

# Transforming Higher Education through VLE

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Innovation and changeDigital Transformation Transforming Higher Education through VLE  
Greg Crichton, Head of Information Services at Oxford Brookes University, discusses the University's IT strategy, and how its agile Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) continues to help it achieve its vision of 'transforming university life through the use of digital technologies'.

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At Oxford Brookes University, our IT Strategy 2020 is well underway. The key outcome of this long-term strategy is to deliver and support a rich set of information technology services that are customer focused, and contribute to our vision of transforming university life through the use of digital technologies and services.

Providing information technology services that meet the needs of our students is a key objective for our IT Services. Their needs are diverse and they are generally very early adopters of new technologies, which create opportunities for the University's IT landscape.

In 2013, as part of this strategy, we started our partnership with CoSector – University of London, when we decided it was time to implement a new Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

## Drive for change

The first project I inherited when I moved to a new role in the University was to implement a new VLE. The drive for this change came from student and staff, who told us that the existing platform wasn't flexible enough. This resonated with our IT colleagues as, from a technical viewpoint, its flat hierarchy didn't allow us to create categories that could represent programmes.

In order to align with the IT strategy, we wanted to offer a much more versatile approach, and at Oxford Brookes we strive for quality when selecting new digital services, specifically favouring ones that are future proof and can adapt to changing needs.

Part of our strategy continues to be focused on the use of technology to enhance both the transactional elements of staff and student experiences and transformational learning, which underpins a commitment to providing an excellent online learning experience. In order to achieve this, it is vital that the university offers an attractive, digital learning experience that meets the needs and expectations of both our staff and students.

Oxford Brookes decided to do some peer analysis and requirements gathering, to evaluate the services that other institutions were using. Once this process had been completed, Moodle, a widely used VLE, was seen as the right solution for us. CoSector was chosen as the service partner due to its knowledge of the sector, being an academic institution itself.

Today, the University works with the CoSector Digital Learning team, which includes the hosting and technical support of the Moodle VLE platform, including Mahara (e-portfolio) integration.

### **An ongoing partnership**

The original tender for the VLE implementation was very technical, and CoSector were initially required to only host the Moodle platform. However, since the partnership began, our relationship has evolved significantly and we've expanded the use of Moodle into other areas outside of online learning; including the integration of student management records and mobile apps. As a result, the Moodle platform has changed from a standard VLE, into one of the University's most used digital services, and it has become thoroughly embedded into the University's digital environment. And maintaining a 24/7 service is critical to teaching and learning at the University.

CoSector provides ongoing technical support and advice for this, and both organisations have since embraced a service credit model, which provides a better understanding of how much capacity each side has, and allows for easier communication. This gives a level of independence to the University: for example, if a product requires changes within the Moodle platform, the University can quickly inform their Digital Learning team, and, as a result of opting into the tailored Service Level Agreement service, we can request the installation of third-party plugins as well as plugins developed onsite. This activity is based on an element of trust between both parties; speeding up the process and enabling a better workflow between the two organisations.

Oxford Brookes has a vision to be at the forefront of digital transformation in the HE sector, and good working partnerships are fundamental to this vision succeeding.

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Digital transformation is high on the agenda for educational institutes this year. University of Exeter had initiated [digital transformation programmes](#) with the aim to become one of the top 10 universities in the UK. Similarly, University of Huddersfield had partnered with Agilisys to deliver [improved collaborative environment](#).

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