Report

Impact of StudyNet on student learning: preliminary outcomes of a LTDF project

An increasing number of higher education institutions are adopting virtual and managed learning environments (VLEs and MLEs), which offer flexible access to on-line learning materials all day and every day. There are multiple claims about e-learning enhancing learning and teaching (Britain and Liber, 1999; Conole, 2002; Allen, 2003; Littlejohn and Higginson, 2003) – such as supporting active learning, facilitative rather than didactic teaching and increased student motivation – but these are not pre-determined outcomes. Much depends on how lecturers use them and how students respond to that use.

This report describes work in progress from a research project which has evaluated the students' own experience of on-line learning at the University, and presents some preliminary results from the data analysis. Using StudyNet, academic staff have been able to offer students on-line access to study material since 2001. Activities available for students using StudyNet include: participating in discussion forums, using formative assessment materials, accessing journal articles, and viewing and downloading course materials for each of their modules.

The aims of the project, which was funded by a grant from the University's Learning and Teaching Development Fund, were to identify and measure:

- The impact on the student learning experience, if any, of the introduction of StudyNet.
- The student perspective on the ways academic staff use online learning to complement the traditional face-to-face delivery of material.
- Student views on the accessibility of StudyNet and the ongoing support provided for them as users.
- Emergent good practice from the students' perspective that can be shared beyond an immediate faculty or department.
- Additional features that students would like to see.
- The importance to new students of an existing e-learning environment in choosing a course and higher education institution.
- A greater understanding of how StudyNet is being used in different faculties.

An initial questionnaire was circulated to groups of first and final-year undergraduate students from faculties across the University. In total just under 1,000 students completed the questionnaires, which is approximately 10% of the student population in these categories. Eight focus groups from the target population of students were then used to follow-up the key issues in greater depth. The overwhelming majority of students said that they used StudyNet, with only 12 students claiming not to have used it at all.

Preliminary analysis of the data collected has provided information relevant to the first two of these aims. In response to a question asking how useful the features of StudyNet have been during their academic studies, 88% of students rated Teaching Materials as 'Extremely Useful' or 'Reasonably Useful'. High ratings of usefulness were also given to Module Information (82%), Accessing their University e-mail (80%) and Module News (76%).
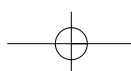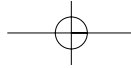
Of particular interest to the project team was the perceived impact of StudyNet on student learning. Fifty per cent of respondents agreed that: 'StudyNet has improved the way I learn,' and 54% agreed that: 'StudyNet has made me a more independent learner.'

In terms of providing an environment where students can learn asynchronously, 52% agreed that 'StudyNet has enabled me to manage my time more effectively,' with 40% reporting no change in their time management due to StudyNet.

Preliminary analysis of the focus-group transcripts reports that students accessed StudyNet primarily for lecture notes and other class materials, e-mail and to communicate with their lecturers. They also accessed past exam papers and the Voyager library system through the special links set up in their StudyNet modules. They prized the convenience of having their study materials in one place and their ability to access them from anywhere. Clearly there is much more work to be completed in analysing the data produced from both the questionnaires and the focus groups. The project group expect to report back in greater detail at forthcoming conferences and in journal articles, and anticipate much interesting material regarding the differences in use and perceived usefulness of StudyNet by students across the different faculties.

In due course the outcomes of the project will be made available across the University through the LTDF project final report and other dissemination channels such as the annual StudyNet conference. Staff across the University will then have the opportunity to consider the evidence of how StudyNet supports student learning and it is hoped colleagues will draw on this resource to help plan its future use.

References
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Amanda Jefferies
School of Computer Science
University Fellow in Learning and Teaching