

UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

LEARNING AND TEACHING COMMITTEE

8 December 2015

REPORT FROM DIGITAL LEARNING SUB-COMMITTEE (24.11.15)

PRESENT

Professor P Hanna (Chair), Mr G Booth, Mr D Comiskey, Dr S Cook, Dr N Cunningham, Mr M Fitzpatrick, Professor B Hamber, Professor D Hazlett, Ms A Honan, Mr A Jaffrey, Mrs Á MacNeill, Professor D McAlister, Dr B Murphy, Mrs C Murphy, Mrs J Peden, Mr M Quigg, and Dr S Roulston, Miss H Shiels and Dr J Uhomobhi.

1 CHAIR'S COMMUNICATIONS

Digital Classroom Update

The Chair encouraged members to participate in the 'Digital Classroom' active learning initiative. The JISC supported event is in the Belfast Campus (BA-03-27) between 16th November and the 11th December. Further details are available at <http://digitalclassroomroadshow.co.uk/ulster.htm>.

Nomination for Digital Learning Environment Procurement Selection Panel

The Chair informed the Sub Committee that Professor McCormack would be representing the DLSC on the Digital Learning Environment procurement selection panel. Members of the committee will also be invited to participate in the vendor demonstration aspects of the procurement process and will have the opportunity to ensure their views are represented through Professor McCormack.

2 TIMETABLING FOR GBD

The Head of Planning and Development and Timetabling Officer delivered a presentation. The presentation would be distributed with the minutes.

The Head of Planning and Development described the historical change management process for new teaching blocks and the Belfast campus, beginning with the appointment of space planning consultants in 2009. The planning process identified the shift in Teaching and Learning practice from didactic to collaborative and active as a key requirement. The availability of suitable teaching space to support active learning is, and will be, a priority on all campuses.

Space per student in the new teaching blocks, on all campuses, is now calculated at 2 square metres rather than the historical 1.5 square metres. Layouts are flexible and can be reconfigured into clusters to facilitate collaborative teaching. Flexible spaces such as the student hubs in Jordanstown and Coleraine are proving popular.

The Timetabling Officer described the annual timetabling workflow. In early March, Schools are asked to review the previous year's timetable and are asked to return comments and suggested amendments to Planning and Development within a month. Returns are considered and a draft timetable is produced by the end of May. Amendments to the draft are negotiated before final publication at the beginning of September. Early publication is essential to allow students sufficient time to organise and plan their personal arrangements around their studies.

It was recommended that a more strategic approach to timetabling would help address known issues and inefficiencies with the current system. For example modules with known retention issues could be scheduled at a more popular time to try to encourage attendance. Planning and Development would welcome more strategic conversations with all Schools and Faculties to help inform the timetable.

In practice, a lot of changes are late and this has obvious impact on the student experience. Changes are more likely to be accommodated if they are highlighted early in the process.

There are 65 general teaching rooms on the Jordanstown Campus. A survey conducted in Week 3, of Semester One 2015, identified that the central teaching rooms had a utilisation level of 28% which is a product of the average of 62% of rooms being used and having an average occupational level of 45%. HEFCE norms suggest that this figure should be 35%.

The survey identified that classes on a Friday were poorly attended and classes scheduled for a Tuesday resulted in the best attendance. 9.15am classes are least popular and attendance tapers off after lunchtime. Whilst some rooms are scheduled for 3-hour slots, the rooms are often used for 2 hours within the 3-hour window.

It was noted that accommodation is Ulster's second highest cost and needs to be better used. Based on the above data, room occupancy of 60% equates to 329 hours – or 9.5 rooms unoccupied during a semester.

It was reported that the Belfast development will have 51 general rooms, 14 flexible spaces and 5 student hubs. Some of the larger spaces can be subdivided, with sufficient notice.

The presentation concluded with the statement that a more strategic approach would result in a more even distribution of teaching throughout the week, a better experience for students and staff, a more targeted approach to supporting achievement, a more responsive approach to cohort needs and more efficient use of an expensive resource.

Discussion

It was noted that Heads of School are best placed to manage the timetabling process particularly because room occupancy results in charges for space usage. Involving Heads of School in timetabling communications should

prompt discussion in appropriate detail within Schools. Teaching methods, agreed through validation and revalidation, should inform timetabling negotiations.

When rooms are not fit for purpose, it was noted that the appropriate action is to contact Planning and Development to explore further.

It was recognised that Health and Safety legislation dictates that rooms need to be adequate to accommodate the number of students registered for the class and not the number that might turn up.

It was noted that further and more frequent surveys are planned for Jordanstown to inform the decision-making process for room usage before the move to Belfast.

It was recognised that greater connectivity between the Student Records System (Banner) and the timetabling system would help improve the process.

AGREED:

- i) that timetabling principles should be developed to give guidance to Schools and that the Academic Space and Technologies Advisory Group would be well-placed to develop these.
- ii) that Planning and Development should report data through Deans during the annual timetabling cycle. It is expected that Deans would delegate to Heads of School ensuring a strategic approach to room usage and timetabling.

3 ACADEMIC SPACES AND TECHNOLOGIES ADVISORY GROUP (ASTAG)

The Director of Access, Digital and Distributed Learning and Director of the Centre for Higher Education Research & Practice gave a verbal update on ASTAG.

There had been no meetings since the last report. However decisions need to be made on technology specifications which had been developed, as well as fixtures and furniture specifications arising from the FF&E consultations. An extension of ASTAG, ASTEG (Academic Spaces and Technologies Executive Group), to include Deans will be constituted on an ad hoc basis for final academic sign-off prior to contractual commitment.

4 DIGITAL LEARNING INFRASTRUCTURE

Digital Learning Infrastructure

Blackboard Collaborate was installed on the development server on 3rd November and will be deployed on the production environment after functional testing.

The procurement of Ulster's next generation hosted and managed Digital Learning Environment deadline has now slipped due to reprioritisation of the ISD's Identity and Access Management Project. The Digital Learning Environment relies on the Identity and Access Management Project and it is therefore sensible to reprioritise. The target tender release date is now the end of November with a selection date anticipated for early 2016.

The current internally hosted infrastructure will be migrated to a hosted environment by July 2016. Regardless of which supplier is successful in the tender process, migration to a hosted environment is a complex task that will have implications for all Faculty and School business continuity and disaster recovery planning.

The level of risk in the current project plan is unknown until the preferred supplier is identified. Migrating to a new VLE supplier will involve a greater management of risk than a migration to a hosted version of the current VLE.

Discussion

It was acknowledged that the risks identified in the paper were comprehensive and at the appropriate level. However it was felt that managing user expectations should be taken into account along with highlighting the need for suitable resources to support the transition process to minimise risk of detrimental impact on the student experience. Ineffective communication with staff should also be added as a significant risk.

AGREED: that the risk assessments after feedback was incorporated would be forwarded to Learning and Teaching for ratification.

Synchronous Teaching Tool

Blackboard Collaborate is now installed on the development server but not yet installed on the production environment. A Blackboard consultant will be on site on 7th and 8th December to discuss Ulster's strategic approach to rolling out Collaborate.

The Blackboard consultant, based on experience at other institutions, has recommended an approach to institutional rollout that they describe as 'depth rather than breadth' which focuses on use cases that are aligned to strategic goals. These pilot projects are then used as case studies to encourage other academic teams to use the technology in a measured and effective way. The risks identified with releasing the technology to the entire institution immediately include: poor user experience due to lack of training; cultural and ethical issues; bandwidth issues on campus at peak periods; and local technical issues on managed staff and student PCs.

Whilst a slower, strategic implementation is sensible there is an immediate business need for the technology to support certain programmes.

The committee agreed that those academic teams identified in the business case should be first to have training and access. This should include all fully

online programmes. The second stage of rollout should be through a selective call inviting academic teams to partner with the Office for Digital Learning to successfully implement Collaborate in to their practice.

Members were assured that Blackboard Collaborate would work with any VLE currently active in the marketplace.

It was noted that Collaborate can support up to 500 concurrent users in a session and that the technology can be scaled on demand to support specific events such as Students' Union events.

AGREED: that initial implementation would be focussed on users with identified business needs and online courses. A selective call will be used for the second stage of rollout.

Digital Learning Statistics Semester One 2015/16

There were 9,480 active areas in Blackboard during the busiest 30-day period. Page views dropped by over 40% on the same period last year but analysis has shown that this is a result of interface changes implemented in Summer 2015 which significantly changed the way the statistics were recorded. The number of mobile apps users has increased by 50% on the same period last year.

There has been a drop in module presence in Blackboard particularly in subject areas that are going through restructure. Due to sensitivities in the current operating context individual schools have not been identified in Faculty level reports. Programme Support Area usage is skewed due to the inclusion of foundation degrees.

AGREED: that foundation degrees and other validated provision be removed from Programme Support Area usage data. Blackboard module usage, including School breakdown, should be made available to Deans.

5 DIGITAL LEARNING STRATEGY

Digital Futures

The Digital Futures strategy is to be launched in December, supported by a digital package of resources and a video introduction. Academic development in the form of an online Academic Development Prospectus will be a focus during the remainder of 15/16 to support academic teams. The ambition for this work will be a one-stop shop across CHERP, ISD, Library, ODL etc for academic opportunities to include digital technology, case studies and development opportunities.

6 DIGITAL LEARNING POLICY

Social Media

The Office for Digital Learning presented a discussion paper on the use of Social Media for Teaching and Learning (DLSC/15/23).

The paper was prompted by a number of recent requests for support to use social media, particularly Twitter, for fully online programmes. Corporate Communications maintain the main Ulster Twitter account which a corporate channel is promoting the Ulster University brand. However, social media is currently used to good effect in some courses at Ulster and there are national guidelines (JISC) on effective use for teaching. However, conversations around this topic have led to tension in debate between academic teams and Corporate Communications regarding the appropriate use and the corporate use of the medium. Accordingly, the DLSC sought to provide clarity for the institution in this digital space at various levels.

The paper had been discussed thoroughly at both the VLE Futures' Working Group and eLearning Course Directors' Forum with a recommendation for further review at the DLSC. Discussions suggest that recommendations in the paper were in conflict with the institutional approach to social media use. It was felt that further work could not progress without confirmation of the institutional position on the use of social media for teaching and learning purposes.

It was acknowledged that guidelines would help inform social media use for teaching and learning purposes.

AGREED:

- i) that ASTAG would seek Faculty views on social media usage for teaching and learning purposes to inform draft guidelines. Corporate Communications should be involved with the process. Recommendations would then be presented to DLSC and Teaching and Learning Committee for further consideration.
- ii) that the Students Union should consider and develop student guidelines on the use of social media for teaching and learning purposes.

Data and User Retention

The Digital Learning Environment enforces a limited and undocumented, user management policy and a 'keep all' approach to data retention. A policy of module archiving was implemented during the migration from WebCT Vista to Blackboard. Migration to a hosted and managed service necessitates a clear policy to inform the project plan.

The following recommendations are proposed following consultation with the VLE Futures Working Group and eLearning Course Directors' Forum. The DLSC were asked to review and discuss the recommendations.

- a) Students will have access to their modules for the duration of their programme, including those on part-time programmes. Students on Leave of Absence will also have access to their historical modules when they return.
- b) Staff will have access to modules from the current academic and the previous two academic years. Older modules will be archived and retrievable on request.
- c) Staff will have the opportunity to request that all modules are removed, from their Blackboard course list view, except those they are teaching in the current academic year. Older modules will still be in the system but not visible to the user.
- d) Any module with no student enrolments will be removed at the end of the associated academic year.
- e) A report will be generated showing modules that have student enrolments but no academic team associated with them. The Report will be made available to Deans for further distribution as appropriate.

AGREED: that the paper and recommendations would be forwarded to Deans for discussion at Faculty Academic Affairs Committees. Faculty representatives are to return any feedback by 25 January 2016, to saj.copeland@ulster.ac.uk.

7 REPORTS FROM DIGITAL LEARNING WORKING GROUPS

VLE Futures Working Group (VLEFWG)

The only item that had not been discussed earlier in the meeting was the Wimba Voice tool licence which is due to expire. Investigation has revealed that only 5 modules were using this software at a cost of £5k. Discussions with remaining users suggest that the software is no longer an institutional requirement and it is unlikely that the current software licence will be renewed in January 2016.

eLearning Course Directors' Forum (eLCDF)

Most of the issues that had arisen had been discussed. eTutor contract issues and IT account provision were reported as causing significant problems for eLearning course teams and discussions are on-going between ODL/ISD and HR to resolve. A number of distance-learning students were reported as having download and access issues with SPSS software. The Office for Digital Learning is investigating the issue.

25 November 2015
PH/SAJC