THE **MANCHESTER LEARNING ENVIRONMENT** PROJECT

Highlights: The MLE Project incorporating Blackboard Learn v9.1

Semester 2 BB9 Pilots

Having successfully delivered 13 Blackboard 9 (BB9) pilot courses in Semester 1, the MLE Project decided to open up BB9 in Semester 2 to any members of staff interested in moving across to the new environment. The Project Team received a very healthy response to its call for Semester 2 pilots. Over 140 courses from across all four Faculties have gone live in BB9 this semester, as well as nine programme/multi-programme spaces. It is encouraging that such a significant number of academic staff were so eager to move to the new Blackboard environment. This response is due, in part, to the positive feedback received from the Semester 1 pilots. Staff have remarked that the new tools and features in BB9 are genuine improvements and make up for any differences between Vista 8 and BB9 environments. And not only have staff been impressed with BB9, the new system has also been well received by students. Students have commented that BB9 is a real improvement on Vista 8; it provides a cleaner and more elegant interface; it is easy to navigate; and it allows more immediate and direct access to their course leaders. As one Nursing student commented, 'It's easier to use than Facebook.'

BB9 Transition Plans

Phase 3 of the MLE Project commenced at the end of January and will undertake the roll out of BB9 to all staff and students. Academic staff now have access to BB9 where they can begin to try out the new features and build their courses for next session. The Project Team and Faculty-based eLearning Teams will work closely with Schools and Faculties to ease the transition from Blackboard Vista 8 to BB9; but, many staff have reported that the move has been a simple and straightforward process. Nonetheless, every effort will be made to provide adequate levels of support and training during the transition phase. In most cases, Schools have been allocated a set time period where they will receive dedicated support from their respective eLearning Team. The eLearning Teams can provide a range of different support tools and opportunities:

• School-focussed clinics;

• one-to-one support;

• online guides and training resources;

• helpdesk support and advice.

There will also be opportunities for colleagues to work together and share their experiences and skills with developing and delivering online course material.

The transition process will begin in early spring and be carried out over the summer. For further details on the transition plans for specific Schools/Faculties, please consult with your local eLearning Manager. The intention is to have all courses for the 2011-12 Academic Year delivered in BB9, so that the Blackboard Vista 8 system can be decommissioned in July 2012.

Blackboard *Mobile Learn*

Uptake of Blackboard *Mobile Learn* has been growing steadily since the application was launched in October. There are already more than 750 registered users with numbers expected to grow rapidly as more courses become available in BB9. Students, in particular, have responded very favourably to the Blackboard *Mobile Learn* app. They appreciate the ability to have immediate and on-the-go access to their course information, as well as to continue academic discussions outside of the classroom via discussion boards and wikis.

Course activation

As part of Phase 3, a new Control Interface has been launched that allows academic staff to activate their own course spaces in the BB9 environment. With just one click, teaching staff can activate their BB9 course and begin the building process at their own convenience. This approach gives staff greater ownership over their online courses and simplifies the activation process. A brief how-to guide has been created that explains the course activation process and is available from the University's *Knowledge Base* (https://servicedesk.manchester.ac.uk/portal/ss/).
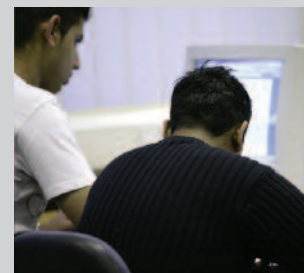
Playground spaces

An additional feature of the Control Interface is the 'Playground' tab, which is available to all staff. It allows each member of staff to activate one playground area for experimenting with the tools available in BB9 and exploring different ways of structuring a course or presenting content. The Playground area also provides an opportunity for both academic and administrative staff to familiarise themselves with the new environment in preparation for the University-wide transition to BB9. A short guide on how to activate the Playground can also be found in the *Knowledge Base*.

BB9 School presentations

Since October, the Project Team has co-ordinated a series of BB9 road shows for Schools. The intention of these engagements is to develop deep product knowledge, prepare staff for the broader migration and build on the BB9 momentum established by the Semester 1 pilots. So far, ten School road shows have taken place with four more scheduled in March. The road shows provide staff with an overview of BB9, as well as Blackboard *Mobile Learn*, and an opportunity to explore in more detail any issues or concerns particular to their discipline or School. If you are interested in having a BB9 presentation for your School, please contact Kim Comer, Strategic Projects Officer in TLSO (kim.comer@manchester.ac.uk).

Training

For Semester 2, the MLE Project Team has offered two new BB9 training sessions: 'Kick Start – Assessing your Learners' and 'Kick Start – Collaboration and Communication'. These half-day sessions are focussed on specific tools and features found in BB9. The training dates for March are as follows:

Kick Start – Assessing your Learners
Tuesday 22nd March 2011, 1.30-4.30pm
Kilburn Building, Training Room 2

Kick Start – Collaboration and Communication
Thursday 24th March 2011, 9.30am-12.30pm
Kilburn Building, Training Room 2

These sessions are open to anyone who is interested in learning more about the BB9 tools that support assessment and student collaboration and communication. Previous experience of using BB9 is helpful but not a pre-requisite for these training sessions. To register for these training sessions, please contact Kim Comer, Strategic Projects Officer in TLSO (kim.comer@manchester.ac.uk). Places are available on a first-come, first-served basis.

Want to know more?

Blackboard provide a wide range of short tutorial videos and reference documents that are available from their website: http://ondemand.blackboard.com

Please also contact Kim Comer, Strategic Projects Officer, in the Teaching and Learning Support Office: kim.comer@manchester.ac.uk or x 58103