



# An introduction to learning platforms



This is one of a series of occasional publications for those who provide support to schools, colleges and education organisations. The series aims to equip LEAs and other intermediaries with current information and resources, so that they may support schools and other education providers in working towards sustainable, embedded use of ICT.

# Introduction and definitions

As an introduction to learning platforms, this publication aims to make clear the potential value of electronic learning environments and the issues associated with them. It provides guidance, supported by practical examples, on how to ensure that a learning platform has both clarity of purpose and the confidence and commitment of its users.

Learning platforms are often procured through commercial channels, either by a school, local education authority (LEA) or regional broadband consortium (RBC). It is also possible for institutions to develop their own systems, based on the types of functionality needed (see circle in right-hand column). There are several possible options, and each system will differ in the facilities it provides and the manner of delivery.

A VLE is a software tool which brings together resources for curriculum mapping, delivery, assessment, tutor support, communication and tracking.

The guidance provided here concentrates on the definition of VLEs above, and an assumption of a standard set of functions being provided. Learning platforms have been developing over the last five years and it is only recently that they have reached maturity and achieved consistency of functionality and specification. Becta is ensuring that initiatives in these areas, along with the need to consider developing pedagogical approaches, are fully integrated with the development of learning platforms.

## What is a learning platform?

'Learning platform' is a generic term to describe a broad range of ICT systems which are used to deliver and support learning. A learning platform usually combines several functions, such as organising, mapping and delivering curriculum activities and the facility for learners and teachers to have a dialogue about the activity, all via ICT. So, the term learning platform can be applied to a virtual learning environment (VLE) or to the components of a managed learning environment (MLE).

Their flexibility means that learning platforms are a significant asset in providing personalised learning both at school and beyond. A learning platform can extend and enhance the processes used in a school, college or any education organisation for planning the curriculum, delivering subject material, managing assessment and communicating with learners. If this position is to be achieved, then full understanding of the potential of learning platforms, the processes for purchasing a system and the requirements that implementation will place upon individual users and the whole organisation, is required.

While learning platforms have developed as systems, so too have the ways in which they are applied. It is important to help schools to recognise that the place and purpose of learning platforms in school activity is still evolving. The most important question for any organisation to consider is, 'Why do we want a learning platform?' The clearer the school is about this before purchasing a learning platform, developing its own, or indeed choosing to delay or decide against having one, the more effective the decision will be.

Learning platforms are most effective when they are at the heart of a learning culture in which the needs of the learner are clearly understood, and where they form the core from which all other activities and developments evolve. Just having a system is not the answer. As with all significant educational developments, the key to success is to win the confidence, goodwill and commitment of learners, teachers, leaders and other users.

## What is a managed learning environment?

A managed learning environment (MLE) refers to the whole range of information systems and processes that support learning and the management of learning within an institution. It includes VLEs or other learning platforms, administrative and other support systems.

# Purchasing and implementing a learning platform – a checklist

There are a number of key points to consider before purchasing and/or implementing a learning platform. They apply whether it is for an individual school or partnership of local schools, or if it is a system purchased and hosted through a central intermediary. It is important to encourage organisations to reflect on these key points, and this checklist is a starting point.

## Know why you want a learning platform

- Consider which parts of the real school environment are to be extended into the 'virtual' world.
- Discuss and decide how the school or schools will use the functions that a learning platform provides.
- Reflect upon how use of these functions may change and develop over time to further enhance how the real school operates.

## Be confident and clear in your vision

- Consult all potential users over what they want the learning platform to do for them.
- As an opportunity to reflect and to provide further ideas, compare your vision with that of other schools, but don't feel obliged to change yours!
- Consult suppliers and experts to ensure that your vision is achievable and that you minimise the risks.

## Procure carefully

- Review the potential cost savings to schools of purchasing as part of a consortium, whether as a group of schools or through an LEA or RBC.
- Follow the appropriate financial regulations, especially where providers are competing to supply learning platforms.
- Be clear about the ongoing financial costs, including management and support overheads, and training.

## Formulate clear questions to ask suppliers

- What are the licensing requirements? What is included in the purchase price and what is not? What about installation and technical support?
- Does the supplier offer a hosting service? Is the learning platform hosted on their servers or will you have to purchase your own? If so, how will it be managed and how often will you have to upgrade servers?
- Don't be afraid to ask anything that is important to you, and make sure that you ask the same questions of all potential suppliers.

## Know that the learning platform will relate to the other systems you want it to

- Find out how open the environment is. Does it allow you to share information with other resources or systems you already have? Does it link to your management information systems (MIS)?
- Check that all the functions (communication systems, student tracking and assessment, and reporting systems) are easy to use and well designed to meet the needs of the school(s).

## Make the learning platform belong to your organisation

- Consider and decide who will 'own' the learning platform: it is important to think who will lead the development and implementation within the school, as well as how all staff will develop ownership of their activities and spaces on the learning platform.
- Think about how the learning platform you are interested in can be tailored to the look and feel of your school, and what structures (navigation and access rights, for instance) you want within it.
- Does the learning environment contain learning materials? If so, find out how often the content is upgraded.
- Consider whether you want to develop your own materials and, if so, how. How easy will it be to incorporate these?
- Also look at learning materials available from other producers.

## Plan your implementation

- Consider what changes a learning platform will have upon the whole school, who will use it and whether school members are prepared for this change.
- Have a clear understanding of what the training implications are. Will enough staff have the necessary skills, confidence and understanding to use the learning platform effectively?
- Consider who will make the best use of the learning platform, and how you can then involve them in the early stages of the implementation.
- Prepare and support teaching staff so that they are able to make effective use of this resource.
- Develop a clear strategy for training and for sharing developing practice, to support staff and to celebrate their successes
- Think through how learners will respond to the different demands placed on them as a result of working with a learning platform and to the need for working differently from their normal practice.

# Benefits of learning platforms

There are many benefits to using a learning platform, whether on its own or in combination with other systems as part of a managed learning environment. However, ownership and installation of the system alone does not automatically provide the benefits, so organisations may need guidance in how best to apply the system. A learning platform has a range of electronic and online tools that – applied with vision and after careful consideration – can achieve these benefits.

The model below shows some of the key benefits that can be achieved by certain user groups. The information aims to help organisations both to understand the potential value of learning platforms and also to decide how to structure their implementation.

A good learning platform has benefits for all who participate in the learning and teaching processes



# Procurement advice

There is no single set of tools and probably no learning platform that will suit every institution. A number of local education authorities, regional broadband consortia and educational internet service providers are already developing or supplying many of the functions of a learning platform as part of their services. It is important for schools intending to establish their own learning platform to be aware of these developments.

The local authority should provide advice on the tendering process and choice of suppliers. A formal tendering process will help to ensure best value and increase the likelihood of meeting individual specifications and requirements. Where a number of schools are involved, the tendering process should allow for partnerships between schools to define the functions and services they need for inter-institution collaboration.

If they are to achieve economies of scale and avoid potential problems in developing and retaining the necessary technical expertise to support school-hosted systems, individual schools are unlikely to want to purchase, install, configure and maintain their own hardware and software. One solution is for schools to buy a web-based service hosted outside the school, usually by a commercial provider. This will offer some economies of scale for single schools while avoiding the need to establish a procurement relationship with other purchasers and users of the system. A remotely hosted service such as this should also allow learners access to the system from anywhere with internet connectivity

without compromising the security of a school's own network or the wider educational network that it is part of.

There are two alternative approaches to procurement: single supplier and 'best of breed'.

- The single supplier is accountable for the performance of the system and how different parts of the system interact with each other. However, future developments may be difficult to achieve without increasing the contract costs, and changing the supplier may be difficult.
- Best-of-breed specifications focus on specific requirements as they emerge, and solutions are based on existing systems or the latest best-of-breed applications from a number of suppliers that meet the requirements. Specific functions can be developed as required without purchasing a costly system of which only a part is used. The disadvantage is that it is difficult to work out who is at fault when parts of the combined systems fail or when separate applications do not interoperate as intended.

Whether schools choose to extend the use of available systems, purchase new systems or buy hosted services from single or multiple suppliers, it is important to consider the total cost of establishing and supporting the solution chosen and developing its use. To gain the most from any learning platform, it is vital to involve staff as early as possible in specifying the learning and teaching practices to be supported by the system and then in working to transform those practices.

## A collaborative approach to development



C2k is the regional project providing a managed service for ICT for all schools in Northern Ireland. As part of that provision C2k will provide, in partnership with Hewlett-Packard, one of the world's most sophisticated web-based learning environments called Learning Northern Ireland (LearningNI).

LearningNI will drive e-learning development in the province's schools over the next five years and beyond. LearningNI will offer the education community a flexible, feature-rich platform that will support a wide range of pedagogical models, which allow teachers and pupils to experiment with and blend a diverse range of learning styles.

<http://www.c2kni.org.uk/>

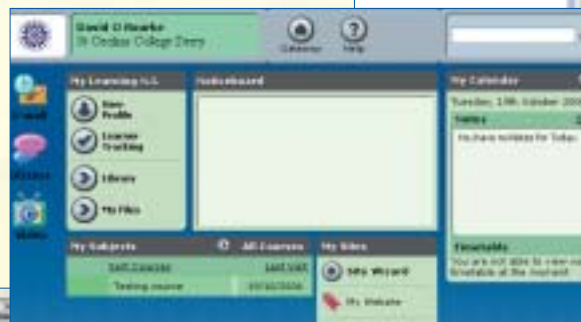
# What does a learning platform look like?



Tutor interfaces have personalised working spaces, with daily management tools plus access to communication tools and learning resources. Some tutor interfaces also provide opportunities for personalising 'learning offers' and structuring the resources and activities associated with them.

Student interfaces provide personalised home pages, learning management tools and access to study units, collaborative tools and learning materials.

A key feature of a learning platform is that it has different user interfaces, and thus offers each user a personalised access point to their work and learning environment.





# Points to consider before implementing a learning platform

Implementing a learning platform is not a simple task. Many organisations will have to address a number of issues before they feel confident enough to purchase and implement a system.

## Financial issues

Financial issues clearly have to be prioritised. While there are many approaches (collaborative purchasing, for example) that can reduce the initial financial outlay, recognising the size of the initial investment and considering how this may be perceived is important. Organisations need to consider the total cost of ownership when installing learning platforms – their intended use, organisational savings and costs and what the potential is for a return on their investment. Sustainability of any ongoing costs should also be acknowledged at the outset, and again organisations should be advised to consider these in terms of ongoing activities and savings across the whole institution.

## Technical issues

For many, the key issues of implementing a learning platform will be the technical ones, which can seem daunting, so it is important to guide organisations to access technical advice services available locally. School leaders may be concerned about their ability to negotiate and discuss details of maintenance and support contracts with providers of learning platforms.

## Training and change management

Another key issue will be considering how technically competent each individual will need to be in order to make effective use of the learning platform. This should be considered within the broader requirements of training and change management. The extent of the training needs that a learning platform will impose on an organisation and all users of the system should not be underestimated. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that it is not only technical training that will be required, but also time and opportunities to reflect on and develop learning and teaching and organisational practices. An open attitude and a willingness to try something new will be vital if an organisation is to implement a learning platform successfully – as is the recognition that the implementation will take time.

## Learning and teaching

Ultimately a learning platform is about enhancing and enabling learning and teaching practices. The ways in which schools can achieve this will vary. While as yet no one has established a best-practice approach on which organisations can immediately draw, there are some clear patterns of usage and successful practice beginning to emerge. The potential to enhance learning and teaching is already here for institutions that have an open and innovative approach and are willing to apply the facilities of a learning platform.

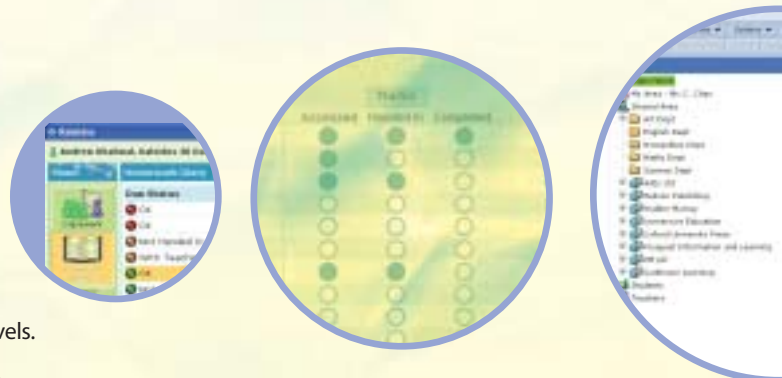
# Future developments

Launched early in 2005, Becta's learning platform registration and interoperability scheme will enable users to review learning platforms using the same vocabulary. The scheme is working towards getting all learning platforms to adhere to accepted international standards and to provide interoperability at agreed levels.

A key objective of the scheme is to ensure that, after purchasing a learning platform, users are not 'locked in' to any specific content brand, and that their system has the tools they need in order to use and re-use content from a wide variety of sources.

Through channels such as Curriculum Online and the Becta website, Becta will provide advice and guidance to help schools with the process of choosing a learning platform.

<http://www.becta.org.uk/learningplatforms>



An open attitude and a willingness to try something new will be vital if an organisation is to implement a learning platform successfully.

# Further sources of information

## Definitions

- What is a learning platform?  
<http://www.ictadvice.org.uk/?rid=3838>
- What is a managed learning environment?  
<http://www.ictadvice.org.uk/?rid=74>
- What is a virtual learning environment?  
<http://www.ictadvice.org.uk/?rid=77>

## Evidence and research papers

- Virtual learning environments  
<http://www.becta.org.uk/research/research.cfm?id=545>

## Practice and case studies

- Virtual learning environments (FERL website)  
<http://ferl.becta.org.uk/vle>
- Virtual learning environments (ICT Test Bed newsletter)  
[http://www.becta.org.uk/page\\_documents/projects/testbed/oct04.pdf](http://www.becta.org.uk/page_documents/projects/testbed/oct04.pdf) and then select page 6

## Procurement and technical information

- The procurement cycle  
<http://www.becta.org.uk/schools/procurement> and then select the procurement tab
- Virtual and managed learning environments  
<http://www.becta.org.uk/technicalpapers>

## LEA advice publications

Becta publishes a series of advice and guidance documents on ICT in education. These are written with the aim of enabling LEAs and support providers to give appropriate advice to schools on the application of ICT.

Titles currently available:

- **Data protection and security: a summary for LEAs and schools**
- **Moving on: the role of ICT in pupils' transition**

Titles to be published during the spring and summer terms 2005 include:

- **Extending the boundaries of learning**
- **Workforce remodelling and ICT**
- **Enabling institutional development and sustainability with ICT**
- **Learning platforms – an in-depth guide**

Becta publications

<http://www.becta.org.uk/publications/>

Images reproduced courtesy of:

- Granada Learning (Learnwise)
- (RM) (Kaleidos)
- Dept of Education, Northern Ireland (LearningNI)

© Copyright Becta 2005

You may reproduce this material free of charge in any format or medium without specific permission, provided you are not reproducing it for profit, or for material or financial gain.

You must reproduce the material accurately and not use it in a misleading context. If you are republishing the material or issuing it to others, you must acknowledge its source, copyright status and date of publication.

While great care has been taken to ensure that the information in this publication is accurate at the time of publication, we accept no responsibility for any errors or omissions. Where a specific product is referred to in this publication, no recommendation or endorsement of that product by Becta is intended, nor should it be inferred.



Becta is the Government's key partner in the strategic development and delivery of its information and communications technology (ICT) and e-learning strategy for the schools and the learning and skills sectors.

Millburn Hill Road  
Science Park  
Coventry CV4 7JJ

Tel: 024 7641 6994  
Fax: 024 7641 1418

Email: [becta@becta.org.uk](mailto:becta@becta.org.uk)  
URL: <http://www.becta.org.uk>