

Choosing a virtual learning environment (VLE)

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Do we need a commercial VLE?

The answer to this question is not necessarily 'yes'. The features inherent in a commercial VLE can be generated in-house by good programmers – content management systems, automatic marking, tracking systems and communication systems. However not all institutions have programmers with these skills, and those that do may prefer to use them in other roles. It is perfectly reasonable for a college to purchase a commercial VLE even though it employs programmers with the skills to build one. There is also a contentious school of thought that believes commercial VLEs are irrelevant. Clearly the answer to the question remains open to debate.

Which VLE should we buy?

As you would expect, there is no single answer to this question but there are important considerations to be taken into account by any institution contemplating a purchase. They include ease of use, licence costs, implementation costs, support, staff development issues, financial stability of the vendor, and commitment to specifications from IMS [a global consortium developing standards for e-learning].

There is a drive within the education sector to link VLEs to management information systems and other management tools to form managed learning environments (MLE). An MLE is a collection of linked software systems that share data in a way that lets the institution manage its business effectively. What is currently under consideration is the process of sharing data between the different components of an MLE and this is where specifications and standards come in. If you anticipate building an MLE within your institution you should consider deploying a VLE that complies with IMS specifications.

Online learning at City College

Although we employ programmers capable of providing the features of a VLE, we have chosen to use a commercial product – Blackboard. This allows us to deploy our in-house expertise on other projects while a commercial company develops our VLE. Using Blackboard and other procedures, our teachers are encouraged to create, publish and manage online learning opportunities as an integral part of their curriculum delivery. Our VLE is now linked to our management information system. This represents a step towards establishing an MLE within the college. These initiatives are aimed at providing our students with new and engaging learning opportunities based on emerging technologies.