2013 evaluation of Blended Learning in UWS

Evaluation methods
In 2013, UWS issued all new undergraduate full-time students with iPads. In September 2013 the University emailed all 1st year students, inviting them to complete a survey about:

- use of iPads for study
- types of online activity in their courses
- online communication methods
- use of vUWS.

The survey included two open-ended questions: on how technology helps study, and what UWS could do to improve this. Some of the survey questions were also part of a larger 2010 survey, so we can report on changes over the 3 years since then.

In 2013 there were 740 responses, representing 6% of the 1st year student population. In the 2010 survey there were 2074 responses from 1st year UWS students.

For further insight into what the survey responses mean in terms of students’ day-to-day use of technology for learning, we ran focus groups and interviews with 40 students across all campuses and disciplines.

We have also been interviewing a cross-section of teaching staff, for feedback on their experiences of the introduction of blended and mobile learning, and how UWS is supporting them in using learning technologies.

Summary of results
Students with iPads are using them extensively and find them valuable for learning. But teacher use is more variable. Since 2010 there has been a noticeable increase in the more common types of online learning activity. While students are still using email as a primary communication with staff, they are increasingly using social networking sites instead of email amongst themselves for communication about study activities. vUWS tools and resources are being used regularly; with some such as the discussion and sharing tools, being used less than others. The staff interviewed to date have noted some limitations in vUWS tools, have confirmed the need for continuing staff development for blended learning and have described ways in which curriculum development initiatives influence their use of learning technology.

The rest of this document has further details on:

- Use of iPads for study
- Online learning activities
- Online communication methods
- Use of vUWS tools
- Teaching staff experiences.
Use of iPads for study

Most students who have iPads are using them in all of their study units. However, teacher use is variable. Some teachers are running activities in which students use iPads daily or weekly, while others are not using them at all. There is also some variation between Schools in the patterns of iPad use by teachers.

Students who received iPads believe the use of mobile technologies in their study will help their future careers, and help with learning. Many also believe the iPad helps with collaborative work. Those who didn’t receive iPads seem to be a little less enthusiastic about their value.
Sample student comments

Use the iPad mainly for everything I used to use paper for. Notes sync automatically to my phone and laptop so I have everything I need wherever I am.

It's more mobile and if I'm taking the train I can just open the iPad and read my notes. It's very efficient as you can transfer files from the laptop to the iPad and also edit work.

It's like you get your stuff in an instant and we don't have to wait for computer access, like going to the library just for something, where we can just use the iPads to actually access what we need.

I found the iPad much more useful than I thought I would. When I first found out we were getting them, I thought they would be just like toys, and hadn't realized how much information would be available from the uni everyday on the iPad, like vUWS and email, which is essentially what I use it for, and for checking personal email as well. But I use it a lot more than I thought I would.

Online learning activities
The survey asked students how often they took part in 15 different online learning activities as a required part of their course of study. The graphs below show the frequency distributions for the activities, ordered with the more common activities to the right. Over 30% of the respondents are accessing Library resources, podcasts/vodcasts created by teachers, and social networking/sharing websites at least several times a week.

There has been a significant increase in the frequency of some online activities since 2010, in particular the more common ones such as viewing teacher vodcasts.
Among iPad recipients, iPads are by far the most commonly used device for all activities except accessing library resources and creating web pages. Those who didn’t get iPads are more often using laptops and desktops, although some have their own iPads or other tablets.
The text comments confirm that students are increasingly expecting to integrate technology use into their study in a variety of ways.

**Sample student comments**

*We don’t have any lectures, we do basically everything on our iPad, so that helps a lot. Only tutorials, and that’s it.*

*I use it [the iPad] for everything. I take notes on it; I read from it; I download the user guides or the documents online, and the reading resources. Everything I do, I do it on the iPad. Listening to online tutorials, doing online activities; all done through the iPad.*

*I find that when I’m doing an essay I’ll have my notes with me [on my iPad] that I’ve written in the lectures, and I’ll have reading materials and I’ll usually go back to the lecture slides as well, and then type on my PC. It’s really useful when you don’t have to go and change screens when you’re typing.*

*Make it more interactive i guess, use technology to make classes more interesting as everyone is mainly surrounded by technology and that’s what people prefer nowadays anyway.*

*It would be great if the teachers took it on a bit more. However in saying that, they do put lecture slides and recording on blackboard so that is helpful.*

**Communication methods**

There has been little change in the methods students use for online communications with staff since 2010 – except for a small increase in the use of Skype and social networking. Students are mostly communicating with staff by email, often several times a day. However in some cases they are using social networking sites. Overall students are still getting less online communication with staff than their 2010 preferences.

However, for communicating with other students, email is used much less often than with staff, and much less than in 2010. Instead students use social networking sites like Facebook or messaging and chat tools. Social networking sites are being used even more frequently than 2010 students said they would prefer.
iPads are the main device students most often used for all methods of communication, with staff and with each other.

Sample student comment

[...] that’s the main communication. Everyone uses it. So group work? Okay, we’re gonna add each other. They no longer use emails, they use now Facebook, [...] so it’s the easiest way to get hold of them.
Use of vUWS tools

Students with iPads are using them for everything except online assessment activities; which are typically done less often and for which students will typically use a laptop or desktop computer.

Devices used to access vUWS
Sample student comment

Everything is on vUWS and the way that Blackboard navigates through vUWS is really easy. I really like using it. It’s made organizing a lot more enjoyable, and I’m not a very organized person. It’s really easy to use.

Teaching staff experiences

Interviews with staff are still being conducted. So far we have input from 10 staff across 5 campuses representing 5 Schools and including academic and professional staff; employed as sessional staff, on fixed term contracts and continuing appointments. Staff members are being asked to comment on three levels of learning technology provision:

- **Institution-level support** for blended and mobile learning: including not only IT services and infrastructure, but also staff development opportunities and curriculum development support.
  
  There have been comments on some of the limitations of the vUWS tools and on the continuing need for staff development.

- **Academic-led technology use**: how they have been able to use technology in their own teaching practice, pros and cons, helps and hindrances.
  
  Curriculum review within disciplines seems to be an important influence on academic-led technology use.

- **Student-led technology use**: observations on how the students are using technology in their studies, on-campus or off-campus.
  
  Teachers are noticing how students increasingly use their iPads and other mobile devices in class to capture visual material or take notes.