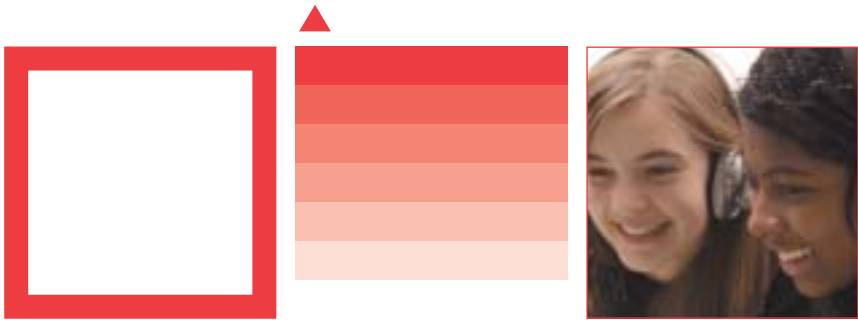




# Learning platforms

## Secondary



Making IT personal



The term learning platform describes a broad range of ICT systems used to deliver and support learning. The government's target is that all pupils will be able to access a personalised online workspace, capable of supporting an e-portfolio, by 2007-08.



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This booklet explains the Department for Education and Skills' policy and funding arrangements for learning platforms. These arrangements have been designed to help your school invest successfully in a learning platform that suits the needs of pupils and staff.

The term 'learning platform' refers to a combination of IT services that support teaching and learning. Through a learning platform, hardware, software and supporting services are brought together to enable more effective ways of working within and outside the classroom.

This booklet should be read in conjunction with wider guidance about learning services, provided by Becta. This is available on the Becta website at: [www.becta.org.uk/publications](http://www.becta.org.uk/publications), under the 'School Leaders' section.



Learning platforms can be put together in different ways, using software and services from a number of different suppliers. Although it will be important to choose the right complementary technologies, you need to understand first how you might use the resources and services a basic learning platform can deliver.

At the heart of any learning platform is the concept of an online personal learning space for the pupil. This space should offer teachers and pupils access to stored work, e-learning resources, communication and collaboration with peers, and the facility to track progress.

With password controlled access to a learning platform:

- the pupil can work from any computer with an internet connection (preferably broadband) in school, from home or elsewhere
- teachers can check individual pupil progress much more easily, and offer advice and resources tailored to the particular needs of an individual student
- parents or guardians can readily look at schoolwork from a home computer or community access point and become more closely involved in the pupil's development.

Where the learning platform is integrated with a school's management information system (MIS) these benefits deepen for everyone, offering school managers and teachers, in particular, significant and time-saving administrative efficiencies.

You may have come across many of these ideas described as a Virtual Learning Environment or a Managed Learning Environment (VLE or MLE). VLEs and MLEs may also be referred to as learning platforms.

## *Personalisation*

The concept of personalisation is central to government plans to transform learning and teaching through the use of information and communication technologies (ICT). The aim is to raise pupils' achievement in school at all ability levels, as well as reducing the burden on teachers. Personalisation is a theme that runs through the October 2005 White Paper.

*4.6 Now we must go much further and create an education system that focuses on the needs of the individual child. This ... means every pupil being able to extend their learning and develop their interests and aptitudes through extra support and tuition beyond the school day.*

The White Paper acknowledges the central role of ICT, and specifically a personal learning space, in this vision.

*4.42 By 2008 all schools will be able to offer access to e-learning resources both in and out of school. We will encourage all schools, by this date, to make available a personal online space for every pupil.*

Learning platforms in schools can support and underpin a number of other government initiatives in education. For example, school workforce reform such as managing the government's 10 per cent Planning, Preparation and Assessment (PPA) statutory requirement,

will be significantly easier using an appropriate and embedded learning platform.

### *The core service*

You'll need to seek detailed advice about the best technology and service arrangements for a learning platform in your school. The starting point should be your Local Authority (LA) and/or Regional Broadband Consortium (RBC). To locate your RBC, see <http://broadband.ngfl.gov.uk/>. Further information about learning platforms is in the guidance available from Becta at [www.becta.org.uk/publications](http://www.becta.org.uk/publications), in the 'School Leaders' section.

Learning platforms will vary from school to school but the basic functional specification, currently being developed by Becta, might include:

- communication and collaboration tools e.g. web-based email to enable peer/mentor dialogue
- safe and secure individual online working space for the school workforce and pupils enabling anytime, anywhere learning
- tools to enable teachers to manage and tailor digital content to user needs and learning styles, and to track user progress.

## **The benefits**

### *Parental involvement*

With a learning platform it is easy for schools to offer parents or guardians detailed information about their child's work and progress, or indeed to communicate information about school events and activities.

A well-designed service, integrated with the school's MIS, can also provide information about attendance, achievement and behaviour. The school can also use email or text messaging to alert parents quickly and efficiently about potential issues, or simply as a news channel to keep parents informed.

### *Anytime, anywhere learning*

With their materials online, teachers and pupils can manage their time more efficiently. Pupils can access their work when they want to, for example in the evenings, during periods of prolonged absence or during holiday periods. Easy access to additional materials can build confidence in young learners struggling with particular subjects, or stretch more able children by encouraging them to research topics more widely.

### *Personalised learning*

Teachers can tailor learning to the individual needs of their pupils, assigning different tasks to different pupils according to abilities and

preferred learning styles. Tracking tools can help teachers identify problems early, and more easily reinforce particular learning objectives. Quick and easy data analysis for pupils across a class or in subject areas can also offer useful comparative insights that may inform lesson plans. The administrative efficiencies that a learning platform can create should help teachers assess, review and meet the individual needs of their pupils.

### ***Better use of teaching time***

Learning platforms can help teachers share resources and lesson plans more easily, encouraging collaboration and development of ideas.

They can reduce administrative burdens, for instance making it easier to track missing homework or coursework, and follow up quickly.

Integrating the learning platform with the school MIS can also streamline behaviour management in a school, dramatically reducing the workload of Heads of Year in particular. Because all data and documentation is immediately available to all relevant staff incidents and issues can be addressed more efficiently and are less open to dispute.

### ***Supply teacher effectiveness***

Lesson plans can be stored centrally in a learning platform system. When a teacher is absent supply or cover teachers can continue the

planned programme of teaching, minimising disruption to the class and providing coherence and continuity in pupils' learning. Experience has shown that this can lift teacher morale and pupil attendance rates.

### ***Collaboration***

Email and chat tools make it easy for pupils to communicate within a school or even across schools, working through problems together and exchanging ideas and useful sources of information.

### ***Cross-institutional working and a more flexible curriculum***

A Learning platform accessible from the internet, makes it much easier for pupils to follow courses across different schools, colleges and workplaces, enriching curriculum possibilities. They are also being used successfully by secondary schools and their feeder primaries to help smooth the transition from Year 6 to Year 7.

### ***Supporting an e-portfolio***

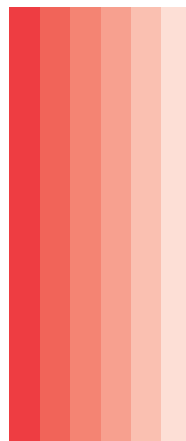
Learning platforms should support an e-portfolio, including examples of the pupils' work. The e-portfolio will offer a picture of the pupil's ability as he or she moves up from year to year, from primary to secondary school and beyond.

### *Pupil inclusion*

Out of school access to an online personalised learning space means that if a pupil is absent over a prolonged period, he or she can easily stay in touch with lessons, teachers and classmates. It can also be a more productive learning environment for children who do not thrive in traditional classroom settings.

### *Preparing learners for working life*

Learning platforms are based on the collaborative tools increasingly featured in all kinds of workplaces. Daily use of these tools in school will ensure that pupils are better equipped to cope and thrive as they move into the world of work.





### *How funding is allocated*

The Standards Fund allocation system is being replaced. From 2006-2007 onwards the capital funding allocation for schools, called devolved formula capital, will include ICT funding for learning platforms provision.

Schools also have provision to support learning platforms included within their *revenue funding*.

Schools' *devolved formula capital* and *revenue funding* are both allocated to local authorities, who must pass these funds directly to schools.

From 2006-2007, Local Authorities will have some retained capital funding, through their Connectivity allocation, which is intended to fund core learning platform provision to all schools, either through the Local Authority or RBC. This funding is designed to encourage schools to introduce learning platform services into their working practices.

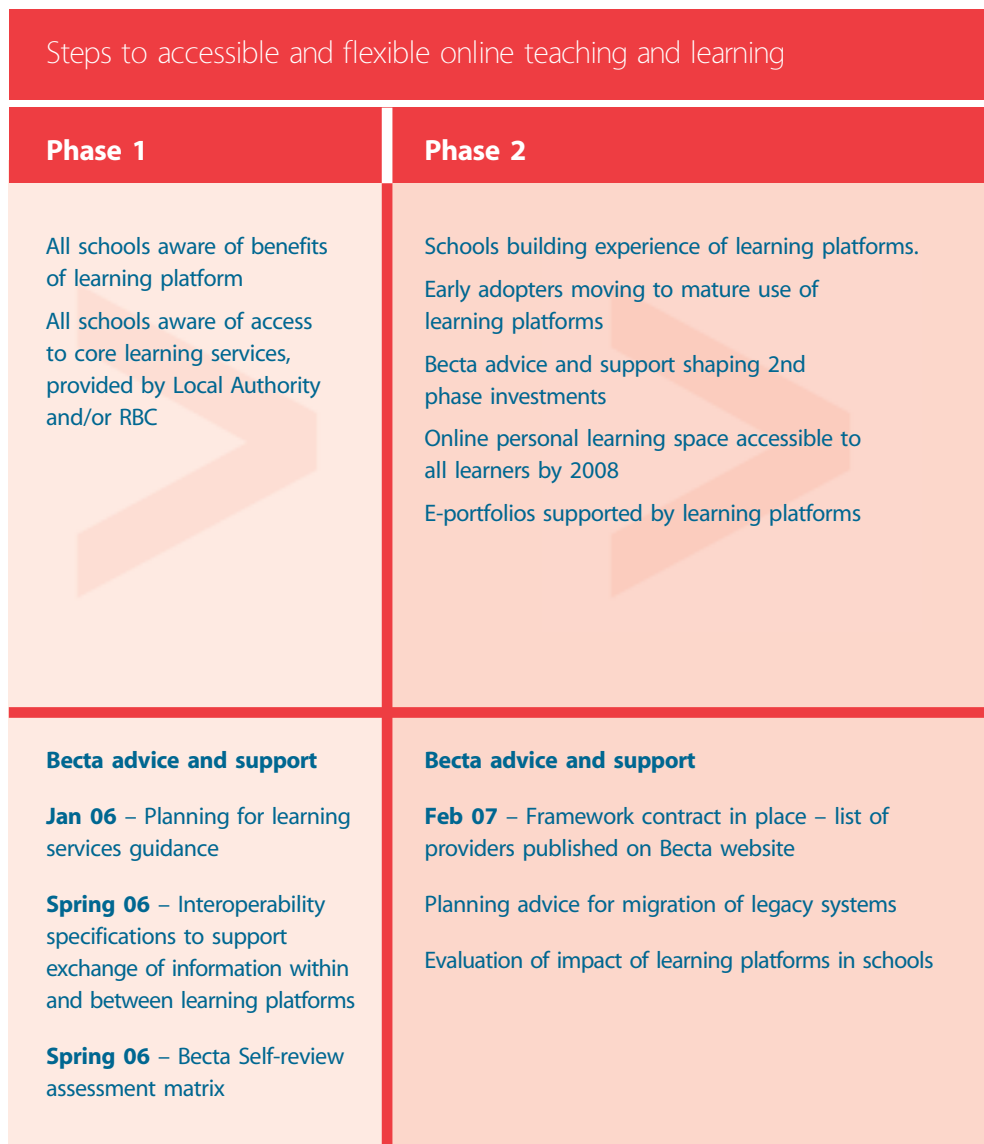
### ***Achieving economies of scale***

Funding allocations to Local Authorities and schools are based on achieving economies of scale i.e. aggregation of costs. For instance, a regional broadband consortium (RBC), Local Authority or cluster of schools can save money when purchasing learning platforms, because they buy services and support in bulk.

### ***Phased approach to implementation***

We are taking a phased view of the investment in and management of the development of learning platforms in schools, see *Figure 1*. We believe that as schools become more and more familiar with this technology, they will be better placed to work with specialist advisers from RBCs, Local Authorities and Becta to achieve an optimum deployment of learning platform tools and services.

Figure 1



## Phase 3

Anytime, anywhere access to school resources for learners and the school workforce, at the pace, place and time to suit

Earlier investments creating an informed customer base

VFM and economies of scale are realised by schools who invest in learning platforms supplied by LAs and/or RBCs

Industry responding to customer needs

Specifications and framework contract are used to best advantage

Improved resource planning, supporting school workforce reforms

More efficient management and pupil data handling

Opportunities for Assessment for Learning realised

### **Becta advice and support**

Migration from legacy systems

Refresh of framework contract

Continuing planning advice

Becta – British Educational Communications and Technology Agency

### *Phase 1 – first steps with a learning platform*

We want to encourage more schools to take up affordable learning platform provision, preferably supplied by their Local Authority or RBC, minimising the risk of schools purchasing inappropriate products or overly expensive technical support.

To enable this, we're allocating additional funds to Local Authorities either to themselves provide, or buy from their RBC, a core learning platform service for their schools. Schools are encouraged to take advantage of this position where practicable.

Schools can consider supplementing the core provision, by purchasing additional tools that best meet their individual needs. In the short term, our objective is for schools to gain experience and build their learning platforms knowledge base. This should help them embed learning platforms across all areas of school life – in teaching, in learning and in school management. This experience should help schools work through the cultural changes required to get most benefit from their learning platform investment.

### *Phase 2 – Building on knowledge gained*

In the medium term, our objective is for schools to be in a position to assess properly their learning platform functionality needs.

Becta is preparing functionality specifications for learning services, due out in spring 2006. These will help suppliers to design products that can exchange information and allow interoperability between the wide range of e-learning materials and software required to meet the learning needs of a diverse range of students. This approach is designed to give schools, Local Authorities and RBCs much greater product choice and flexibility.

A procurement framework of suppliers is due in early 2007. The framework is designed to ensure that learning platform products meet the necessary interoperability standards and offer best value cost options.

By this stage schools should be well grounded in their use of learning platforms, and better informed about the optimum ways to deliver their curriculum activities through ICT.

### ***Phase 3 – a long term view***

It is our objective that by this stage, use of a learning platform is embedded into every school's working practice. This requires robust knowledge about the application of the technology and change management skills.

Because these changes go to the heart of teaching practice, the implementation of a learning platform must be tailored to the needs of each individual school.



**Q** *What is a learning platform?*

**A** It is an umbrella term that describes a broad range of ICT systems used to deliver and support learning. As a minimum, we expect it to combine communication and collaboration tools, secure individual online working space, tools to enable teachers to manage and tailor content to user needs, pupil progress tracking and anytime/anywhere access. You might hear the term learning platform being applied to a virtual learning environment (VLE) or to the components of a managed learning environment (MLE).

**Q** *Why shouldn't my school simply wait for the learning platform framework to be in place before deciding which learning platform to buy?*

**A** Your school will make better use of the framework if it already has some experience of how a learning platform works, and understands what the various functions can do.

If your school already has a learning platform in place, it probably makes sense to wait until the framework arrives rather than change providers in the interim.

However, if you have yet to invest in a learning platform, working with your Local Authority and/or RBC to access a core service will help build the required experience and enable your school to make better judgements about learning platform provision in the longer term.

**Q** *By gearing up Local Authorities and RBCs in April 2006, aren't you pre-empting the framework agreement that is not due out until early 2007?*

**A** Becta is already putting together learning platform functional specifications for release in spring 2006. These will allow LAs and RBCs to ensure that their systems are interoperable and conformant before the framework contract is in place in early 2007. In the short term, we want schools to benefit from the chance to gain experience by accessing affordable learning

platform provision that is as low-risk as possible. This should help ensure that schools are better-informed customers when the framework is in place.

**Q** *My school has a learning platform at the moment. It costs us a lot and we don't really use it that much. What should we do now?*

**A** There may be specific issues that can be resolved with your provider, for instance, training. Or you might need to speak with your Local Authority and/or RBC to see if there is a cheaper and better option for your school available at an LA or RBC level.

Early in 2006, Becta will be producing a self-evaluation tool for schools. This will help schools assess where they are in terms of readiness for a learning platform. Check the Becta site at [www.becta.org.uk/schools](http://www.becta.org.uk/schools) for news of this facility.

**Q** *Why not just give the additional money that you're planning to channel through Local Authorities to schools instead?*

- A** The sum involved is significant only when measured against the economies of scale and aggregated costs that can be wrought by bulk purchasing from the strategic local or regional perspective. The DfES' policy is about ensuring best value for money by aggregating purchasing at the most appropriate level.

For more examples of DfES Frequently Asked Questions, go to [www.teachernet.gov.uk/learningplatforms](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/learningplatforms)





## **Coopers Technology College, Bromley**

Coopers Technology College (an 11 to 18 comprehensive school) is on a large site with distributed administration. Though it already had an intranet and was developing a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), the school wanted to go further. It has set out to create a seamless ICT system connecting staff, students and parents with the “learning process”, accessible at all times from outside as well as within school.

### *Implementation*

A large number of documents are now available within the new environment, from lesson plans, through teaching resources to

agendas and minutes for governors meetings. Many of these are coming from the old intranet, but all need to be re-organised to fit the new system structure. Each school teaching faculty has a set of standard headings under which to file resources and information, as well as templates to ensure a consistent “look and feel”.

Staff also have protocols to name and post documents in a consistent way. Each faculty has an e-learning coordinator to help staff find information and support.

Through this consistency, school managers can now readily find the information they require.

Faculties have recently been asked to set an action plan for ICT, based on a set of common expectations. These processes and discussions are being mediated through the learning platform.

In retrospect, the school would have managed implementation differently. E-Learning director Sue Wood suggests that any school adopting a learning platform should talk to others that have been through the process, develop its own vision and then set up a test site for eight to twelve weeks, before planning the detailed implementation.

## *Learning and teaching*

Students have access to their own *My Learning* area where they can find dedicated subject pages for every Key Stage. Departments are increasingly using the learning platform services to set independent study assignments.

Customising assignments and resources for specific groups of pupils is much easier in an electronic format. Pupils get immediate feedback from electronically marked tests, and staff can readily add comments to open-ended assignments, so pupils get better direction for their learning. The less well-organised students can no longer lose work; return levels are higher as the system is constantly there to remind them to hand it in.

The system's electronic discussion boards have been used in 'A' Level history, with teachers using the questions and answers as the basis for set coursework assignments. Live, online discussions have also helped maths teachers; pupils can now post their questions electronically and the teacher can give specific help. Email is being introduced, so teachers can now set collaborative assignments to selected groups of students.

## *Beyond school*

Pupil reports were made available online to parents in July 2005 and all staff can access the learning platform from home. In future developments, parents will get more information about their

children through access to components of the college management information system, such as registration, timetables and attainment details.

## *Benefits*

### *To school leaders*

Encourages team working and corporate ethos among staff

Improves monitoring of planning and the progress of faculty teams.

### *To teachers*

Centralises communications and administration for a large school campus

Produces greater consistency for filing of learning resources – search facilities enable fast, accurate location and effective sharing of learning resources.

### *To pupils*

Enables more engaging and exciting formats for learning

Creates greater potential for immediate feedback from assignments, encouraging students to review their learning

Provides new facilities for collaboration and communication.

### *To parents*

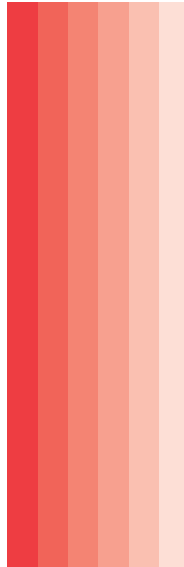
Gives direct access to their children's reports and general college information.

Creates a greater sense of involvement in the life of the college.

### *To governors*

Improves dissemination and archiving of minutes and policies

Offers a greater involvement in the college community.



## Shireland Language College

Mark Grundy, headteacher at Shireland Language College, wanted to create a completely customisable online system that integrates the data and resources relevant to every service involved in learning and the management of the school.

On login, all users see a view customised to their individual needs and permissions along with common items, such as the calendar and college notices, and specific access to data and resources appropriate to their role in the college.

Staff have easy access to everything they need to teach a lesson, run a department and be accountable to parents and governors, whether via a PC or a classroom whiteboard.

Through the learning platform, pupils follow learning units which may be worksheets, assignments, project plans or complete assessments that the computer can mark directly. These learning units are available from any computer with internet access. With the launch of Shireland Plus, home assignments to pupils include short modules that they must complete otherwise they find their online privileges removed. Those pupils who satisfactorily complete additional units earn points towards vouchers, CDs, iPods or other valuable items, as part of the college's learning rewards system.

## *Implementation*

Seven primary schools in the ICT Test Bed cluster, and all 17 of the Local Authority's secondary schools have signed service level agreements that enable them to use Shireland's learning platform content and request the development of new resources. Each of the participating schools can also customise the system for their own purposes, including uploading lesson planning and controlling information available to staff on their desktops.

Shireland has committed an enormous resource to the project with two full time learning platform managers and a content development team of ten people. Teachers give the content team storyboards for activities. The unit is then developed using Flash, PowerPoint, video or assessment modules. The teachers then review these before delivering the unit to pupils. Funding has come from a wide variety of sources including heavy investment from the college's own funds.

## *Learning and teaching*

The school is ensuring that learning content only gets used for clearly defined purposes; units are categorised and tagged to ensure that they display to the intended audience and not used repeatedly at different times.

As well as the Shireland Plus homework units, the school is developing content for its Alternative Curriculum Centre, where pupils in danger of exclusion receive specialist support. Clear

labelling and the learning platform's management system ensure pupils only see targeted content relevant to the learning context.

Units are based on standard templates. However, personalising to a student with visual problems, dependent on severity, can be as simple as attaching a new high contrast template to the same content.

### *Beyond school*

Through the link from the Parent Portal, parents can see the responses of their children to the Learning Units along with correct responses to questions (where available). Parents can start to work with children to support their learning. For their own use, they can also access multimedia Skills for Life content.

#### *Benefits*

##### *To school leaders*

Creates a single, holistic management system

Changes the ethos of the school by creating an integrated learning community.

##### *To teachers*

Brings a massive potential reduction in workload through electronic marking, shared planning and remote learning delivery.

### *To teaching assistants*

Integrates non-teaching staff so they can access the same information (as required) without practical or institutional barriers.

### *To pupils*

Inspires, motivates and brings enjoyment through engaging with learning via modern communication technologies.

### *To parents*

Enables active engagement with their children's education as they can see their child's data anywhere they can get an internet connection.

### *To governors*

Permits access to relevant data analysis and all key documents (including agendas, minutes, policies and briefings) from a single place.



You can get more detailed advice about learning platform functionality and specifications from the Becta web site.

[http://www.becta.org.uk/corporate/publications/publications\\_detail.cfm?currentbrand=all&pubid=250&cart=](http://www.becta.org.uk/corporate/publications/publications_detail.cfm?currentbrand=all&pubid=250&cart=)

<http://www.ictadvice.org.uk/index.php?section=te&rid=1994&wn=1>

<http://www.becta.org.uk/> Search under “learning platforms for schools” to get a downloadable version of this document.

And <http://www.becta.org.uk/leas>

For more general, and technical, information on managed learning environments and virtual learning environments, search under those headings at:

<http://www.becta.org.uk/> for a range of references.

Talk to your Local Authority or RBC about funding and basic service provision. Go to: <http://broadband.ngfl.gov.uk>, for contact details of your appropriate RBC.



A booklet for the secondary school workforce providing clear policy and funding guidance for learning platforms.

Copies of this publication can be obtained from:

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