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# **The Odd Case of the Legal Foundation Module: Reporting on Student Perceptions of e-learning at Cardiff Law School**

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## ***Key Words***

E-learning, Teaching Efficiency, Qualitative Analysis, Law Student Perceptions,

## ***Abstract.***

The debate over whether online activities enhance learning has also been occurring in legal education. For Cardiff Law School, where pedagogy dictates the *'blend'* of traditional and online support, the question has been whether complementing or substituting traditional teaching activities with e-learning tasks and resources (e-blend) can enhance Cardiff Law School students' overall pedagogical experiences. This paper reports on a project that explored aspects of this dilemma by investigating Cardiff Law School students' perceptions, with a particular focus on the value they placed on e-learning resources and tasks. The research methodology adopted integrates quantitative data (student results) with a qualitative analysis (semi-structured focus group interviews).

## ***The Odd Case of the Legal Foundation Module: Reporting on Student Perceptions of e-learning at Cardiff Law School***

British Higher Education legal teaching is typically faced with the burden of increased substantive teaching complexity, reduced preparation time, and institutional research pressure. An ongoing debate is raging over whether e-learning innovations can have any lasting effect outside facilitating information delivery/retrieval for students. For Cardiff Law School, where pedagogy dictates how traditional and online support may combine, the dilemma has been whether integrating e-learning activities and resources with traditional teaching can enhance learning and at the same time increase teaching efficacy (e.g. reducing teacher preparation time, collecting individual and group feedback, improving student results, etc.). Our own and some recent research has qualified some of the assumptions that might be drawn in this area (Maharg, 2007).

Our project findings reveal that overloading law students with information does not guarantee teaching quality, and endorsing IT as a panacea for a lack of funding can be detrimental to individual modules and institutional teaching quality. However, the project results also give some indications that IT and carefully designed e-learning tools and tasks can improve student perceptions of their pedagogic experience if the e-blend is inserted into a constructive learning environment.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first provides a brief review of the theoretical and methodological pedagogical bases of e-blending that informed the empirical research. The second part presents and reflects on the project results, with a particular focus on students' perceptions of teaching efficacy in e-blended modules as recorded in focus group scripts.

### ***Questioning the Theoretical Assumptions***

In the past decade, approaches to e-learning have generated a wide interest in British Higher Education. This is due in part to an increase in the availability of standardised educational support technologies, but also to the United Kingdom Government consultations and strategies in recent years (DfES 2003, HEFCE 2004). One notable outcome was the Higher Education Funding Councils being tasked with finding ways to embed e-learning in a full and sustainable way 'within the next 10 years'. Indeed, the HEFCE 2006-11 strategic plan reinforces the view that innovation and improved quality in learning experiences *via* e-learning, among other methods, are key factors in meeting current and future diversity and employability needs (2007). A possible underlying assumption is the belief that the adoption of educational technologies can improve the quality of students' learning experiences and of teaching efficacy (e.g. increase students' assessment performance, create an efficient culturally integrated community of learners, etc.). Such a belief can be supported by the view that '[c]ost-effectiveness is a [...] major goal of a Blended Learning system in both higher education and corporate institutions. Blended Learning provides an opportunity for reaching a large, globally dispersed audience in a short period of time with consistent, semi-personal content delivery' (Graham, 2005: 10).

A general discussion of the pedagogic potential and benefits of e-learning can be retrieved from several sources (see for example: Biggs, 2003: 213; Duffy and Cunningham, 1996; Dunlap and Grabinger, 1995; Laurie, 2006; Maier, 1998; Salmon, 2002). However, these studies focus on online learning modules that are pedagogically distinguishable from those delivered at Cardiff Law School. For traditional Higher Education establishments such as Cardiff Law School, the main stimulus for endorsing a new e-pedagogic style has to do with maximising resources (e.g. reducing teaching preparation time), maintaining the minimum standards for conferring an English/Welsh Law degree, and enhancing students' overall perceptions of their pedagogical experiences within their HE institutions (Graham, 2005: 10).

Our research project is also distinguishable from other empirical studies on the formation of online communities of learners. For instance, the report by Boardman et al (2003) on the use of discussion boards at the University of Durham includes a useful and detailed analysis of law students' frequent use of online blogs that were moderated by module leaders. While these activities created a students' common questions database, they cannot be considered genuine e-blending. Boardman reports, for instance, on the positive feedback that such use of blogs might have on students' perceptions of a particular law module. However, an online resource such as this tends to reproduce didactic material normally available in other formats (such as Q&As that can be retrieved in text books) and it can be out of sync with traditional teaching purposes (e.g. students might only use such a blog during revision time).

In contrast with these studies, Cardiff Law School sought to adopt a blended learning approach to e-learning as a potential solution to the problem of significant reductions in undergraduate applications. Over a five-year period, Cardiff Law School's improved research status was not mirrored by a corresponding improvement in students' perceptions of the school as a whole and this had a significant impact on student applications. Like many other institutions, this led to a belief at the time that by integrating e-learning into traditional teaching (the e-blend,) students' perceptions of Cardiff Law School would directly improve, student applications would increase, and school revenues would (indirectly) improve. These assumptions have since been questioned by theorists and have not been confirmed by research to date. At the theoretical level, educational experts argue that such a conviction is unfounded and 'dangerously misleading' (Oliver and Herrington, 2001: 214). Overwhelming students with information or overemphasising the use of e-learning technologies and resources does not guarantee a pedagogic enhancement of their experience; instead it enlarges the gulf between educators and learners. Biggs (2003) reaches a similar conclusion. He found that because legal research and analysis are core skills and the databases used are enormous, law students need to be trained to be selective, to use key words that

cross-classify so that the data obtained is as relevant as possible, and to 'surf fruitfully, so that it is not mind -boggling or a waste of time'(2003: 217).

It might also be argued that using educational technologies to improve student learning and performance outcomes can be related to the *enhancement of pedagogic methods*, if such teaching efficacy is measured in relation to a teacher's confidence in his/her own ability to influence and improve student learning and academic performance (see Bandura, 1993; Woolfolk Hoy, 2004; Bauer and Zimmermann, 1998). At a theoretical level, it is sometimes assumed that teachers with high efficacy (i.e. confidence in their abilities) are more likely to experiment with instructional materials and find new ways to deliver and improve their teaching methods (see Allinder, 1995; Stein and Wang, 1998). In practice, however, the concept of teaching efficiency is difficult to define and it is only indirectly linked to students' perceptions of their pedagogical experiences (Dunlap and Grabinger, 1995; Schubauer-Leoni and Ntamakilir, 1998). There is a complex interplay between teaching efficacy and the students' perceptions of that teaching efficacy on their learning. This may be why most of the empirical studies to date have focused not on the relationship between teacher activities and students' performances (e.g. retention, critical engagement, assessment performances), but rather on how to reach an agreement on how to best measure this constructed relationship (Maharg, 2007; Maier, 1998). In addition, these empirical studies might not give a holistic picture because they focus almost exclusively on a teacher's perspective. Our project attempted to bring some clarity to the debate by focusing on students' views of teaching efficacy in relation to the use of e-learning and their own performances. These views were obtained during and after they finished traditional modules that included e-learning activities. Overall, our project findings might support a speculative link or a series of connections between Cardiff Law students' perceptions of teaching efficacy and e-blended activities.

## ***Background and Research Methodological Structure***

Our project's focus on a possible speculative link between blended e-learning and teaching efficiency arose for two reasons. First, there had been a progressive improvement over a five-year period in first year students' performances in a compulsory legal skills module (LEFO) and it was important to investigate why. Secondly, an ongoing Cardiff University-funded project, led by one of the authors investigating students' understanding of assessment criteria, had revealed a possible link between the adoption of e-blending and students' perceptions of its usefulness.

Prior to the academic year 2002-2003, various attempts to teach legal skills had not proved successful and students' general performances had continued to deteriorate. In light of this trend and the need to meet Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Standards for Law introduced in 2001, Cardiff Law School revised the module structure with a specific focus on essential legal skills such as legal research, and writing for law using traditional teaching methods and hands-on lab exercises (Jackson and Davies, 2005). This brought about an expected improvement in overall essay marks from 2002/3 onwards.

The increase in students' performances can be explained by a multiplicity of factors. However, six possible reasons could be excluded from the outset. First, during the period under examination, the quality and the demographic balance of student cohorts had remained unaltered. The entry requirements were fixed at 'two As and a B'. Secondly, there was no indication that the quality of the teaching had significantly improved. Other than the module leader, there are often many new tutorial staff and assessors every year because LEFO teaching is allocated to all junior members of staff.

Thirdly, the substantive elements of the module (see Fig.1) had not been substantially amended during the period under investigation. Prior to 2004, LEFO Tutors' main educational task was to guide students in class on how to acquire legal writing basic skills (e.g. in-text footnoting, creating

bibliographies and research trails, etc.); how to read legal cases; and how to write a successful assessment (i.e. evidence of proficiency in research, range of legal material read and effective legal writing). After 2004, these expected learning activities were followed by an online activity that reinforced and/or completed a traditional learning task (e.g. read a case).

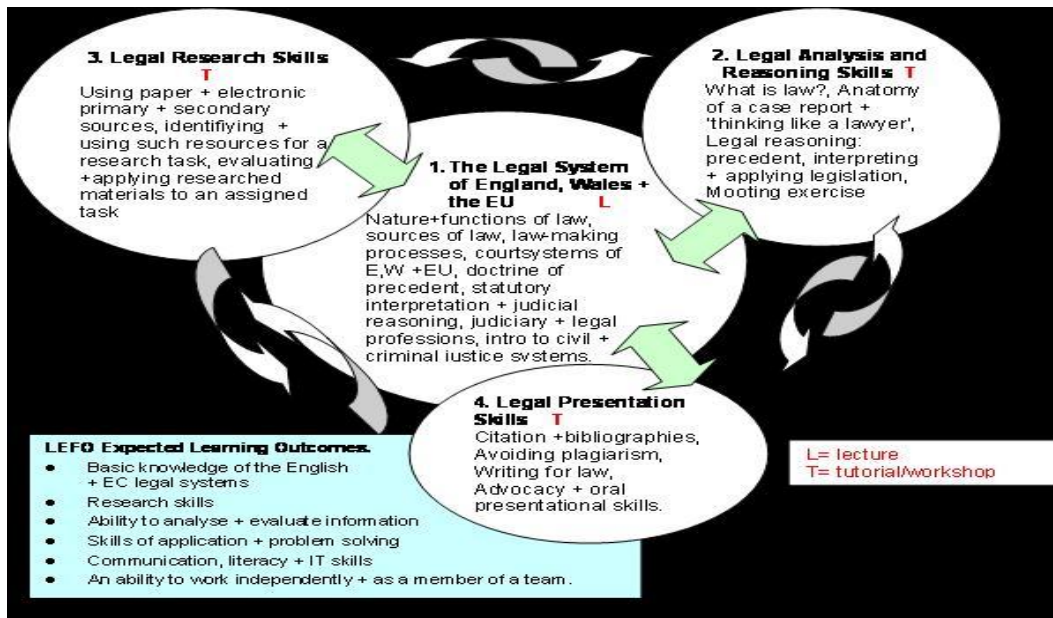


Figure 1: LEFO Module Design

The 2002 changes in the alignment between teaching units and assessment and the adoption of a new method for delivering information might explain a slight increase in students' results (Maharg, 2007 150). However, logic demands that an eventual design improvement should settle after a couple of years of running the new curriculum. In other words, after the novelties of new teaching practices are mastered by the staff, it can be assumed that students' acquisition of the learning material should reach a settled level. However, LEFO students' academic performances continued to improve after 2004 rather than level off. It was felt that the improvement in our students' performances could possibly be correlated with the progressive integration of e-learning tools and tasks with LEFO traditional teaching methods.



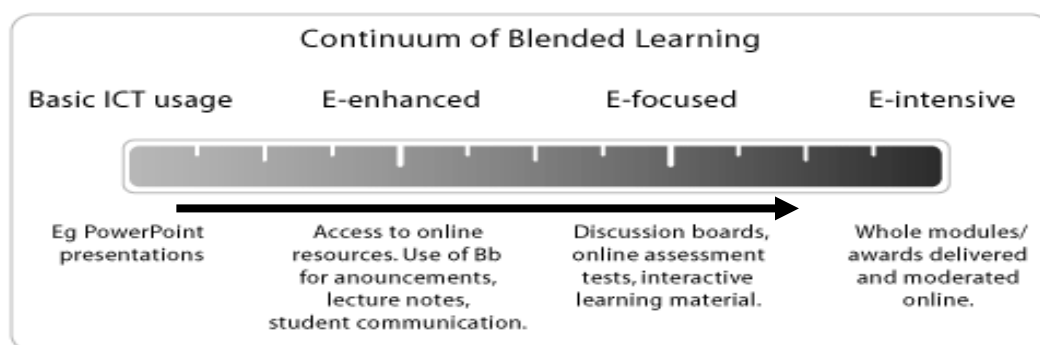
Fourth, in the period analysed, marking had not become more lenient. Assessment is left to a group of four or five tutors who do their work independently and autonomously. Fifth, the assessed tasks had not become easier. LEFO Students are assessed via a long prose assignment aimed at assessing legal writing skills and an MCQ test aimed at evaluating substantive knowledge of law and assessing students' ability to read judicial decisions. The data collected by the project has focused exclusively on the essay mark where students are allowed to choose their own substantive titles. Lastly, during the period under consideration by our project, plagiarism policies had remained unaltered.

These preliminary qualifications have not altered the original difficulty of the project to explain the interplay (or lack of it) between the progressive improvement in students' performances and the introduction of new e-blended activities. Neither the absolute number of students monitored by the project nor the depth of the qualitative data could support such a link. Therefore, it was decided to focus the research scope on students' perceptions of their pedagogic experiences rather than trying to quantify it in absolute terms by assessing, for instance, *quasi* objective elements such as learning retention. This resulted in adopting open definitions of e-learning and e-blending (that fostered some speculative deductions over the link between IT and e-blend and actual learning).

Adopting such an open definition of e-blending appears at odds with the intended project scope. Because there is no commonly adopted definition of *e-learning*, most institutions adopt a broad analytical description of behaviour to support their particular strategic aims. For example, for HEFCE '[e-learning is the] use of technologies in learning opportunities'. While these various definitions might help to qualify a learning activity at conceptual level, they do not describe the different processes that transform a traditional module into an *e-blended* module. Depending on the emphasis chosen, similar studies might use terms such as web-dependent or mixed-mode delivery.

In other words, they fit well the requirements of a *pure* online module, but they appear unduly restrictive of the e-blended learning activities adopted at Cardiff Law School.

By being open-minded about the conceptual significance of e-learning, our project was able to include a wider spectrum of activities (see Fig.2) that moves from simple delivery of information (Lecturers' PowerPoint Slides) to fully autonomous online task such as an online-mock exam. In particular, the openness of our definition of e-learning provided us with a chance to speculate over the impact of technology in modules that had very limited e-integration.



The *basic ICT* end of the continuum refers to the mixture of traditional teaching practices combined with basic IT, for example PowerPoint and Word documents. At the *e-enhanced* stage, teaching and learning is supplemented with access to some online resources on Blackboard, such as announcements and lecture notes. The next stage is *e-focused* and this includes the use of discussion boards, online assessment tests and interactive learning materials alongside some face-to-face delivery.

**Figure 2: Continuum of blended e-learning (CELT, University of Glamorgan)**

We were better able to qualify the overall aim of the project by refocusing on a relatively limited area of interest, such as students' perceptions of modules taken over short and long periods of time. Research on e-learning and learning outcomes in law schools tends to involve case studies which focus on distance learning in online modules (not an option at Cardiff Law School), or on professional training programmes to account for the use of specific didactic tools such as discussion boards (Maharg, 2007: 215). In particular, Maharg discusses the positive effect of an e-blended activity in which students create a student simulation. While students might find it useful to

generate a contextual learning environment similar to a massive multiplayer online game, (Maharg, 2007:225) it is unclear whether such online interaction in itself can change students' overall perceptions of the module. An argument that often emerges from literature reviews is that similar results could have been achieved if traditional pedagogic tools were used properly. Our project research suggests, albeit mildly, that such assumptions are unsound if the pedagogic potential of using e-learning is linked to students' positive perceptions of their pedagogical experiences.

### ***Data Sources***

The main focus of the project was to explore whether the blending of e-resources and activities with traditional teaching methods on the Year One LEFO module had an impact on the students' perceptions of teaching efficacy and their own overall performance. The project used both qualitative and some quantitative data. The *quantitative* data is self-explanatory. It relies on an analysis of the possible (albeit quite weak) correlation between the seven-year process of integrating e-learning tools and tasks into the LEFO module and the improvement in students' assessment performance. While the data alone has very little scientific value, it helps to explain the phenomenological development of the project and to qualify the reading of students' perceptions extracted from focus groups during which second and third year students depict the first year LEFO module as one of the '*most useful modules taken at Cardiff Law School*' .

Two distinct groups of students participated in the qualitative part of the study: the first group included only Year One LEFO students; the second group was composed of Year Two and Three law students from pure and joint law programmes of study. The focus group interviews were structured to follow the various stages students were at during the course of the year (see Table 1). The LEFO students were interviewed on four occasions. The first meeting aimed at discussing their views on assessment before being provided with any instruction, and the second meeting focused on their views after receiving training and advice on the assessment and use of legal databases. The

third meeting took place after formative feedback from tutors had been received (delivered online), and the final meeting took place to explore how the students were going to use the feedback and e-resources to prepare for exams. The second group of second and third year law students met three times. The first meeting, a semi-structured interview, required them to reflect on previous years' assessment methods and criteria. At the second meeting, the students were asked to review and evaluate available online resources in modules they had already taken and passed. The last meeting focused on formative feedback and pre-exam preparation.

Year 1 (2 groups: 17 LEFO students)	Year 2 + 3 (2 groups: 12 students )
<b>Stage 1:</b> To informally discuss attitudes/ feelings about interpretations of assessment criteria	<b>Stage 1:</b> To informally discuss attitudes/ feelings about assessment
<b>Stage 2:</b> To informally discuss: guidance received, resources available, and whether expectations over the assessment task were clearer.	<b>Stage 2:</b> Review of e-resources available and used
<b>Stage 3:</b> To informally discuss feedback	<b>Stage 3:</b> To informally discuss: formative feedback; what resources have been used that are useful; what other support should be made available.
<b>Stage 4:</b> To informally discuss whether feedback from LEFO helped or not.	

**Table 1: Focus Group Interview Groups and Stages**

Both groups were also asked to complete an online resources questionnaire before their final meeting and indicate what online resources they used (or not) on LEFO, Blackboard and other modules, and to evaluate these resources in terms of frequency of use and overall usefulness. The quantitative data incorporated a series of speculative analyses of assessed essay results of LEFO students between 2002/3 and 2006/7 (approximately 160 students per year).

By dividing the focus groups over an academic year, we were able to collate some data that would possibly enable us to assess whether modules under review were aligned in Biggs's terms

(2003). Biggs considers a module as aligned if pedagogical activities are 'in-line' with the module's expected outcomes and assessment. This was crucial to aspects of our project, since only in carefully designed modules could students evaluate the (perceived) impact of e-learning activities undertaken.

The focus group questions and semi-structured interviews sought to obtain information on three thematic issues:

- 1) Were expected learning outcomes of learning activities met and did particular tasks improve their assessment performance?
- 2) What formative assessment contributed to their constructive learning experiences?
- 3) What criteria were used to assess their work?

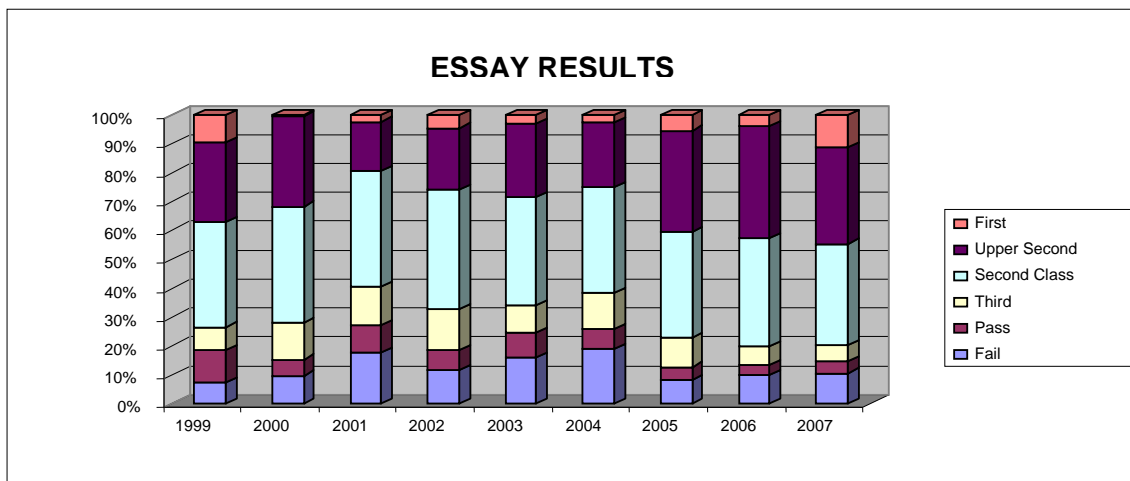
The Year Two and Three focus group interviews and meetings sought to capture the students' perceptions of teaching efficacy over the entire spectrum of modules taken during their time at Cardiff Law School. Given the small sample of the group (13 students), the data collected from these interviews have only anecdotal relevance. They were asked open questions such as: What learning resources have had an impact on teaching delivery and skills/ knowledge acquisition? Which e-learning resources usefully contributed to their overall performance in a module? What connections could students make between delivery of information and use of e-learning resources?

The scripts were subsequently analysed and cross-referenced with the questionnaire results.

## ***ii. Reflecting on the Data: the Odd Case of LEFO***

As shown in Graph 1, prior to 2002/3 student assessment performance was poor. Forty per cent of the student essays did not achieve a mark of 50 (out of 75) and 17% failed to reach the pass mark of

40. After the progressive e-blending of LEFO the overall results improved; overall only 10% were under 50 (out of 75), and over 52% of the recorded marks were over 60. This increase in performance could be attributed to a series of factors, but there were some indications of a potential link between the e-blending of the module and the improvement in students' essay writing skills.



**Graph 1: LEFO Students' Essay Performance**

In 2003, QAA standards led to a revision of the LEFO module design with a particular focus on improving students' academic legal research and writing skills, and providing hands-on sessions on finding and using online legal resources databases. When the new curriculum was introduced in 2002/3, the only online resources used were those covered in the hands-on sessions with the law library online as electronic legal databases and the University's VLE (Blackboard) were not yet available. There were more Upper Second and Second Class grades for the assessed essays compared to previous years, but less Firsts and no significant improvement in the number of Passes and Fails when comparing 2002/3 with 2003/4.

Improvements across the grades really started to appear after 2004. There might be a number of possible reasons for this. In 2004/5 the gradual process of e-blending LEFO started. Some traditional learning tasks were complemented by several e-tools and some basic e-learning activities. Blackboard (Cardiff University’s chosen VLE) was introduced as a pilot and LEFO used it to deliver traditional learning resources (e.g. lecture notes). E-Learning tools such as legal research engines were also inserted as research resources so students could use their LEFO-learned skills in other modules. A new online mock exam (MCQs) was also introduced and for the first time students received immediate online feedback each time they completed the test.

The school appointed an e-learning officer in January 2004 who started developing a series of e-resources on generic legal studies and information literacy skills. By 2005-6, these e-learning resources, tasks and simulations helped to clarify and support the overall LEFO learning outcomes (see Table 2) and gave students the opportunity to better engage with and develop the set of skills expected in any legal professional.

<b>RESEARCH, STUDY &amp; INFORMATION LITERACY SKILLS 05/06</b>	
<b>Expected Learning Outcome</b>	<b>E-blended activity</b>
Learning and Conducting Legal Research	Finding the Law (an interactive guide linked to all key Cardiff resources ); Sources of Law quiz
Improving research and information literacy skills	What kind of learner are you? (MCQs aimed at providing feedback on individual learning strategies); Information Literacy Quiz;
General Study + Language Skills Legal Writing skills	An interactive list of online resources and useful websites; Dissertation Writing Guide and Quiz; Essay Writing Guides and Activities

**Table 2: Key Learning Outcomes and e-learning Resources for LEFO 2005/6**

The progressive increase in student performance reached its maximum in 2006-07, when less than 10% of the results were under the mark of 50. This is possibly due to the fact that more e-learning resources were developed in 2006-7 and made available for use (see Table 3). For example, the online reading strategies and writing resources made it possible for students to revisit activities and skills covered in the classroom whenever needed or after in-class sessions.

<b>RESEARCH, STUDY &amp; INFORMATION LITERACY SKILLS 06/07</b>	
<b>Expected Learning Outcomes</b>	<b>E-blended activity</b>
Conducting Legal Research	+ Multimedia training on using professional legal databases.
General Reading and Writing	Online resources to help master reading /writing skills and improve grades
Mastering legal reading	Reading strategies guide, academic reading guide + tasks
Citing it right!	OSCOLA tutorial: citing and referencing in law
Avoiding plagiarism	Quizzes developed by law library + links to other resources
Writing good essays	Getting to grips with assessments and feedback (interactive guide on using assessment criteria and feedback to assess own and others' writing + authentic samples of student writing)
Editing Skills	Key grammar summaries, do's and don'ts, effective paragraph writing for law, editing checklist etc, Internet for ESOL
LLB Assessment Criteria Guide	Sample exam questions, answers and feedback across a range of grades and subjects

**Table 3: Summary of Additional e-learning Resources for LEFO 2006/7**

Some resources were also used explicitly by the LEFO lecturer and some other tutors in their teaching, and students were expected to use them too when preparing for or reviewing in-class activities. For example, students learnt in lectures about the direct links between careful referencing and legal principles, and relevant coherent legal reasoning in their own writing and the use of correct bibliographical references. They were then required to use an online version of the well-known referencing tool *Oxford Standard for Citation of Legal Authorities* (OSCOLA) to reference a variety of legal sources. This was followed up with a practical in-class session on assessing other people's writing in readiness for a formative assessment. Students could revisit the task online for



further practice and/or revision purposes. After 2007 the progressive introduction of new e-blending resources and activities stopped and so did the improvement in overall student performance. The similarities between the increased e-blending process of LEFO and students' results suggested interplay between the two that needed further investigation.

### *Quantitative Data*

In the previous section we outlined our unscientific speculations about a 'tentative linkage' between the increasing integration of e-learning material in LEFO and students' improved assessment performances. This section looks at how we sought to explore the possible implications of e-blending law modules and overall performance from students' perspectives. The qualitative data gathered via the focus groups aimed at evaluating student perceptions and, to a lesser extent, behaviours by adopting a combination of focus group interviews and questionnaires. The aims of the qualitative part of our research were therefore twofold. Firstly, the research aimed at qualifying first year students' perceptions of the usefulness of learning resources (traditional and 'e') and the clarity of the assessment criteria. The assumption was that the level of students' understanding of the assessment task and the usefulness of the learning materials and resources available for use would give an indication of the level of perceived teaching efficacy or at the very least the level of transparency in the module design (Graham, 2005: 8; Biggs, 2003). For example, Biggs argues that a carefully designed module will make it possible for students to easily know what is expected from them and ensure they have the pedagogical tools for achieving these expectations. Within the axioms set by Biggs's view of HE Learning, blended learning should therefore enhance the pedagogical effect of teaching.

The project therefore aimed, via the focus group sessions, to verify these assumptions by questioning first-year student perceptions; and to assess the long-term impact of e-blending epistemic practices on second- and third-year students. Our assumption was that once students were trained to use different types of educational resources (notably electronic and traditional

educational tools), they would continue to use (or they at least expected to have at their disposal) the same learning facilities in other modules (Biggs, 2003). In particular, it was assumed that students would continue to interact with the e-simulated environment that they had been trained to use. The qualitative data appears to confirm such assumptions.

### ***Qualitative Data; The analysis of First-Year Focus Group Scripts***

In the first focus group held in October 2006 (17 students divided into two groups), LEFO students' focus group scripts revealed that they felt access to relevant e-learning resources as tools for learning would be crucial for improving their assessment performance and demanded training in the use of those resources be moved to the first weeks of the term. They had been made aware of the existence of online resources (during lectures) but had yet to receive training on how to use them. Their scripts also revealed that they had quickly realised that university learning is based on their autonomous research abilities and on the quality of their findings. A student, for instance, made the point that: *'A-levels are all about knowledge but university is about knowledge and ability to use it and demonstrate skills in an academic way..* The LEFO scripts also revealed an anxiety over the lack of clarity in higher-education assessment criteria and the reduction in contact hours *vis à vis* A-levels.

During the second focus group meeting, LEFO students' anxiety over assessment and learning resources had visibly lessened because the assessment criteria to be used were better understood and all students had now received training in and had used the online learning and research resources. The overall perception was that their in-class and online activities aligned with their forthcoming assessment task. The LEFO students were particularly enthused by OSCOLA (an online training resource for citing legal material) which students described as *'fantastic'*. This data can be verified by cross-referencing these types of responses with the responses to a questionnaire that students had to complete before the fourth and last of the focus group meetings. For example,

the questionnaire answers indicate clearly that all the LEFO students surveyed used the online resources 'quite often' or 'often'; that the online OSCOLA resource in Blackboard was used by all the LEFO interviewees, and that they all considered it either '*useful*' or '*very useful*'. Indeed one student pointed out the advantages of this resource: '*OSCOLA gave me important examples of what to cite and how this might be achieved and I will use it in the future.*' The third LEFO focus group meeting took place after the students had received the results of their first formative assessment and the ensuing discussion focused on the rigour of the marking criteria, for example:

Q: 'Is it everyone's experience that this is different from writing A-level essays?'

A: 'I find that quite hard. To fit everything in, it just seems you're not doing things in any great detail. I feel when I read it back myself, I just feel I haven't written enough.'

Apart from an analysis of students' attitudes toward HE assessment standards (which is outside the aims of this report), the LEFO students interviewed appeared to be concerned by the strict formal requirements of professional legal writing.

Q: 'It seems you have all been marked quite heavily on your citing style. Is that fair?'

A: 'Unanimous, yes.'

A(Student One) : 'We might as well learn.'

A (Student Two): 'I know we have been told along the way. You've got to get the hang of it.'

They also appear to understand the importance, at least at a general level, of using online resources and activities designed to teach essential referencing skills such as OSCOLA.

A (Student One): 'Yes, I'm confused. If you quote extracts that are relevant but when you try and make things concise and put them in your own words, do you have to reference that? '

A (Others): 'Of course you do!

A (Student One): 'I wrote my own interpretation of what the judge was saying in his judgment. Do I still have to cite the case and page numbers?'

A (Others): 'Yes, you should also refresh your mind about how to cite using OSCOLA!'

The last meeting took place in March 2007 after the LEFO exam. Students were asked to reflect on the module's usefulness. They were also asked to complete in advance a questionnaire that targeted the relevance of common themes emerging from previous focus group script analysis. The questionnaire revealed that students felt they had learned the importance of legal research and considered OSCOLA and legal databases crucial for their own development and for improving their assessment performance in other modules.

Again these perceptions can be validated by cross-referencing them with behavioural changes reported in the questionnaire answers, but the same responses also reveal that online resources that are not blended are either not used or seldom used. For instance, links to other Cardiff University Personal Development Planning (PDP) e-learning activities and resources were not used or considered not useful. Internet for Lawyers was never used by our student sample and LexisNexis (a legal database for which they did not receive training) was considered not useful by all the Year One students surveyed. The impression from these results is that the LEFO students' perceptions appear not to be founded on an autonomous assessment of online activities or, in the case of legal databases, their functionality. Their perception appears conditioned by having access to online activities that reinforce or replicate in part what has been done or said in class. In other words, a speculative argument based on students' perceptions of their pedagogic experience suggests a link between retrieving an e-learning task similar to that done in-class and their perception of efficacy.

### ***The Analysis of YearTwo and -Three Focus Group Scripts***

During the first meeting, second- and third-year students' scripts (eight second-year and five third-year students) show - albeit from a small sample - a general appreciation of their first-year LEFO blended learning approaches and the development of core legal skills. These students continued to use LEFO e-learning resources for essay writing and legal research strategies, and continued to use the online search and referencing tools, but pointed out that they had integrated many of these skills with the ones mastered during their preparation for A-levels. They realised that only a minority of educators were referring to the available e-learning resources and even less were integrating their teaching practices with the available online material. However, they positively referred to modules where this practice was implemented (e.g. Press and Broadcasting, Family Law, and Land Law).

In December 2006, the second focus group meeting for second- and third-year students was expected to foster a discussion about the resources available to students (traditional and 'e'), including the most relevant online resources and e-tools at their disposal generally or promoted in particular modules. Before the meeting students were given a list of all online resources available at Cardiff Law School (including legal databases and online how-to guides, self-access e-learning resources on essay writing, exam writing, etc.), and a questionnaire to assess them. The expected outcome was a comprehensive evaluation of the entire spectrum of electronic pedagogical tools and resources available to them and that they had used or tried out. However, it became apparent that most interviewees were using exclusively online material for which they had received training in LEFO.

Q: 'What online resources do you use or find useful for preparing formative or summative work?'

A (Student One): 'I was not aware of PDP<sup>1</sup> resources until I started these focus groups... find the assessment section under law skills useful – past land law exams, sample LEFO summative essays.'

A (Student Two): 'Yes, they are really good and well put-together.'

A (Student Three): 'Yes, OSCOLA: cite it right [...] I use the "cite it right" all the time when I am writing an essay. It is open in a separate window all the time, to check each reference as I use it.'

A (Student One): 'Yes, me too.'

A (Student Two): 'Yes, but I also use the OSCOLA.pdf file, too.'

Again the sample of second- and third-year students is limited, but the comments appear to confirm the speculation that online material has an impact on learners only if it is inserted into a pedagogical environment where traditional teaching methods support e-learning. It was good to note that the second- and third-years were willing to try out unfamiliar e-resources and were willing to comment on their usefulness generally. Unfortunately, the research structure did not allow enough space to elaborate on the motivations of students' pedagogical behaviours. However, the fact that some students perceived some tasks as more difficult than others demands further qualification. For instance, online activities that familiarised users with legal databases were very similar to the use of a search engine such as Google. These types of e-tools cannot therefore be considered difficult (see the discussion on the next pages about resources being difficult to use).

During the third meeting, second- and third-year students were asked to complete a questionnaire aimed at probing their educational online activity. Again the scripts' analysis confirmed previous common themes. All but one student considered OSCOLA useful and used it either 'quite often' or 'all the time'. By cross-referencing these responses with the questionnaire

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<sup>1</sup> Personal Development Planning: a dedicated PDP area in Blackboard had been developed for all law students (and staff) to ensure equality of access to all e-resources and activities whether promoted on taught modules or not

given to students before the meeting, it appeared evident that even simple online activities were sufficient to change students' perceptions of module learning efficacy.

Q: 'How often did you use or view the following additional materials? How useful were they to you in completing your formative / summative work? When do/did you use them? (Please indicate your response with an X and elaborate on why, how and when you used them or not in the comment boxes).'

A (Student One): 'Often refer to it when referencing essays.'

A (Student Two): 'First point of reference when struggling to reference something.'

A (Student Three): 'Always use this as it was recommended by a module leader(!).'

A (Student Four): 'This is a much more user-friendly way of getting a lot of information across; the incremental bit-by-bit approach!'

A (Student Five): 'I have used the interactive tutorial about four times and I have the OSCOLA written guidance for all of the law essays I have done this year. It's really useful but could be a bit clearer in some areas, for example it doesn't cover all eventualities for referencing, so on a couple of occasions I have had to guess.'

The last comment deserves some attention because it might infer that there is a discrepancy in learning behaviours among students with consistently high marks. An enquiry over their overall performance appears to indicate a different learning technique. Students with a strong assessment performance try to master a required skill by repeating an online activity several times. For instance, one student says: *'I have used the interactive tutorial about four times and I have the OSCOLA written guidance for all of the law essays I have done this year.'*

Another common theme that surfaced from analysis of the Year Two-Three questionnaire is a substantive difference between the perceived retention of learning material in modules that blended their learning resources and those that did not. For instance, second- and third-year students who had not learned basic legal skills in LEFO (either because they had arrived from other law schools or from other degrees) claimed that they found online material difficult to learn and difficult to use.

Q: 'What online\_resources do you use or found useful for preparing formative or summative work?'

A (Non-LEFO Student One): 'I did look at various online resources on PDP and elsewhere, but personally find them difficult to use. '

A (Non-LEFO Student Two): 'I only really knew about these from the questionnaire done before this meeting. I have not used it, but will definitely go through it before doing my summative.'

Moreover they complained about second- and third-year teachers who assumed that they had retained those skills.

A (Non-LEFO Student One): 'There has never ever really been any guidance or feedback on problem questions. In the first year, when asking how to go about answering problem questions, the tutor was surprised we had not learnt it on LEFO; assumed we had.'

A (Non-LEFO Student Two): 'Yes, it is assumed that we know how or taken for granted that we have all paid attention on LEFO or FEL, that the skills are already there, so if they are not, then you get left behind trying to catch up. '

The discovery, albeit unintentional, of a discrepancy in students' perceptions between former LEFO and non-LEFO students appears to support the speculative argument that online material is perceived as useful (and its ongoing use continued) only if it is complemented by in-class activities or use by a tutor.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

The aim of the research was to probe Cardiff Law School students' perceptions of their pedagogical experiences on modules that included elements of e-blending and the use of e-learning tools and resources. The theoretical assumption under scrutiny was whether an e-blended module is perceived as *pedagogically more useful* than a traditional one. The short answer is: yes. Students who have learned to complement their studies with online activities and who make good use of the e-learning resources available to them to develop skills perceive that they have discovered



something useful. They also change their learning behaviours by using online activities and resources to train and, in case they have forgotten, to re-train themselves. For instance, during the second and third year of their studies, students commonly used first-year online exercises such as Finding the Law and OSCOLA.

Unfortunately, the demography of *the sample* (e.g. gender, age of entry in HE, average assessment performance, A-level results, etc.) were not recorded to protect the anonymity of students. The initial assumption was that students who see their data recorded might reduce the intensity of their critical analysis. The implication of that initial decision became apparent in the penultimate meeting, when a clear distinction between LEFO and non-LEFO students' learning behaviours arose. It remains unclear, for instance, whether non-LEFO students find first-year online activities difficult or if they consider the eventual learning outcomes irrelevant. From the narratives collected during focus group meetings, the two elements (difficulty and relevance of the task) do not have a solution of continuity and they need to be further explored in a new study.

A second element gathered from the project might help to qualify the perception of pedagogical usefulness of online material that is simply bolted on to traditional modules. The project results suggest that merely adding online simulations and sources of information to students does not improve their perception of usefulness. Online learning platforms such as Blackboard have facilitated the adoption and availability of online resources. Indeed, at Cardiff Law School students can, if they so wish, use all online activities automatically inserted in their Online Student Personal Development Portfolio. In practice, however, our project suggests that students consider the majority of online activities to be not useful or too difficult. The perception of ineffectiveness therefore remains, even for very basic online pedagogical tasks such as the use of databases and electronic legal search engines. Such perceptions, or rather set of perceptions, remain unexplained by this and other research. However, it is hoped a new project will investigate these perceptions and take into account student and staff perceptions of similar tools and activities.

In conclusion, apart from a prosaic observation that depicts students as selective learners, our project findings have given a strong indication of the potential impact of e-blended programmes. The evidence suggests that e-blending can change perceptions of the value of the information delivered in British Law Schools. In particular, if students come to appreciate the benefits of an e-activity, they will form a series of distinctive patterns of learning that are perceived as useful. Some students might repeat online exercises several times until the expected learning outcome is wired into their practices; others might prefer to re-train themselves only if there is a need in a different module. However, as both groups of learners in our study acknowledged, the enhanced pedagogical benefit of the e-blend is best achieved when it is reinforced during in-class learning.

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