

# BLE MANIFESTO 2021

## INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has put our institutions under intense pressure: teaching staff were required to put their courses online almost overnight, new online assignment submission methods had to be rapidly devised and platforms to deliver live remote learning stretched to (and sometimes beyond) their limits. There has been little or no time for evaluation, implementation and training, and the likelihood is that many of the new approaches engendered by the emergency response will need to be incorporated into standard practice once the virus threat is beyond us.

The Bloomsbury Learning Exchange (BLE) exists to help our partners, and our unique offering is needed now more than ever. We have explored the priorities and challenges of our partners, observed synergies between them and also discovered ways to support them individually. The BLE has identified four key areas of service to assist our partners in these changing times:

- Extending online and blended learning
- Strategy and support for sustaining new practice
- Engaging professional services and support staff
- Online platforms and technologies

## EXTENDING ONLINE AND BLENDED LEARNING

By harnessing the collective expertise across the consortium, the BLE is able to help its partners support their academic staff and students with online, blended and traditional (in-person) learning, teaching and assessment.

To achieve this, we develop and maintain high-profile resources and activities requested, shaped and used by our partners and run events around teaching and learning.

## COURSES

### GET INTERACTIVE: PRACTICAL TEACHING WITH TECHNOLOGY

The BLE's award-winning MOOC<sup>1</sup>, hosted on Coursera, shows academics how to enhance their online courses with interactivity to engage learners. Globally, the MOOC has reached over 26,000 enrolments, while locally it has been of benefit to individual academics across the BLE partnership and cohorts of University of London and RVC PGCE students. In addition, the course offers professional development opportunities to our partners: we recruit mentors from amongst the Bloomsbury MOOC graduates. The BLE will continue to work with Staff and Academic Development departments to ensure take-up of the MOOC. The BLE MOOC team has been invited to contribute a chapter in

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<sup>1</sup> Received the 2018 Roger Mills Prize for Innovation in Learning and Teaching; short-listed for the 2017 ALT Learning Technology Team of the Year.

a forthcoming book about continuing professional learning and development for teachers, which is currently in development.

“This MOOC has helped me to understand the simple yet effective ways to design and improve online courses. The course follows a clear route and practices what it preaches; it shows learners how the course is designed along the same principles, and using the same tools, it is teaching about. Not only has it helped me to hone my skills but it has encouraged me to learn more about certain aspects of learning design and seek further knowledge and experience in learning technologies.” *Hifzah Tariq, UoLW*

## THE DIGITAL SKILLS AWARENESS COURSE FOR STUDENTS (DSAC)

The DSAC was requested by our partners specifically to ensure new students (UG and PG) understand what digital skills they need for a successful university experience. A ‘blueprint’, generic version of the course was developed by the BLE to enable each partner to have their own customised course running on their own Moodle site.

“Just wish I’d had this when I first started! All relevant info for studying and helping to use the technology at Birkbeck. All in one place!” *Pilot participant*

## FUTURELEARN COURSES

A new fully-designed version of the DSAC is currently being developed by the BLE team on the FutureLearn platform, which will allow students around the world to prepare for their university experience before being set up with their institutional IT accounts. Other FutureLearn courses will follow, such as a MOOC for prospective PhD students, which will support widening participation from the BAME community in particular.

## THE DIGITAL SKILLS AWARENESS COURSE FOR TEACHING STAFF (DSAC-T)

Following the success of the DSAC, a request was made for a version for teaching staff. The DSAC-T is aimed at new staff and provides a ‘heads-up’ about what digital skills they need for their work and, crucially, to steer them to where they can acquire and improve these skills. The course is now ready for BLE partners to adopt and we will be working with staff development and HR departments to disseminate the resources.

“I really liked this module... Nice balance between theory and practical things to think about and potentially implement in my own practice.” *Pilot Participant*

## EVENTS

Ever since it was established in 2004, the BLE has organised events for staff across the consortium, mainly in-person, but these were usually recorded, blended and some were webinars. Topics have included:

- Legislation (GDPR, accessibility)
- Pedagogy (assessment, peer mentoring, MOOC development, learning design)
- Learning technology demonstrations (referencing tools, online tutoring, online exam platforms)

As a result of Covid-19 and the national lockdown, we significantly increased the number of sessions we ran. Our events have reached new audiences of staff. Going forward, we will continue to take a proactive approach to designing our programme of events by seeking what our community wants us to organise as well as keeping a close eye on the radar of what is emerging more widely.

“The [MOOC] workshop was really useful and my colleague Fran and I are already brainstorming some ideas!” *Dr Nicole Blum, Senior Lecturer, UCL IoE*

Topics for future online events:

- ABC Course Design online
- Encouraging institutional support for open education practice
- Best practice pop-up webinars on using technologies for teaching and learning (e.g. Microsoft Teams, Zoom, etc)
- Supporting women in IT and Digital Education

## OTHER PROJECTS

### SHARING LARGE-SCALE ONLINE RESOURCES AND EXPERTISE (IN PLANNING)

Extending the reach of the impressive and high-quality resources developed in-house by BLE partners across our community, we propose to create an online space to flag to staff and students what is available to use, such as:

- Connected Learning at UCL
- The RVC’s Blended Learning Rubric
- Birkbeck’s Teaching Preparation Project

Ideally, the site would allow users to add feedback to help improve the quality of resources. It would also be a space where specific knowledge and expertise are recorded.

“UCL Knowledge Lab members have worked with colleagues across BLE to realise some of our ambitions for online and blended learning... for digital assessment and feedback... These collaborations have always been positive, bringing extra resources, community and support. This has been so important for projects that were too big for us to run on our own.” *Professor Diana Laurillard, Professor of Learning with Digital Technologies, UCL*

## STRATEGY AND SUPPORT FOR SUSTAINING NEW PRACTICES

The BLE is committed to helping our partners transform culture and sustain new practices through closer working relationships between institutional leaders, digital education teams, academic staff and learner support. This is realised by the BLE team acting as a ‘critical friend’ to our stakeholders and facilitating knowledge exchange between senior staff. An example of the latter is the BARDG (Bloomsbury Academic & Research Development Group), which the BLE convenes to bring together senior staff who support academics and researchers across the consortium.

## CRITICAL FRIEND

The BLE Steering Group, which helps to drive the direction of the BLE, comprises senior managers from across different stakeholder groups including digital education, library, IT, academic development and academia/research. The Group comes together three times a year not only to oversee BLE development but also, importantly, for the members to share their own priorities and challenges with each other. In its role as advocate, the BLE is able to offer a sounding board to its Steering Group members together and individually to help them embed institutional change. We also act as a conduit between them, the other partners, the Bloomsbury Heads of Administration and external bodies such as Jisc, HeLF, ALT and UCISA.

We run sessions to address and solve common issues faced by more than one partner. Topics include:

- investigating the way changes in legislation impact institutional policy (e.g., accessibility)
- standardising technologies in shared classrooms
- examining and sharing practice of using remote proctoring services for online exams
- evaluating students and staff lockdown experiences
- managing labs (virtual and on-campus)
- virtual conferences and distance learning

## CONDUIT

The BLE is in the unique position to be able to act as a conduit and feed information *up* to senior staff as well as *down* to support staff in individual partner institutions: this allows us to probe issues with staff and bring awareness to leaders and managers of problems on the ground in a sensitive and non-partisan way. Similarly, we can help to embed and disseminate new ideas and practices to staff members in a collaborative and non-authoritative way.

## STRATEGY AND VISION

The BLE will be focusing on further helping individual institutions define their strategies and visions for digital learning as a critical friend. Once invited, we can assist in brainstorming sessions, bringing with us knowledge about best practice both within the BLE partnership and across the sector. We can help support research, evaluation and connect digital education departments with internal stakeholders (including library, IT, staff development, academic development and student support) as well as external experts.

“Belonging to the BLE gives us access to the collective expertise and ideas across the Bloomsbury partnership plus the opportunity to be part of projects that as a single institution we would have struggled to deliver.” *Hilary Sellars, Chief Information Officer, SOAS*

## ENGAGING PROFESSIONAL SERVICES AND SUPPORT STAFF

The BLE is in a position to respond to need by bringing together the great cross-institutional collection of specialised support and professional services staff in Bloomsbury for peer sharing and improving practices, momentum and motivation to expand in-house resourcing. We use a range of

communication tools to keep in contact with our colleagues (Skype, Google Chat, Zoom, Teams, Blackboard Collaborate, email lists, WhatsApp groups, Twitter and the BLE blog and website).

## SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS

For over 15 years, the BLE has brought its community together for events as well as organising special interest groups for staff in similar roles. These include the BLE's Digital Education team of learning technology professionals from across Bloomsbury, for which regular meetings and training sessions are held. In addition, we run groups for digital education professionals from complementary areas, such as:

- Bloomsbury Library e-Systems and Services (BLESS)
- MOOC Developers Group
- User Experience Group
- BLE Learning And Design (BLEAD)
- BLE Accessibility Forum

## CMALT

Since 2015, over 100 staff members from across the BLE partners have set off on their CMALT voyage – with many achieving CMALT accreditation. Previous cohorts have comprised academics, course administrators, librarians, learning technologists, careers advisers and other professional support staff who all have a strong interest in technology to support learning.

*“The big take away for me in undertaking CMALT accreditation was the reflection aspect to my portfolio. I have now incorporated a reflective learning process into my teaching, which has had a positive impact on my students.... I found the whole process very rewarding and would wholeheartedly encourage anyone thinking of the CMALT qualification to engage with a structured approach such as organized by the BLE.” Steve Hiron, Researcher and Lecturer in Earth and Planetary Sciences, Birkbeck*

## WELLBEING

In order to specifically support the wellbeing of our colleagues, we provide a sounding board for individual digital education staff members and managers and plan to continue running regular meetings and pop-up events for the BLE Digital Education team. In addition, we will be offering bespoke help and a work-shadowing scheme to share learning technology practices between partners. We will also investigate a mentoring scheme for early career and long-standing learning technologists in Bloomsbury.

## NEW AND PROSPECTIVE STAFF

In addition to the DSAC-T, which is aimed at new teaching staff, we are available to support recruitment and onboarding of new professional services staff with presence on interview panels, planning and supporting orientation activities, coaching and advising teams on working together remotely. We offer both one-to-one support and group coaching sessions. We are also introducing support for new staff on temporary contracts and student/staff volunteer/champions in order to help enable institutional continuity in service.

## EXTERNAL GROUPS

We operate closely with (and in some cases, lead) external bodies who also promote best practice, We bring their events to the attention of our colleagues, for example ALT events, M25 Learning Technology Group, the Moodle User Group for Greater London, the Blackboard Collaborate User Group and the London Roundtable.

## ONLINE PLATFORMS AND TECHNOLOGIES

The BLE offers a centralised space to engage in forward-looking collaboration and sharing cross-functional experience and perspectives on educational technologies. We broker discounted licences, support and enable evaluation and engage in conversations with suppliers and futurists on behalf of our partners.

## HORIZON SCANNING

The BLE keeps abreast of the latest developments with leading learning technology platforms and newcomers to the sector, and we bring this knowledge to our partners' attention by holding demonstrations delivered by users, suppliers or both. We hold regular supplier forums with key providers, including Blackboard, Turnitin, LinkedIn Learning, Panopto and CoSector.

Moreover, as BLE Executive team members are leaders of externally-organised forums (Moodle User Group for Greater London, Blackboard Collaborate User Group, University of London User Experience Group, the ALT Assembly, UCISA Digital Education Group' and the London Roundtable), the BLE is setting the agenda nationwide!

## TROUBLESHOOTING AND TRAINING

We facilitate 'over the shoulder' technical sessions to enable peer support with very positive responses from attendees. These sessions allow staff to help each other solve problems with implementing software and new platforms and enable cross-institutional relationships. We also organise traditional training sessions.

## VALUE SOURCING

As a collective, we share resources and have the ability to research and evaluate existing and alternative platforms and technologies. Since the BLE was established, its partners have benefited from cost savings on both shared and individual software licences. This value extends to talent as well: the Bloomsbury Media Lab brokering service, managed by the BLE, offers our partners exclusive access to specialist freelance support at discounted, preferential rates.

"We have found the BLE invaluable to maintain positive supplier relations; keep in touch with sector best practice; and to combine efforts with other institutions for platform enhancements. The BLE allows its constituent partners to deliver an excellent service, well above what could be achieved working in isolation." *Dave Cobb, Director of Enterprise Applications, SOAS*

## THE TEAM

The BLE subscription paid by its members predominantly funds staffing for three digital learning professionals who make up the BLE Executive team. The team members each have distinct roles suited to their unique skills as well as collaborating on organisational strategy under the guidance of the Steering Group.

### SARAH SHERMAN, DIRECTOR

Sarah has headed up the BLE since 2007 and is responsible for managing the coordination, implementation and development of digital education activity across the BLE partners, helping to support institutional digital learning strategies. Sarah began her career working as a primary school teacher and educational researcher and has worked in the field of digital learning for over 20 years. Sarah is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, a Fellow of the Centre for Distance Education, a former Trustee of the Association for Learning Technology and coordinates a number of regional and national digital education user groups in the UK.

### DR NANCY WEITZ, DIGITAL LEARNING SPECIALIST

Nancy has worked with the BLE since 2016, developing large-scale projects (Digital Skills courses and MOOCs), design and writing. Nancy has 25 years of experience in education and has worked with digital and online technologies from the very beginning. Having split her working life between traditional academia as an English Lecturer and digital design and learning has allowed her to develop a strategic overview and hands-on expertise, as well as establishing connections between learning, design, technology and communication. Nancy has worked mainly with universities, but also national and international government agencies, schools, voluntary organisations and small businesses.

### JULIAN BREAM, DIGITAL LEARNING COACH

Julian has worked with the BLE since 2019, facilitating workshops, events and conversations between BLE partners. Julian coaches digital transformation for academic, professional and leadership staff across London's HE, FE and Adult Learning sectors. His career started with studying Soft Systems Methodology in the 1980s, in NHS systems, then with University of London Computer Centre in the 1990s. In 2002, Julian helped to set up the Jisc Regional Support Centre for London, which was central to sharing grassroots understanding and practice between IT and academic perspectives. Working since 2015 as a professional coach, he runs the Digital Innovation Roundtable communities of practice, recognised as a national impact in the 2020 #EdTech50 Yearbook.

## THE EXTENDED BLE DIGITAL EDUCATION TEAM

The extended BLE team includes all of the talented partners across many roles who have been closely involved in our collaborative projects, notably the members of the Steering Group, BLE Digital Education Team, Project Working Groups, CMALT mentors and MOOC mentors.

*The BLE is committed to equality, diversity and accessibility for all.  
We continue to learn from each other to ensure we are a truly inclusive centre.*