

E-Learning Support For LIS Education In UK

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we describe the findings of the initial phase of the eLLIS project funded by the HEA Subject Network Development fund that aims to study the current practices and support for e-learning available in the Library and Information Science departments in UK. The project is on-going, and in this paper we provide a snapshot of the current practices, highlighting the most interesting ones, of e-learning supports provided by the LIS departments and the libraries of the corresponding universities.

Keywords

e-learning, Library and Information Science education, Digital libraries, Library services

1. INTRODUCTION

The term e-learning has a variety of meanings, and is often used interchangeably in literature with learning technology, educational technology or machine-assisted learning. Simply speaking, e-learning is learning facilitated and supported through the use of information and communication technologies, that can take one of the three forms:

- supported learning,
- blended learning -- combination of traditional and e-learning practices, or
- learning that is entirely online.

e-learning can take place in one of the two modes:

1. Synchronous e-learning: It is a computer-assisted e-learning environment where the instructor and participants are involved in the course, class or lesson at the same time (synchronized). Web conferencing is an example of synchronous e-learning where participants can log on and interact with the instructor and/or other participants at multiple facilities or locations.

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2. Asynchronous e-learning: Computer-assisted training where the instructor and participants are involved in the course, class or lesson at different times (not synchronized, or asynchronous). Examples include web-based training (WBT), electronic bulletin boards, blogs, and email listservs. Asynchronous methods allow participants to access training materials anytime, even when other students and/or the instructor(s) are not present.

Today Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) are used in institutions to support e-learning. The term VLE is used to refer to the various kinds of online interactions that take place between learners and tutors. According to the JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) MLE (Managed Learning Environment) Steering Group VLE refers to the components in which learners and tutors participate in online interactions of various kinds, including online learning [1]. VLEs provide appropriate architectures and tools for an e-learning environment where teachers can easily produce, offer, assess and manage their course, and students can access materials and learn online at their convenience. Amongst others, Blackboard and WebCTs are the two dominating VLEs used in the universities in UK [2].

JISC recommends the term MLE that includes the whole range of information systems and processes of an institution, including its VLE, that contribute directly or indirectly to learning, and management of that learning [1]. The prospect of e-learning support has increased significantly with the development of digital and hybrid libraries, and a number of research projects have taken place in the past that aimed to facilitate access to electronic information resources by individual users in support of their learning [3]. Higher Education Funding Councils, and JISC have been instrumental in developing programmes to support e-learning, such as the Teaching and Learning Technologies Programme (TLTP) and the Fund for Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL) [4]. However, we still know very little about the various aspects of e-learning and consequently this has emerged as a new action line in the UK's national information initiatives

[5]. The JISC DivLE programme¹ aims to explore the technical, pedagogical and organisational issues of linking digital library systems and VLEs.

2. THE ELLIS PROJECT

eLLIS (an investigation of the e-Learning environments in the LIS departments in British universities) is a project, funded by the Higher Education Academy Subject Network Development Fund, that aims to study:

1. how the LIS (Library and Information Science) departments in the universities in UK support e-learning by providing access to information resources and services on the intranet, and manage courses through the intranet,
2. how the university libraries provide support for e-learning of LIS students by making information resources and services available specifically to the LIS courses, and
3. how the students perceive and use these intranet and library services.

According to the JISC recommendation [1] this research therefore aims to study the MLEs in the LIS departments in the country. The first phase of the study, conducted during the period of December 2005 to March 2006, looks into the

- e-learning facilities and supports provided by the departments as evident from their websites, and also as reported by the departments
- e-learning supports provided by the libraries of the corresponding universities as evident from their websites.

Based on the findings of the first phase of the eLLIS project, this paper provides a snapshot of the current practices followed by the LIS departments and the corresponding university libraries in providing support for e-learning. This is not a comparative report of the current practices, because most of these services are restricted to the students and staff of the LIS departments, and for obvious reasons, there is also a degree of confidentiality and restrictions of access for others. Nevertheless, we have mentioned the common practices, and have also highlighted some

interesting and those that look like the best practices.

3. METHODS

Data in relation to this study was gathered through the following stages:

- Identification, through the web, of the University departments that offer library and information science courses. World List of Departments and Schools of Information IS etc.² maintained by Prof. Tom Wilson has been the main source of information. Appendix 1 lists the LIS departments.
- Gathering of information from the LIS departments' websites in relation to the courses and the corresponding e-learning support provisions, as mentioned on the websites
- Gathering of information about the current provision of e-learning support services from the departments through a simple questionnaire survey among HODs/ LIS course leaders
- Gathering of information from the websites of the corresponding university libraries to identify the current level of information services vis-à-vis e-learning support.

4. FINDINGS

Preliminary analyses of information gathered so far have provided some interesting findings in relation to the current e-learning facilities and supports provided by the departments offering LIS courses, and the corresponding university libraries.

4.1 About the Courses and Departments

1. Fifteen UK departments now offer LIS courses. Name of the departments offering such courses differs: while some are Information Science/Studies/Management departments or schools, others are Computer and Information Sciences, Business Schools, and so on.
2. Title of the courses varies from Information and Library Management to Information and Library Studies, Information Services Management, Information Studies, Librarianship, Library and Information Studies, etc.
3. Most of the LIS courses are offered at the Post graduate level, though there are some undergraduate Hons. courses too.
4. LIS courses are offered in both fulltime and part-time modes in most universities.
5. Some departments also offer courses in the distance learning mode (e.g. University of Wales, University of Northumbria, Robert Gordon University, University of Strathclyde)

¹ JISC. Linking digital libraries with VLEs (DivLE) Programme.
http://www.jisc.ac.uk/index.cfm?name=programme_divle

² <http://informationr.net/wl/>

4.2 e-learning facilities and support provided by the department

1. All the concerned LIS departments have embraced ICT for providing e-learning support services in some form or the other.
2. Some departments use VLEs (like WebCT) used in their university (such as by the Department of Information Science at City university), while others use in-house intranet systems (such as by the department of Computer and Information Sciences at the university of Strathclyde) or specially built in-house systems (such as the Department of information and Communication at Manchester Metropolitan University) for managing online learning environments.
3. The degree of support for online learning varies from little (such as in case of the department (SLAIS) at UCL, to moderate such as at CIS at Strathclyde, to very high such as at the department of Information Science at City University).
4. All departments make use of the intranet services to provide students with information about the course modules, handouts, and other course related information including timetables, etc., though in some cases access to such services can be obtained through central services (such as through MUSE in the department of information Studies at the University of Sheffield).
5. The IS department at City University offers blended e-learning where one module is fully online, and over a period of two years it has developed very well.
6. City and Sheffield's IS departments provide very good e-learning support for every module through VLEs.
7. Some universities have a centrally managed e-learning service that is the first port of entry for students. For example, LIS students at Sheffield have to log in first to the centrally managed service called MUSE from which they can go to the department's intranet services that are specifically designed for the department's students.
8. Some departments have gone completely paperless in cases of submission of assignments and dissertation, and assessment and examination; IS at City university is an example.
9. Most departments require both an electronic and hard copy submission.
10. There are also departments where assessment is based only on hard copies of assignments, e.g. the departments at UCL, London Metropolitan University, etc.
11. Most of the departments encourage electronic communications and discussions

about the course and specific modules through the intranet or VLEs. Departments at Strathclyde and Manchester Metropolitan have developed in-house student discussion forum for discussion of course-related issues.

4.3 Library Support for e-learning

1. University libraries provide access to a variety of subscribed and freely available electronic information resources and services. In order to facilitate access they provide subject guides that are designed to familiarize users with the materials and resources, in both printed and online form, that the library offers in different subjects.
2. Some university libraries have organized web resources in a manner that suits the students' needs in relation to specific activities. For example, London Metropolitan University Library categorises information resources in the following headings: *Directories, Documents (like CILIP-Framework of qualifications), Gateways and Search Engines (like HERO, SOSIG), Information Skills (like LSE guides to using online resources), Journals/Newsletters (like Managing Information, Newsletter for Information Professionals), Organisations (like UKOLN, OCLC, SCONUL), Projects (like BUILDER Hybrid Library Project), Web Link (like Jobs in Information, ODLIS: Online dictionary of Library and Information Science).*
3. Although the common practice in university library sites is to list specific collections and services separately and therefore they have to be accessed and searched separately, some library sites provide facilities for cross-database search. For example, *MetaFind*: at London Metropolitan University library website is a search tool that allows users to search multiple databases and catalogues using a single interface.
4. *Information Skills Tutorial* is a unique feature offered by university libraries, and in some cases these modules have been contextualized to serve the students in a given discipline. For example, in Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) library there is an online tutorial that will assist students in searching, accessing and evaluating web based resources of information in the field of Information Management, Business Information and Librarianship.
5. University libraries often provide access to digitized collections of the most frequently used resources. For example, at LJMU the *Electronic Key Text* is a digitized collection of mostly requested journal articles and book extracts that can be accessed on or

off-campus and may be viewed by multiple users simultaneously. Academic staff members may recommend a key text to add to the *Electronic Key Text* collection.

6. Online information databases and services come with their own help files to support the users. However, in order to maximize electronic access, and thus e-learning, some university libraries provide additional help facilities. The Robert Gordon University library website provides *User Guides* to offer additional help to users especially for the more complex databases.
7. Some university library websites have organised electronic information resources that are relevant to a specific subject or discipline. The LIS resources webpage at the University of Wales at Aberystwyth is a good example that organises resources under specific categories that are suitable for the LIS students.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper shows that all the LIS departments and the corresponding university libraries provide some

supports for e-learning, though the nature of these support services varies significantly. Most LIS

departments in UK currently offer a blended learning environment i.e. a combination of traditional and e-learning facilities. The Information Science department at City University appears to be ahead

of others in adapting to an e-learning environment while some departments, such as SLAIS at UCL, still prefer the traditional face-to-face teaching and learning. It will be interesting to study how the LIS students perceive and use the current level of e-learning services available to them.

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APPENDIX: UK DEPARTMENTS OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCES

University/department	IS/IM/ILS Courses
University of Brighton, School of Computing, Mathematical and Information Sciences	BA (Hons.) Information Management, Library & Information Studies; MA Information Studies, Information Management, Health Informatics
Liverpool John Moores University, Faculty of Business and Law, School of Business Information	BA (Hons) Business Management & Information MA Information and Library Management
City University, School of Informatics, Department of Information Science	MSc Information Science, Information Management, Geographic Information Management, Pharmaceutical Information Management, Health Informatics, Pharmaceutical Information Management MA/MSc Information Management in the Cultural Sector, Electronic Publishing, Library and Information Studies
London Metropolitan University, Dept. of Applied Social Sciences, Information Management School	MSc. Information & Knowledge Management, Information Services Management, Information Management (MRes)

University College London, School of Library, Archive and Information Studies	BSc Information Management MA Archives & Records Management, Library & Information Studies, Information Science, Electronic Communication & Publishing MRes in Library, Archive, and Information Studies
Loughborough University, Faculty of Science, Department of Information Science	UG (3 and 4 year) Information Management and Computing, Information Management and Business Studies, Information Science PG (MA/MSc) courses in Information and Library Management, Information and Knowledge Management, Electronic Publishing
Manchester Metropolitan University, Department of Information and Communication	BSc (Hons) in Information Architecture, Web Content management, Information and Library Management, Information Management, Information and Communications MA Library and Information Management; MSc Information Management
University of Northumbria at Newcastle	BSc (Hons) Business Information Management/ Information Technology/ Information Studies MA/MSc Information and Library Management (also in Distance Learning)
Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen Business School	MSc Electronic Information Management, Information Analysis, Knowledge Management, Information & Library Studies (courses are offered in FT/PT and in distance learning mode)
University of Sheffield, Department of Information Studies	BSc in Information Management BA in Business Management/Information Management, Accounting and Financial Management/Information Management BSc/MChem in Chemistry with Informatics, MA in Librarianship, Multilingual Information Management MSc Information Management, Information Systems, Chemoinformatics, Health Informatics
University of Strathclyde, Department of Computer and Information Sciences	MSc Information Management, Information and Library Studies (also PT from 2006), Strategic Information Systems, Digital Libraries
University of Wales, Aberystwyth, Department of Information Studies	BSc (Econ) Information and Library Studies Single Hons (also in Distance Learning Mode) and Joint Hons, Information Management Single Hons, Information Management Major Studies and Minor Studies, Historical and Archival Studies Single Hons, Information Systems Management Single Hons MSc (Econ) (on-campus & Distance learning mode): Information & Library Studies, Archive Administration, Records Management MSc (Econ) only on-campus: Information Systems, Information Management MSc (Econ) only distance learning: Health Information Management, Management of Libraries & Information Services
University of the West of England, Faculty of Computing, Engineering and Mathematical Sciences	MSc/PG diploma/PG certificate in Information and Library Management
Leeds Metropolitan University Faculty of Information and Engineering Systems, School of Information Management	BSc (Hons) (FT and PT) Information Management, Knowledge Management MSc (FT and PT) Information Management, Information Studies, Social Informatics
Thames Valley University, Faculty of Professional Studies, Department of Computing	MSc Information Management (Business) MSc Information Management (Librarianship)