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Summary Report on the UKCLE/BILETA VLE Project

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1. INTRODUCTION

In February 2005 the authors embarked on a project, jointly funded by the UK Centre for Legal Education (UKCLE)ⁱ and the British & Irish Law, Education & Technology Association (BILETA)ⁱⁱ, designed to investigate the use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) in UK law schools and to establish an online resource containing examples of good practice. This report locates the project within the legal education context and describes its aims, methodology and dissemination strategy. The report then identifies elements of the selected case studies, all of which are illustrated on the project [website](#)ⁱⁱⁱ, reflects on the manner in which VLEs are currently being used in UK law schools and concludes by offering some insights as to the future potential of VLEs to enhance student learning.

Despite Virtual Learning Environments being one of the fastest-growing areas of legal education very little is known of their design, their users, their content, and the drivers and blockers to their use. This is partly because most aspects of their development and use are often hidden behind institutional and departmental intranets and also because the line between a virtual learning environment and managed learning environments has become blurred. It is clear though, as demonstrated by a more recent survey carried out by JISC (2005^{iv}) indicating that over 80% of business, law and accountancy departments use VLEs with their students, that VLEs are a popular application within law schools. As so little information regarding VLEs in legal education has been shared or made more freely available, UKCLE joined with BILETA to fund a project to explore the issues. It was intended that this project would provide a much-needed resource for law staff in that it would develop guidelines for best practice, identify examples of best practice through a number of case studies, and enable staff and students visiting the [UKCLE website](#) to explore and experience the VLEs within the case studies.



2. BACKGROUND

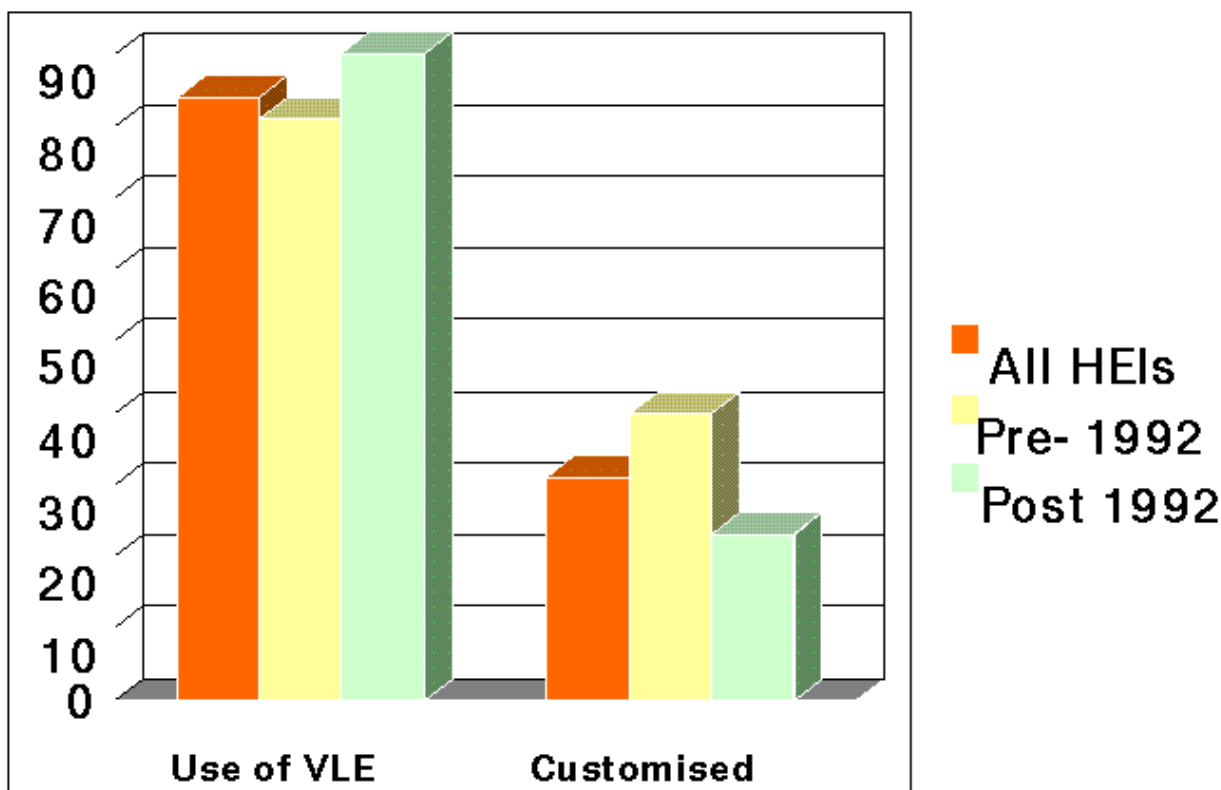
The background to the project is provided by two BILETA reports into Information Technology (IT) provision in law school, the 1991 " Jackson Report"^v and a further report in 1996^{vi}, both of which identified increasing use of IT resources within UK law schools. In 2003, the emergence of VLEs as an ICT tool to support student learning prompted BILETA to undertake a small scale pilot survey of 11 law schools, intended to provide a preliminary snapshot of the Information & Communications Technology (ICT) issues of concern to law schools. The results of the pilot survey were reported on elsewhere and it was commented that "the full potential of ICT for interactive, student-centred learning, is not yet being fully realised"^{vii}, a theme to which we will return later in this paper. The pilot survey was also intended to test the appropriateness and relevance of the questions in preparation for linking with the UK Law Schools Survey being organised by the Legal Education Research Project (LERP). That survey has also now been reported on in some detail elsewhere^{viii} but a brief snapshot of the data on ICT provision provides interesting reading in the present context.

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Of the 63 law schools offering Qualifying Law Degrees that responded to the survey, 60 provided information on ICT provision. All but one reported that their students had access to an institutional-wide intranet. The data is based on the responses of the remaining 59 respondents. Of these, 30 were located in pre-1992 HEIs and 29 were in post 1992-HEIs. All the post-1992 HEIs, were offering students email communication with both students and staff, access to the internet, access to reading lists and other course materials and 90% of them provided access to the intranet from off-campus. The same facilities were being offered by approximately 90% of the pre 1992 HEIs with off-campus access provided by 83%. 57 law schools responded to questions about provision of a VLE. As illustrated below in Table 1, of these, 48 institutions (84%) made use of a VLE, most commonly Blackboard (24) and WebCT (13). Again the post-1992 HEIs reported slightly a higher incidence of use (90%) than the pre 1992 HEIs (81%). However, only about 30% of all HEIs had customised these platforms for their own use. Pre-1992 HEIs were more likely to have done so (41%) than post 1992-HEIs (23%).

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Table 1: Use and customisation of VLEs in UK Law Schools

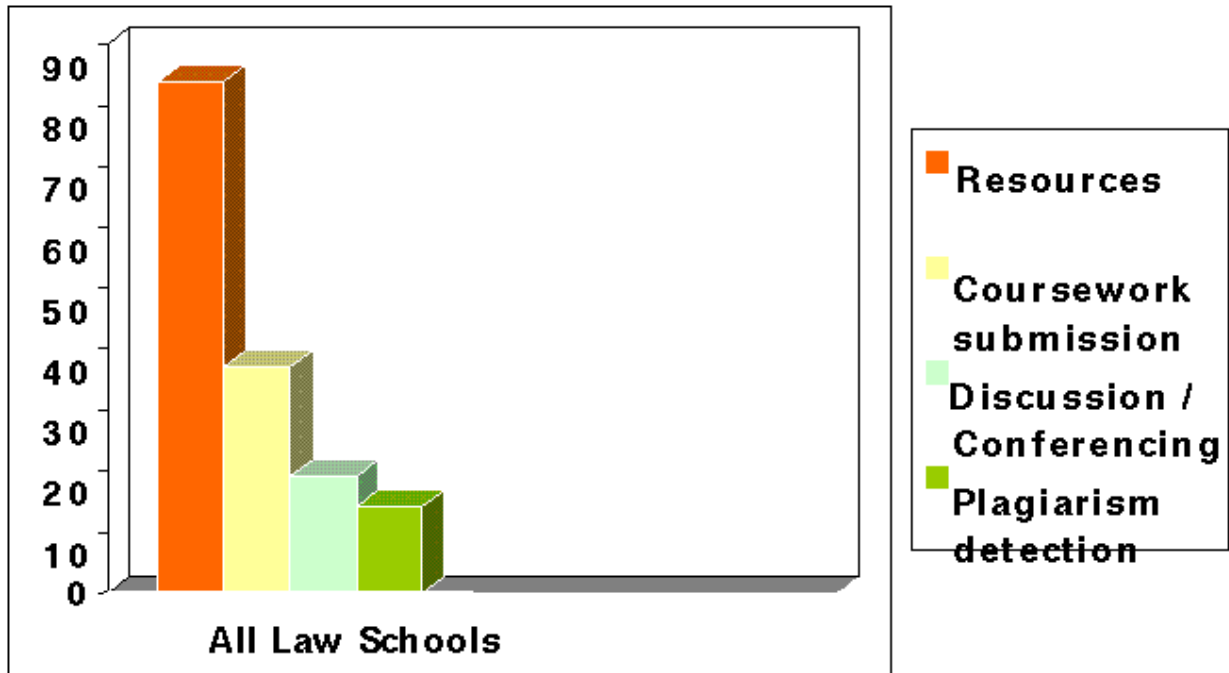


Further questions were asked in the survey about the use of VLEs for: the provision of learning resources; the e-submission of coursework; the facilitation of e-conferencing/discussions; as a vehicle for the use of plagiarism detection tools. The picture that emerges in Table 2, below, is that, overwhelmingly, the main use of VLEs is for the provision of learning resources (84%). Well under half (37%) of the respondent institutions were utilising the integral tools, supplied with most VLE platforms, for the e-submission of coursework. Furthermore, only 8 law schools were making use of plagiarism detection software, for which e-submission of coursework is a necessary precondition. Most significantly,

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in terms of the potential of VLEs for supporting interactive learning, only 11 law schools (19%) were utilising the e-conferencing/discussion tools, mainly to provide chat rooms, but some were enabling discussions, group research projects and collaborative tasks.

Table 2: Use of VLE learning support tools



3. AIMS, METHODOLOGY AND DISSEMINATION

AIMS

The project set out to obtain case studies from UK law school websites covering both undergraduate and professional legal education, co-design a project website for UKCLE, provide illustrations of good practice and develop guidelines for best practice in the pedagogical use of VLEs. 6

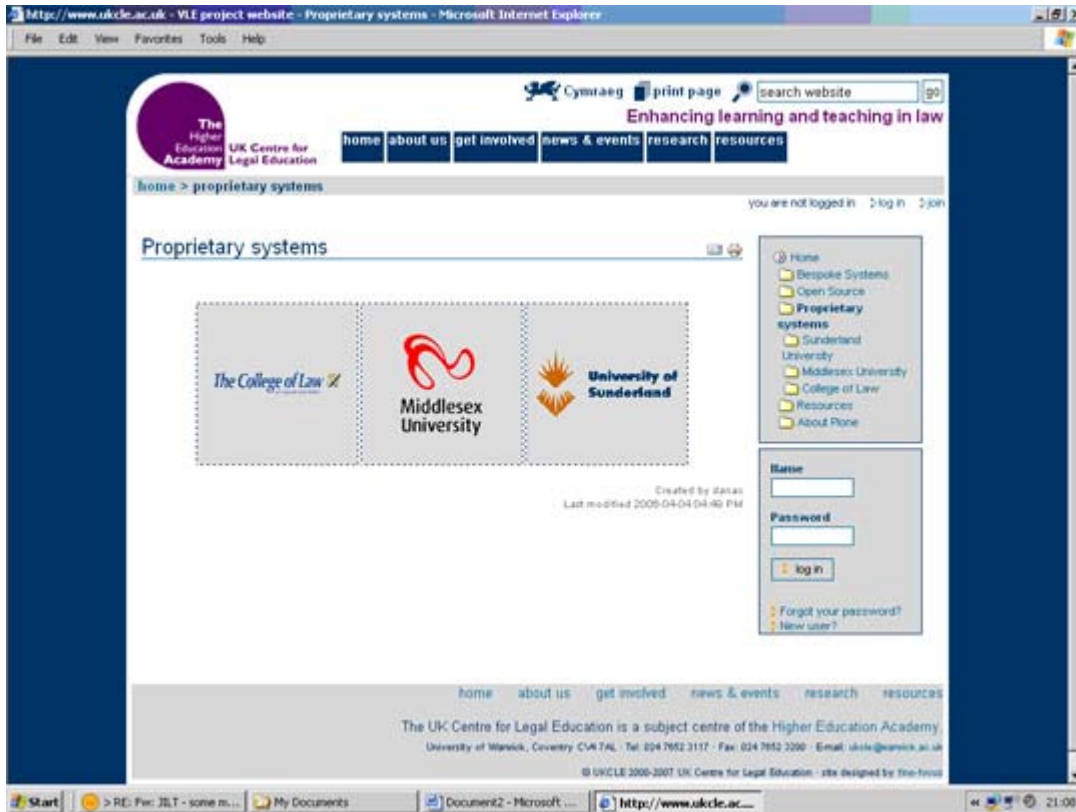
METHODOLOGY

The case studies were grouped under three main headings: bespoke applications, proprietary systems and open source applications. Bespoke applications tended to have the most innovative aspects but required greater resources and, in particular, the dedicated time of one or more committed member of staff. Proprietary systems like BlackBoard and WebCT are used by the majority of law schools but it would appear that they are used principally for their capacity to manage the process of learning and storage of learning resources. Rather than describe the functionality of these generic VLEs we have opted to consider the more innovative examples of their use in legal education in order to present law staff with stimulating instances of e-learning. The third category of VLE case studies, open source applications, were included because it became clear during the course of the project that institutions were increasingly exploring their use. 7

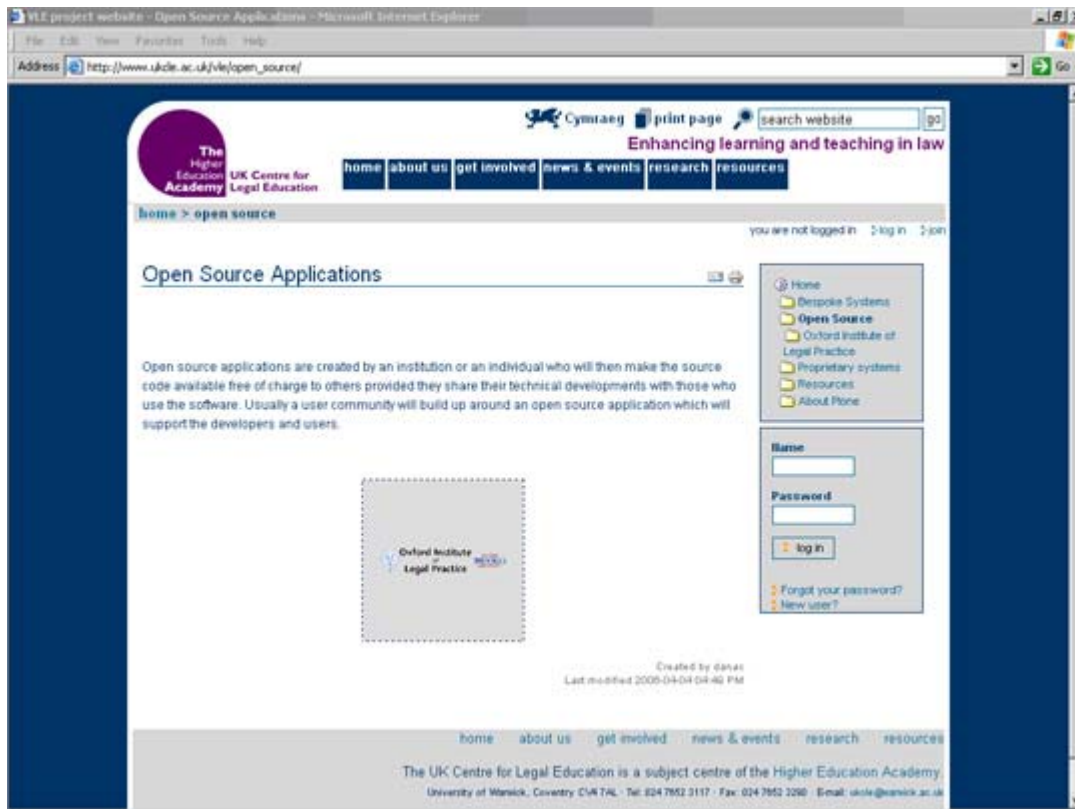
The call for case studies brought a number of respondents from UK institutions and there are case studies uploaded on the project [webpage](#) in the three main categories mentioned above. i.e. [University of Hertfordshire](#), [Glasgow Graduate Law School](#) & [Lancaster University](#) (bespoke systems) 8



[The College of Law](#), [Sunderland University](#) and [Middlesex University](#) (proprietary systems)



and the [Oxford Institute of Legal Practice](#) (open-source system).



Data collection was initially via semi structured pre interview questionnaires issued to relevant staff. These included academics, educational developers & learning technologists. Interviews based on the answers to the questionnaires were conducted, followed by analysis and editing of the data in preparation for uploading onto the project website. Throughout the process themes and markers of good practice were identified and catalogued. The website was designed by the project team, in collaboration with the UKCLE Technical Support Developer^{ix}, using Plone technology. This is a reasonably simple application which allows case studies to be easily updated and has the potential for allowing new authors to contribute their own case studies thus building up a bank of resources for future reference. The site also contains a [user-friendly guide](#) to the technology.

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DISSEMINATION

The findings have been disseminated principally through the dedicated [website](http://www.ukcle.ac.uk/vle) (<http://www.ukcle.ac.uk/vle>) which contains the developed case studies. These can be explored through a series of hierarchical webpages to gain a deeper insight into aspects of each VLE. A series of conference papers were presented (Learning in Law Initiative (LILI) 2006, [European Law Faculties Association](#) (ELFA) 2006, [BILETA](#) 2006, SubTech 2006) and UKCLE sponsored staff development workshops and UKCLE publications. The web site was launched at the 21st Annual BILETA Conference in Malta when the case studies went live.

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4. PROJECT THEMES

While investigating the case studies it became clear that, in view of the wide variation within the VLEs, it was not going to be practicable to produce definitive guidelines to demonstrate good practice. Instead the team have drawn themes from the VLE case studies and considered the good practice elements of the themes within the case studies. These themes include: blended learning, collaborative learning, staff development, assessment and management of learning some of which are explored below. Each case study has examples of good practice in respect of these themes which are identified and explored in the website.

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Although the project website contains three main case studies drawn from Glasgow Graduate Law School (Glasgow), Lancaster University Law School (Lancaster) and Sunderland University Law School (Sunderland), the structure of this section is based around the three main themes that were identified as being evidenced, to a lesser or greater extent, within each case study. These are: blended learning, collaborative learning and assessment issues.

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A) BLENDED LEARNING

The term “blended learning” is generally understood as meaning a combination of online and classroom based learning/teaching. This can be distinguished from purely online learning, the most common form of which being distance learning, where little or no classroom contact takes place. VLEs are ideally suited to supporting blended learning in that the online infrastructure can be used to provide a variety of both text-based and multi-media learning resources to supplement traditional f2f classroom teaching, discussion forums to enable student-to-student and/or student-to-tutor communications, noticeboards for course administration, facilities for the e-submission of coursework and for the provision of feedback on learning tasks as well as providing a mechanism for tracking student progress. 13

Within the VLE project case studies we have examples of blended learning modules. At Glasgow, on the Civil Procedure module, webcast lectures are supplemented by f2f tutorials and an on line simulation project. At Lancaster, on the Common Law module, an online environment provides an archive for resources and a communications medium for student/staff interaction which supports traditional lectures. At Sunderland, as well as using the VLE as a repository for information - lecture notes, overhead slides, seminar questions- some staff add discussion boards, assessment (formal and informal) activities, multi-media presentations, generic assessment advice and/or feedback. It is also used as a principal communication tool - a virtual notice board. There are also links for student support services, spaces advertising work experience opportunities, LPC/BVC open days, support in using Lexis, mooting, Law on Film, etc. Revision activities are frequently offered through the VLE and as a means of trying to enhance attendance, answers to seminar activities can be accessed by those who have attended the seminar. 14

B) COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Collaborative learning, where students work with each other on an assignment, is not a particularly common phenomenon in legal education. Group or team work is not without inherent difficulties in that there can sometimes be a fine line between collaboration and collusion and tensions can often arise within groups over differential levels of participation. On the other hand, it is claimed that the process of group discussion and activity is capable of enhancing the learning process for individual students when appropriately structured and managed. Collaborative learning also takes a variety of different forms and the case studies provide examples of how VLEs can be used to support this form of learning, through discussion forums, group blogs, and team-based assignments involving simulations of actual legal practice. 15

Collaborative learning can be seen in the Glasgow case study where postgraduate students are grouped into firms of four and together they progress a number of transactions. The firm is assessed as a group with students taking responsibility for certain aspects of each transaction. Just as in a real legal practice they require to account for the work they have completed which they do through an ‘Activity Log’. Similarly, in the Lancaster case study, undergraduate students are grouped into firms of five or six to negotiate “out of court” settlements. Here, group assessment of the assignment is in the form of a reflective report. Within both these simulation projects students are also supported through discussion forums which are managed by tutors but also include peer support. In the Sunderland case study, students on a human rights module discuss issues before and after the seminar through [a discussion forum](#). The discussions draw upon contemporary events and allow students to apply their knowledge to emerging human rights issues together with further discussing and debating issues dealt with explicitly on the module. In many instances however, students will post discussions without prompting based upon issues that they find in the media and the boards allow for the continuation of seminar discussions and debates well beyond the time-constraints of the scheduled class. In this module there are also examples of the use of [blogs](#) as an alternative to a reflective report which is seen as an innovative route to individual reflection that forms part of student assessment. 16

C) ASSESSMENT

The role of assessment, both formative and summative, is crucial to the learning process whether online, blended or classroom based. VLEs are being used in a variety of ways to support a range of assessment processes, as identified in the case studies. Most VLEs provide a facility for e-submission of student coursework and assignments and, as can be seen in Table 1 (above), a growing number of law schools are utilising such facilities, with the most common use being for the submission of e-copies of written coursework for summative assessment. However, the case studies reveal more innovative uses such as online assignments that can be both formatively and summatively assessed either online or on paper. VLEs are also being used to provide online self testing tools as well as automated (and manual) formative feedback, for both group and peer assessment. 17

At Sunderland, they have been experimenting with [online submission](#) of assessments. This has had added benefits for the external examiner who can have easy access to all the submissions and has also facilitated online feedback to students. At Lancaster, online submission of copies of coursework assignments performs a similar function as well as enabling tutors to check for plagiarism. Students are also provided with formative feedback on seminar assignments that then form the basis of summatively assessed written submissions. In the context of the online negotiations, full transcripts of the inter-team 18

communications are used as an appendix to the written reports that are then summatively assessed. At the College of Law, students are provided with [onscreen interactive exercises](#) for formative assessment (known as Test & Feedback Exercises.) Teaching staff access a master version of this course, corresponding to the small groups they are teaching. In these smaller versions of the course, tutors can access the results of the students Test & Feedback exercises and therefore tailor classroom sessions to focus on areas of weakness which have been identified. This allows for a more directed form of teaching for specific tutor groups.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Will VLEs improve education? 'Potentially yes, but probably not' was the answer given by Pierre Dillenbourg in his TECFA study of VLEs and their effects on education.^x His report is an excellent summary of the potentialities of the learning environment, and if his conclusion sounds rather bleak, it is so because he is doubtful about the possibility of setting up 'the conditions that turn potential into actual effects'.^{xi} We think his conclusion might be overly pessimistic, but his central point – that development of such environments is inevitable, and that the key thing for education is to understand how they can be used to best advantage – is one we would agree upon. And we would argue that if understanding improves our use, we shall want more sophisticated, intuitive, and better organised environments, which should put pressure upon VLE providers to design such environments. Personalisation, for instance is a key issue for both staff and students. VLEs have the capacity to personalise learning by encouraging social interaction (particularly collaborative learning), giving access to information, and integrating technology with more conventional forms of learning. They don't yet achieve any of this to a significant extent, such that they could be regarded as being responsible for a step-change in learning method. But as Dillenbourg points out, they do clear a space for innovation to take place, and upon a technological platform that is generally regarded as stable and practical.

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Whether the challenge posed by this innovation-space is taken up, is of course another matter. Others have pointed out how problematic it is to deal with change and the culture shifts posed by technology. In a report to JISC on MLEs Jos Boys observed that

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'problems with implementation are most likely to be ascribed to a generalised need for a 'culture shift' because of the current lack of experience of ICT rather than to specific institutional issues about organisational/educational change or the integrative demands of scaling-up'.^{xii}

Five years on, Boys comments are still valid. We still interpret radical new spaces in terms of conventional learning, administration, assessment. As a result, the interpretation of the model of what a MLE (or a VLE) could be degenerates into relatively trivial portal concerns, and the key opportunity for change, organisationally and technically, is lost.

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Yet in spite of this, VLEs do have the capacity to play a part in the transformation of legal education. Using them can help staff understand how important it is to move from a model of institution-based learning methods (based around admin and delivery of information) to a student-centred model, where institutional information is present, but where the structure of the VLE is flexible, and based upon concepts such as personalisation of learning, task-authenticity, and the like. Contemporary VLEs can thus be part of a major shift from content-based to resource-based learning that also involves collaborative learning, and we can see examples of this in the detailed description on our VLE website. Increasingly staff and students are wanting to accommodate the methods of 'Web 2.0 – new forms of web communication such as blogs, vlogs, wikis, RSS, resource-sharing applications (Flickr, del.icio.us, etc) and simulations and game-based learning.^{xiii} Much research is being carried out to determine how VLEs can link effectively with digital libraries and other resources – for example the DiVLE programme.^{xiv} But it is probably the case that their full potential will not be realised until there are culture shifts within disciplines to accommodate the radical, dynamic nature of VLEs and other e-learning applications. Looking further into the future, it may be the case that VLEs will succeed when they entirely disappear – when they become as transparent and forgettable a task for a user as picking up a pen to write.

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6. REFERENCES

ⁱ <http://www.ukcle.ac.uk/index.html>

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ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.ukcle.ac.uk/vle>

^{iv} http://www.ucisa.ac.uk/groups/tlig/vle/vle_survey_2005.pdf

^v *Report of the BILETA enquiry into the provision of Information Technology in UK law schools (1991)*, at <http://www.bileta.ac.uk/B1/b1.html>

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