by those who own the content but teaching staff have limited time to learn new techniques or may not be motivated to learn. Where time has been taken to produce ‘help’ resources for staff, the demand for one to one help has been reduced but some felt that not all teaching staff will use the resources as they like a ‘helping hand’.

If the platform has a clearly defined role, an identity and clear guidance from leadership, this could determine how designers, technologists and other supporting staff can work with teaching staff to produce content that is in line with standards and consistent with an agreed experience.
Final thoughts

We undertook many of our VLE reviews with organisations that felt their platform needed to change. Many of these discussions focused on the need for things to get better, whether that meant a new provider or a change in infrastructure, many minds were already set on their next steps.

The danger is that a change for the wrong reasons may not fix the issues you wanted to change.

On several occasions, organisations have made changes before understanding where problems exist. Unfortunately, some time later they have found the same problems reappear so they’ve wasted considerable effort and time.

A VLE review is an external voice into a bigger project: understanding what circumstances surround a platform(s) at an organisation. A very big point to note is that:

The VLE platform itself is not always the single element that needs changing to improve the student and staff experience. Having a clear vision and defined role, alongside support and guidance for staff and students, is imperative to implement positive change.

Many of the discussion points focus on the practice of the users. Inconsistencies can be ironed out by working with all users to standardise key procedures and practices. Giving the learners and students a robust experience in line with organisational visions and goals with the VLE should not trample on creativity but allow for it in the right places.

Inclusive learning and teaching is an entitlement to an experience that respects all users regardless of their needs or access to technology. Issues accessing the VLE on mobile devices or difficulty for students requiring additional support isn’t always about the VLE’s lack of ability but often about the content within. Staff populating pages, creating content and designing the curriculum should be aware of restrictions that are important to the running of a platform but that should also allow access for all users. Accessibility, for example, is paramount with keeping in line with compliance requirements so staff should understand why, how and what is necessary to make an effective change and also be motivated to do so. Learners and students described the VLE as their college or university in their pocket or their phone. Could this be the inspiration needed for organisations to model their service to make a robust connection that could enhance experience and retain learners and students more effectively?

Throughout this report, the opinions expressed are evidence of a desire to develop VLEs in organisations across FE and HE. Usage data can help inform and underpin a story of how a platform is being used. Data provides proof, but it is important to ask “so what?”. Voices from different user groups are essential for understanding the story and they provide insight into why the things you see in the data really matter.

Giving opportunities for users to give feedback that can effect change can bring engagement and motivation to use a VLE. As we mentioned in earlier sections a working group of senior leadership, staff users and learners or students that can be informed by data, user feedback and organisational circumstances can change a culture that is reluctant to invest time and effort into a VLE. The group can organise showcases of good practice and engage champions who can be involved with planning training or developing supportive content.

Defining a vision that resonates with core organisational values and has achievable aims allows you to form a strategy that staff can buy into.
Recommendations

Each of our reviews is centred around the member organisation and we provide specific recommendations based on the observations we make, but some common themes have emerged. These themes offer a useful starting point and they can inform your discussions and approaches to getting the most from your VLE and the experience you want your staff and students to have.

Vision and strategy

Working group
- Set up a working group including key stakeholders and members of the senior management team (SMT) to resolve key challenges and barriers
  - Strategic approaches to managing change (jisc.ac.uk/guides/strategic-approaches-to-managing-change)

Vision
- Develop a vision that takes into account the role of the VLE
- Engage students and staff in vision development
- Be transparent and take a holistic approach
  - Developing successful student-staff partnerships (jisc.ac.uk/guides/developing-successful-student-staff-partnerships)

Strategy
- Develop a VLE strategy that takes into account the role of the VLE
- Set goals for success and how they can be measured eg via staff appraisals
- Use methodologies such as design thinking to increase the impact
- Use analytics to help inform your future planning
  - Enhancing the student digital experience: a strategic approach (jisc.ac.uk/guides/enhancing-the-digital-student-experience)
  - Designing learning and assessment in a digital age (jisc.ac.uk/guides/designing-learning-and-assessment-in-a-digital-age)

Staff development, quality standards and support

Showcase good practice
- Find and promote examples of good practice across the organisation
- Share evidence and outcomes of practice across departments/faculty/institution
- Increase the focus on VLE practice at staff development days
- Develop champions

Quality and standards
- Develop quality standards
- Include VLE usage in staff development appraisals
- Map VLE usage against quality standards
- Make academic staff aware of the requirement to ‘develop effective learning environments and approaches’ by the UK Professional Standards Framework (PSF) (advance-he.ac.uk/guidance/teaching-and-learning/ukpsf)

Support
- Promote staff access to a sandbox area
- Create ‘walkthrough’ multiplatform support materials
- Define accessibility standards and make awareness/help resources available
- Create templates and best practice standards
- Identify barriers to staff engagement
  - Accessible virtual learning environments (policyconnect.org.uk/sites/site_pc/files/report/1134/fieldreportdownload/appgatreport09-18final.pdf) – the 2018 report from Policy Connect

Policy

Develop a policy around the use of technologies
- Define what is in and out of scope
- Take a supportive and responsive approach
- Page owners to audit content for out of date resources and manage content

If you would like help to explore what you want from your VLE and assess your current position, please contact your account manager (jisc.ac.uk/contact/your-account-manager)