THE **MANCHESTER LEARNING ENVIRONMENT** PROJECT

Highlights: The MLE Project incorporating Blackboard Learn v9.1

The University is initiating an upgrade of its online teaching and learning system from the current *Blackboard Vista* v8 to *Blackboard Learn* v9.1. The upgrade process has already begun and is scheduled to be rolled-out across the Institution over the course of the next academic year. The existing *Blackboard Vista* platform will remain available throughout the coming session but will be decommissioned once *Blackboard 9* is in fully place. The new system offers significantly enhanced features and a variety of advantages to both staff and students alike.

Introducing the *Manchester Learning Environment* Project (MLE Project)

The MLE offers the convenience of a single access point for staff and students to academic material, digital services and University-related information. The MLE will also enable users to access teaching and learning resources via a range of handheld devices and smart phones.

The MLE Project will incorporate a significant stream of work to capture all user requirements, so that they experience a highly personalised learning environment. The Project will bring together a wide range of colleagues from the University who are all in some way working to improve the student experience and student communication, and will help to provide a structure for this process.

The key objectives of the Project are to:

- Provide a more user-friendly and pedagogically engaging learning environment
- Introduce more sophisticated tools to enhance the student experience

- Invest further in the infrastructure and capabilities to facilitate growth in distance-learning and professional development programmes

As part of this project the University is upgrading its online teaching and learning system from *Blackboard Vista* v8 to *Blackboard Learn* v9.1. *Blackboard 9* will be at the heart of the Manchester Learning Environment (MLE) but the MLE will offer much more besides. To create a seamless experience for users a number of teaching, learning and assessment tools in use across the institution will be integrated with *Blackboard 9*. Integrating *Blackboard 9* with other campus services will provide a more holistic learning environment significantly enhancing the experience of on-campus students, and supporting strategic growth in distance-learning. This integrated and streamlined approach is designed to enable the University to fulfil some of its key strategic teaching and learning priorities.

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Implementing Strategic Change: The MLE Project Structure

The Executive Sponsor of the MLE Project is Colin Stirling and Sarah Morgan is the Project Manager. The Project's individual work streams are being led by senior academics and will be consulting with staff and students to define the MLE requirements.

Phase 1

January – September 2010: In the first phase of the implementation, 15 'pilot' projects from across all four Faculties will be deployed in *Blackboard 9* by the start of the new semester. The process to select those courses is now underway and the staff responsible for developing and delivering the pilot courses will shortly receive training, and will be fully supported by the Project Implementation Team and Blackboard's professional services staff to ensure their success.
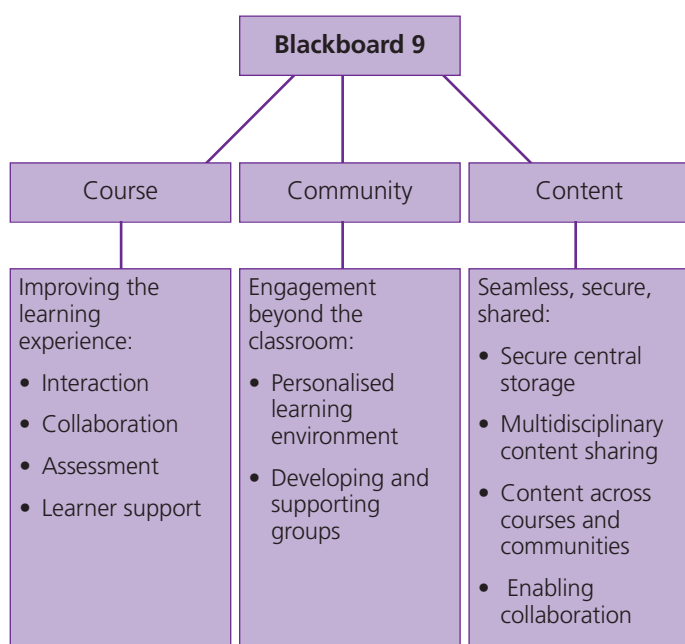
Phase 2

September 2010 – January 2011: A wider group of 25 'exemplar' projects will be identified for the second phase of development, which will go live to students at the start of the second semester (January 2011). The Project Implementation Team, in close consultation with Faculties and Schools, will begin the process of identifying suitable exemplar projects in due course and will provide the necessary training and support.

Phase 3

The new Manchester Learning Environment will go live to all staff during Semester 2 of the 2010/2011 academic year (the exact date will be determined in due course) and the migration plan for all courses that need to be transitioned from Blackboard Vista to the MLE *(Blackboard 9)* will developed in consultation with all users later this calendar year.

What's new in Blackboard 9?

Blackboard 9 offers significantly enhanced features and a variety of advantages to both staff and students alike. There are three main components to the system:

Blackboard 9		
Course	**Community**	**Content**
Improving the learning experience: • Interaction • Collaboration • Assessment • Learner support	Engagement beyond the classroom: • Personalised learning environment • Developing and supporting groups	Seamless, secure, shared: • Secure central storage • Multidisciplinary content sharing • Content across courses and communities • Enabling collaboration

The key focus of the design on the new product is engaging students and innovation in formative and summative assessment (more information on the product features can be found at www.blackboard.com). *Blackboard 9* will provide the University with a highly personalised gateway providing personalised information and services to both staff and students. This includes a wide of range new functionality to enhance teaching, learning and assessment, facilitate collaborative working and share content. The new features include:

• Anonymous grading

• Calculated formulae

• Intuitive online structure and drag and drop file upload

• Enhanced communication tools

• Monitoring student activity and progress

• Peer review for academic staff and students

• Powerful Grade Centre to manage student assessment activities

• Web 2.0 technologies including wikis and 'mash-ups'

Blackboard 9 provides vastly improved educator and administrator efficiency in managing student and course activities, and fostering student engagement throughout the life of their programme.

The new version of Blackboard will enable us to synchronise user, course, programme and enrolment data from Campus Solutions better and the improved interfaces in Blackboard 9 will enable us to achieve a full verification of all Blackboard data nightly, together with regular updates of information throughout the day. This should provide a more reliable and accurate synchronisation between the systems and provide an improved user experience.

The *Blackboard 9* platform uses a light weight technical architecture load balanced across multiple servers. This is anticipated to provide a more responsive and predictable user experience than the current Vista system. The system is designed to be less dependent on client PC configurations so should provide an overall more reliable service.

Blackboard 9 Training

A comprehensive training and support programme is being developed and all staff will have access to opportunities to enhance their skills and knowledge to take advantage of the new environment. *Blackboard Vista* will continue to be supported until July 2012 so there is ample time for everyone to receive the training and support that they need.

The staff involved in pilots will receive training from Blackboard during June and July. These courses are for academic, administrative and eLearning support staff involved in developing and delivering the pilot courses. To ensure that we have a robust infrastructure in place and the means to cascade training internally, a structured model that meets the needs of both academic and administrative staff will be developed. The support model will also develop mechanisms for supporting students transitioning to *Blackboard 9*.

As well as product training, staff involved in the pilots will have the opportunity to attend a course called 'Exemplary Course Design' to develop online learning teaching, learning and assessment activities that will be trialled from September.

We will also be facilitating a Knowledge Exchange programme to provide a forum for those that staff that have received training to give short presentations and talks to colleagues on the new learning management system and its features. This will assist in developing the University's collective knowledge about *Blackboard 9* as the product is quite different to *Blackboard Vista*.

Want to know more?

Blackboard have produced a vast range of resources about the move to *Blackboard 9*, including a large number of short videos on around 90 features in the new product: http://ondemand.blackboard.com

Please also contact Kim Comer, Project Officer for the MLE Project, in the Teaching and Learning Support Office: kim.comer@manchester.ac.uk or x 58103 or Faculty eLearning teams at: elearning@manchester.ac.uk or x 65544.

Information about *Blackboard 9* has also started to be added to the University's Knowledge Base: http://www.itservices.manchester.ac.uk/contacts/ (click on University of Manchester then eLearning and Blackboard).