Bloomsbury Learning Exchange Est. 2004

MISSION DOCUMENT

DECLARATION

Our purpose	Higher Education faces unprecedented change: • **Generative AI** is reshaping assessment and academic integrity. • **Equity and accessibility gaps** risk widening as digital adoption accelerates. • **Staff wellbeing** and workload pressures are acute. • **Budgets are tight**, making collaboration essential. Fragmented responses waste effort and increase risk. The BLE exists so partners act together, faster, and better.
Our principles	1. **Pedagogy and platform in partnership:** aligning teaching with technological capability. 2. **Equity by design:** Inclusion is built in, not bolted on. 3. **Accessibility as default:** Every learner, every colleague, every time. 4. **Evidence over hype:** Decisions grounded in research and practice. 5. **Open sharing:** Resources and insights are circulated, not kept in silos. 6. **Student voice matters:** Learners shape what we do. 7. **Sustainable and ethical practice:** Technology use impacts planet and people.
We do	**Convene and connect**: Bringing together leaders, staff, suppliers and student views across institutions. **Curate and share**: Turning sector intelligence into actionable guidance, courses and resources. **Coach and build capacity**: Supporting leadership, teams, and individuals to thrive in digital education. **Influence through evidence**: Equipping partners to shape policy, practice, and supplier engagement.
We will	**Champion accessibility and inclusion** by providing partners with evidence and arguments to secure stronger commitments from suppliers and internal stakeholders. **Advance assessment integrity and responsible, effective technology use** by co-creating design frameworks and sharing exemplars across the consortium. **Promote wellbeing and resilience** through coaching, peer support, and community spaces that reduce isolation and build confidence.
We ask of partners	**Appoint** named BLE liaisons to ensure two-way communication. **Release** staff to participate in Special Interest Groups and events. **Share** case studies and resources to strengthen collective practice.
We won't	Endorse platforms or practices that fail accessibility, sustainability or equity standards. Chase novelty without identified educational value.

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POSITION PAPER

The Bloomsbury Learning Exchange (BLE) is a partnership of London HE institutions that, since 2004, has empowered the staff responsible for the delivery of digital and hybrid learning, teaching and assessment within these institutions.[1] Together we explore the challenges and opportunities of educational digital technologies, delivering efficiencies and driving innovation. By working closely with professional and academic staff, we develop emerging effective practice under three key areas of operation:

- Supporting leaders
- Empowering staff
- Inspiring learning

SUPPORTING LEADERS

The BLE helps partner institutions to transform culture and sustain new practices through closer working relationships between institutional leaders, academics and professional services staff including digital education teams and learning support staff. The BLE operates as a 'critical friend', a conduit for information, and a means of developing and shaping academic strategy and vision.

Knowledge Exchange

The BLE team supports individual institutions to define their strategies and visions for digital learning. The BLE Advisory Board comprises senior managers from across the consortium, drives the direction of the BLE and crucially enables the partners to share their own priorities and challenges with each other. As a sounding board for institutional leaders, the BLE serves as an advocate for their efforts to drive and embed institutional change.

We are a valued conduit between our partners, the Bloomsbury Heads of Administration/Colleges, and external bodies such as Jisc, HeLF (Heads of e-Learning Forum), ALT (Association for Learning Technology) and UCISA (Universities and Colleges Information Systems Association). The BLE is in the unique position to be able to engage with staff at all levels, and be closely involved with a range of issues and challenges on the ground, advising senior and other staff appropriately.

Similarly, we help to embed and disseminate new ideas and practices - either from within the partnership or the wider sector - to staff members in a collegiate and collaborative spirit. We support research and evaluation of effective practice, connecting digital education departments with internal stakeholders (including library, IT, staff development, academic development and student support) as well as external experts.

> "The BLE is a continuous source of benefits, which Birkbeck would otherwise find extremely difficult if not impossible to arrange independently. In particular the opportunity to support the development of staff who are critical to our work in the digital education field is invaluable." *Prof Sally Wheeler, Vice Chancellor of Birkbeck University of London*

[1] Full partners: Birkbeck, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), The Tavistock & Portman NHS Trust, University College London (UCL), and the University of London. Associate partner: City St George's, University of London

Cost Efficiencies

With the combined strength of our collective, we share resources, and research and evaluate existing and alternative platforms and technologies. BLE partners have always benefited from cost savings on both shared and individual software licences through our brokering of collective agreements with suppliers and partners. 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 regularly lobby suppliers to fulfil accessibility requirements, update contractual terms and conditions, and improve customer communications.

> "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." *Sultan Wadud, Learning Technology Manager, SOAS*

New and prospective staff

We offer assistance in the recruitment and onboarding of new professional services staff, and provide a presence on interview panels, planning and supporting orientation activities.

EMPOWERING STAFF

The BLE brings together the great cross-institutional collection of specialised support and professional services staff in our community to facilitate peer-sharing, improve practices, and ensure momentum and motivation. Members use a range of communication tools to keep in contact as well as accessing the BLE blog and website.

Special Interest Groups (SIGs)

The heart of the BLE has come from over 20 years' experience of bringing its community together to share and enhance practice. Thriving special interest groups bring together staff informally and cross-institutionally, co-chaired by selected individuals who have expertise in the specific topic.
At SIG meetings members:

- share current practice and experiences;
- seek advice for challenges;
- develop shared resources - e.g. training and guidance; planning material; policy and strategy documentation;
- hear from invited speakers; demonstrations and field trips - e.g. reciprocal institutional visits, outings to exhibitions, etc.

As well as sharing and showcasing practice, we ensure that SIG meetings have agreed upon tangible outputs benefiting attendees and their institutions.
The SIGs cover a range of responsibility areas and topics including:

- Academic and Researcher Development
- Student Academic Study Skills
- Digital Media, VR and Immersive Learning

- Distance Learning Administration
- Climate Justice and Digital Education

Please visit our website for the full list and information about each SIG:

> "In times of current economic constraints, the importance of collaboration and sharing of practice has never been so important for higher education. The BLE's Special Interest Groups are an excellent and multi-purpose resource for the HE professionals working within many areas across the BLE partner institutions. Fostering a sense of community between otherwise disparate institutions and roles, and making it easier than ever to share ideas and improve methods of practice, the BLE SIGS provide a safe, secure, and extremely convenient forum to discuss innovations and concerns, as well as to develop and explore joint initiatives, projects and future possibilities." *Sarah Knight, Director of Digital Transformation (HE), Jisc*

Certified Membership of the Association for Learning Technology (CMALT)

The BLE provides an annual CMALT programme, structured around each part of the CMALT portfolio with regular webinars and writing retreats. The programme enables colleagues to work as part of a cohort, sharing good practice and networking with others across the BLE, including existing CMALT holders who contribute to the webinars and act as mentors. Colleagues are supported to reflect on their own practice and expertise as part of the CMALT process. Since 2015, over 200 academics, course administrators, librarians, learning technologists, careers advisers and other professional support staff from across the BLE partners have set off on their CMALT voyage, with many achieving CMALT accreditation.

> "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 that organized by the BLE." *Steve Hirons, Researcher and Lecturer in Earth and Planetary Sciences, Birkbeck*

Coaching and Wellbeing

Specialised team and individual coaching is available to full BLE partners. As teams change and grow, they need to refresh their sense of mission and identity. Team awaydays, visioning sessions and annual planning and reviewing can be powerfully enhanced through BLE facilitation since we truly understand their context and potential. This close support is ongoing throughout the year, where progress is continually evaluated and resilience built up.

One-to-one support helps individual staff who may like to think through challenges they experience in their professional lives. This is especially appreciated by those who might work in more isolated settings, those on temporary contacts and student/staff volunteer/champions.

The wellbeing of the members of our community is of paramount importance to the BLE.
By providing a sounding board and the offer of bespoke help, we fill the gaps for these highly specialised staff.

We can, on request, organise work-shadowing to share practice between participants and a mentoring opportunity for early career and long-standing staff in our community.

> "I was keen to be coached because I needed support with my career. I liked the space to explore myself, the curiosities that would emerge from conversations and as a result I have understood myself more deeply. I would recommend BLE 1-1 coaching when you need help to get out of a trench, to think differently about things and yourself." *Leader in Digital Education (BLE member)*

Troubleshooting and Training

We deliver 'over the shoulder' technical sessions to enable peer support as well as organise traditional training sessions, all 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.

Wider Community

The BLE Executive team establishes and supports forums in the wider community - e.g. Moodle User Group for Greater London, London Digital Accessibility Working Group, M25 Learning Technology Group, UCISA Digital Education Group, and the London Roundtable. In this way, the BLE is setting the agenda nationwide to promote effective practice.

> *"*The BLE is an important organisational member of the Association, actively engaging with the development of leading professional practice and recognition on a national scale. Particular examples of this are the achievements of the CMALT cohorts, which have established a blueprint which other organisations have successfully adopted.*" Dr Maren Deepwell, Former CEO of the Association for Learning Technology (ALT)*

INSPIRING LEARNING

By harnessing collective expertise across the consortium, the BLE advances the experience of our partners' academic staff and students with online, blended and traditional (in-person) learning, teaching and assessment. We develop and maintain high-profile resources and activities, all of which are shaped to suit the needs of our partners. We run bespoke events and meetings designed to address the requirements of our community. We also publish in books and journals, offering research, writing and collaborative opportunities for colleagues; further information available here.

Events

Since its inception in 2004, the BLE has organised in-person and blended events for staff across the consortium in a wide range of formats including small meetings, workshops, demonstrations, showcases and conferences, seminars and webinars. We take a proactive approach to designing our programmes of events by actively seeking-out what our community needs as well as keeping a close eye on what is emerging more widely. The flexibility of our delivery allows us to conveniently reach new audiences of staff; on average, we organise 40-50 events per year. Our event activities, which are purposeful and output-oriented, are fundamental to how the BLE connects with the staff employed by our partners. From these interactions, we learn about our community and use the acquired knowledge and understanding to develop resources, establish special interest groups and identify topics for subsequent events.

Event topics have included:

- Generative AI (understanding implications, ethical practice in education and research)
- Legislation (accessibility, copyright)
- Pedagogy (assessment and learning design, decolonising digital education, creating positive classroom cultures)
- Learning technology demonstrations (e.g. assessment platforms, media suites, innovative teaching practices)

> "Thank you for all the support and encouragement you have given me and many others over the years. Tangible and intangible benefits that impact so many people in different ways - that's what I love about teaching and learning." *Academic (BLE member)*

Courses

The BLE is an award-winning developer of online educational courses on broad themes that benefit all of our partners.

Get Interactive: Practical Teaching with Technology

The recipient of several awards, our flagship MOOC *Get Interactive* launched on the Coursera platform in 2017 and is still going strong, undergoing a full update in 2025 to keep it current. The course takes educators through ways to increase interactivity in their online courses in order to engage learners. Many BLE colleagues have enhanced their professional development by taking this course and even becoming mentors to newer participants.

> "Being involved in updating the MOOC, I've had the opportunity to apply and extend my own course development skills, deepening my understanding of effective online learning design, and helping ensure the MOOC reflects the same best practices it teaches". *Christina Galliou, Senior Learning Technologist, UCL*

The Digital Skills Awareness Courses (DSAC)

Winner of the 2021 Roger Mills Prize for Innovation in Learning and Teaching, our two DSAC courses were requested by our partners specifically to ensure new students (UG and PG) understand what digital skills they need for a successful university experience, as well as to provide new academic staff with a 'heads up' about acquiring and developing the digital skills they need for their work. The course is adoptable by institutions as a generic version, which they can adapt as they wish and run on their own platforms.

> *"*The Digital Skills Awareness Course has been an invaluable resource that all Birkbeck students can access. Written in plain English it introduces the different digital skills and tools required to successfully navigate the digital education landscape. Having this course available enabled us to support new and returning students during the digital pivot and thereafter.*" Elizabeth Charles, Assistant Director Content & Delivery, Birkbeck*

Digital Skills Awareness For Starting Higher Education (DSASHE)

A fully-designed version of the DSAC launched on the FutureLearn platform in 2022. This three-week course helps students around the world prepare for their university experience in the UK, well in advance of attending their chosen institution.

Is a PhD Right For Me?

In 2023, we launched the BLE's innovative MOOC *Is a PhD Right For Me?* This three-week course combines interactive material, extensive interviews with academic staff and students, and even specially filmed drama episodes to create an insightful, exciting, and wide-ranging online experience that helps empower potential candidates to make the right decisions about applying for a PhD - or whether to apply for one at all! Overall, the course is intended to support widening participation of students from a broad range of underrepresented communities, and it has enjoyed an enthusiastic uptake from prospective PhD students around the world.

> "Truly inspiring. Thank you so much for this useful course. Really amazing. It has opened my mind to the 'secrets' of PhDs." *Feedback from a MOOC participant*

The Team

The BLE subscription, paid by its partners, predominantly funds staffing for four digital learning professionals who make up the BLE Executive team. The team members each have distinct roles suited to their unique skills

Sarah Sherman, Director

Sarah has led the BLE since 2007 and is responsible for overseeing all activity and output. She 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 Online & Distance Education, a member of the Association for Learning Technology (ALT) Assembly as a former Trustee, a member of the UCISA Digital Education Group Committee and coordinates a number of regional and national digital education user groups in the UK.

Julian Bream, Coach for Digital Leadership

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.

Nancy Weitz, Digital Education Specialist

Nancy has worked with the BLE since 2016, developing large-scale projects (courses and MOOCs), strategy, design and writing. Nancy has 30 years of experience in education and has worked with digital and online technologies from the 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, international development organisations and small businesses.

Tom Graham, Project Associate

Initially working as one of the course writers and developers for the MOOC *Is a PhD Right For Me?*, Tom was invited to join the BLE as a permanent staff member. Having gained his MA and MRes at Birkbeck, he is currently researching his PhD in continental philosophy. In addition to engaging in the core BLE team in the development of projects, Tom is a head question-writer and quality assessor for the Graduate Medical School Admissions Test (GAMSAT) but has a diverse background outside of academia including six novels published by HarperCollins and extensive experience across many aspects of film production such as art direction, scriptwriting, editing, and animation (stretching all the way back the to 1980s!). At a push, he'll also provide dryly ironic voice-overs.

The BLE Stakeholders Group

The extended BLE team includes all of the talented members across many roles within our community who have been closely involved in our collaborative projects; notably the members of the BLE Advisory Board, BLE Digital Education Team, Co-Chairs of SIGS, 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.*

The BLE's Mission Document is continually updated as it is a live, working paper. The last edit was made in November 2025

OPERATIONAL PLAN 2025-26

- 11 SIGs will meet termly
- 6 Events (including workshops for customer service, creating positive classroom cultures, and how to use NSS/PTES/REF/TEF data)
- Coordination of a BLE-wide Jisc project piloting an AI assessment and feedback platform
- GenAI resourcebank and course; possible establishment of a GenAI SIG
- Development of a podcasting programme: goal to create 2 podcasts per term
- Update of 2 Digital Skills Awareness Moodle courses and Digital Skills MOOC
- Ongoing maintenance and promotion of existing 3 MOOCs