Can the use of Virtual Learning Environments promote students’ preparedness to practice?

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**Background**

Widening participation and accessible learning may presently be seen to heavily influence the design and delivery of today’s health and social care programmes[1], at both pre- and post-registration levels. In line with government drivers[2] institutions are required to demonstrate a clear commitment to ensuring inclusive learning which seeks to promote student diversity and fair access to opportunities for learning and training whilst concurrently maintaining fitness for purpose and practice[3].

**Context**

Whilst Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) have gained currency across the educational landscape, few studies have sought to capture radiography students’ self-reported perceptions of the role of such tools to promote their learning and subsequent preparedness for professional practice. This is the first study undertaken within this institution to investigate the impact of a VLE on pre-registration students’ learning.

**Aim**

To investigate the use of WebCT-based teaching sessions during a final year undergraduate Skeletal Image Interpretation module, to promote student learning and preparedness for clinical practice.

**Method**

Data was sourced from final year undergraduate radiography students (n=51) who were invited to participate in this study. Data were gathered, in June 2008, using questionnaires which were distributed using a census sampling method. A response rate of 71% (n=36) was achieved.

**Results**

**FIGURE 1**

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Figure 1: ‘Please identify the main positive impact that you feel the WebCT-based lab sessions have had on your learning’

**FIGURE 2**

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Figure 2: ‘WebCT learning has improved my performance in clinical areas’

**Discussion**

Respondents identified that the main benefit of the VLE was the instant feedback (56%), access to the learning material for private study ‘off-campus’ (25%) and the constant availability of material for private study (17%). Only 2% of respondents perceived that the use of the VLE had enhanced their module mark. 89% of respondents agreed that the use of WebCT had improved their performance in clinical areas. The greatest challenge identified was technical, with 75% of respondents reporting computer problems e.g. images failing to load properly.

**Conclusions**

Students self-reported that the use of the VLE greatly enhanced their knowledge and skills and that this had benefited their level of clinical practice. The use of WebCT had enabled them to adopt a flexible approach to their learning, with high proportions of the respondents making use of the VLE in their own private study time, suggesting good engagement with this form of study.

**Ethics**

Ethical approval was granted, by the School of Physics Ethics Committee, University of Exeter prior to the commencement of data collection.

**References**