

# VLE from good to great: How can we ensure the quality of blended learning delivery?

## Why are we conducting this research?

Our partners, learners and service users are located across a wide geographical area and it is therefore vital that we can offer effective blended learning solutions and staff development in easily accessible, cost effective ways. As part of the re-design of our Virtual Learning Environment, we want to ensure that the courses we create and offer through a blended approach (which includes the use of the VLE) provide the same diversity and quality of learning activities as those delivered in a face to face setting. We therefore need:

- To evaluate tutors' interpretations of blended learning.
- To critically evaluate the suitability of our current Teaching and Learning Performance Indicators with regard to blended learning.
- To begin to explore what good quality blended learning looks like in practice.
- To make recommendations for supporting tutors to design blended learning programmes

## Data collection and analysis

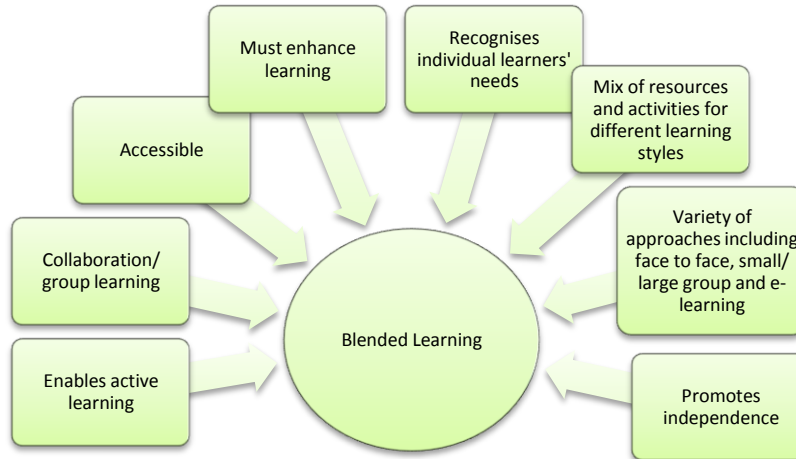
We put together a VLE development pilot group, focusing on blended learning. The group comprised of commissioned partners representing diverse learner groups e.g. LLDD, LLN and those seeking access to work and learning.

The pilot group contributed to research discussions, document analysis, peer observations and questionnaires.

The outcomes of these activities were analysed to identify partners' understanding of a blended learning approach and to determine the suitability of applying a face to face teaching and learning quality criteria to this flexible model.

Findings and recommendations were drawn from the data.

## Tutors' interpretations of blended learning



## Document analysis to critically evaluate current quality criteria

The group categorised the teaching and learning observation performance indicators into three groups:

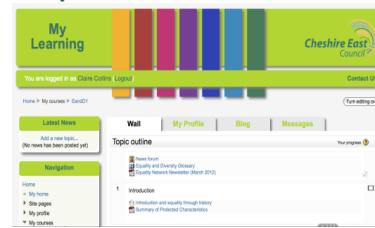
- Easy to demonstrate
- Challenging to demonstrate
- Almost impossible to demonstrate.



The group felt that, without carrying out an observation of an actual blended learning course, analysing the TLO performance indicators could only ever be a theoretical exercise. As a result, we decided to undertake peer observations of an Equality and Diversity course that had been posted onto our VLE as a working example.

We have adapted our approaches throughout this action research project to build on our on-going findings.

## Peer observations to test the suitability of the teaching and learning observation performance indicators



- Current quality criteria can be applied to blended learning but will need translation (e.g. 'How safe do learners feel?' – we need to consider online safety when using a VLE as part of the blend)
- Unlike a traditional 'face to face' observation, it is necessary to consider more than a single 'lesson' when quality-assuring a VLE element of blended learning. We need access to wider course information (e.g. how individual learners' needs have been catered for).
- The teaching and learning quality criteria should be more than a checklist; it needs to become a quality tool.

## Findings

- Our tutors already have a very good understanding of what is meant by blended learning
  - We do not, as we had initially expected, need to re-design the performance indicators from our current teaching and learning observation framework
  - The performance indicators need to be translated for a blended learning context
  - You cannot observe the e-learning aspect of a blended learning programme in isolation; all elements of the blend need to be included in the observation
- "Setting of individual learning goals and identification and support of individual learning needs – difficult to comment on as course is 'in isolation' to other elements." Diane Ireland, Literacy Tutor*
- Peer observations of the e-learning element of the blend will become a key driver of quality:
- "Doing the course and reflecting on it using the TLO...will make me a better blended tutor, and, as a consequence, the courses I put on the VLE better." Emma Greenwood, Literacy Tutor*

## Recommendations

- 1) Compose or adopt a definition of blended learning to be included in service documentation and quality tools.
- 2) Build on the existing teaching and learning performance indicators document by developing an interactive quality handbook for designing, delivering and reviewing blended learning courses.
- 3) Produce a short 'Quick Guide to Outstanding Blended Learning Courses' that can be used to support course development and peer review.
- 4) Establish peer review of blended learning courses by developing blended learning partnership links.
- 5) Cascade effective practice by nurturing tutors to become blended learning champions who can support and encourage others.

**Strengths of the project:** The collaborative 'Pilot Group' approach enabled us to draw upon a variety of experiences and applications of the current quality criteria and highlighted the importance of collaboration and peer support for our tutors and partners. The project has led us to identify aspects of blended learning design and delivery (e.g. the development of quality tools) which we might not otherwise have considered.

**Limitations of the project:** This was a small-scale project with a very limited time scale. The pilot group was sometimes difficult to convene and our partners have been very busy during this project. Technical developments of our VLE limited access for some of the participants doing the peer observations.