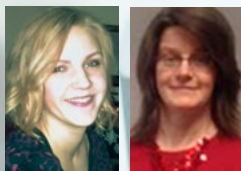


# Subject Librarians and VLEs in Irish Universities: Level of involvement, attitudes and challenges



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## Abstract

Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) are used by educational institutions as content delivery platforms that connect students, academics and administration together. In this context, subject librarians can utilise VLEs to increase visibility and use of library resources, improve collaboration with the faculty and enhance information literacy instruction delivery. The article reports on a study that aimed to identify trends in subject librarians' use of VLEs and makes a contribution to a better understanding of influencing factors and challenges experienced by subject librarians in relation to their use of online tools and involvement in VLEs to deliver course-specific support.<sup>1</sup>

Keywords: *Subject Librarians, Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), Ireland, Academic Libraries*

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Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) are “online teaching-learning-evaluation domains that permit synchronous and collaborative interaction among teachers and students, while also providing asynchronous learning resources for individual use by students at any time” (Das, 2014, p.41). VLEs in educational institutions can be defined as the core digital space connecting students, academics and administration together. VLEs also provide a means for course material delivery, assessments, recording of grades, and student-tutor interaction. In this context, the importance for academic libraries to maintain their presence within VLEs is discussed throughout the literature. The key benefits include: increased visibility and use of library resources, improved collaboration with the faculty, and enhanced information literacy instruction delivery (Leeder and Lonn, 2013, p.1). Additionally, subject librarians can utilise VLEs to provide support by one-on-one instruction, promoting their subject guides and, also, by collaborating with academics to better link course materials and course-specific resources.

Throughout the literature the subject librarian’s use of and involvement in VLEs is discussed as an important factor for successful outreach. To be more precise, **support material and subject guides which are related to specific courses, as facilitated by VLEs, receive more attention and use than generic tutorials** provided by the library and have the potential to encourage students to use library resources instead of consulting

information sources on the Internet (Bowen, 2012, p.449; Essinger and Ke, 2013, p.55). Therefore, numerous case studies in the literature describe initiatives by single institutions to improve and maintain a library presence in VLEs.

### Irish context

The main body of literature presents implemented initiatives and studies conducted in the United States of America. In comparison, despite the fact that VLEs have been widely adopted in higher education institutions in Ireland since 2005 (Cosgrave et al., 2011), the number of such studies in the Irish context is low.

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Irish studies mainly discuss VLEs as a medium for delivering information literacy tutorials and instruction. For example, Russell (2008) investigated the ways information literacy instruction can be brought to distance education students and reported that Irish academic librarians were not utilising the potential that VLEs can offer (only 19% of respondents indicated that a VLE is used for Information Literacy (IL) training).

Also, McGuinness’ (2009, p.273) large scale investigation into the practices of information skills training (IST) in Irish higher education institutions showed that online tutorials were one of the least favoured methods of delivering information skills training. At the same time, taking into consideration advances in technology and eLearning, it can be assumed that the situation has been changing since 2008.

There is evidence that educational institutions are trying to address the low impact of libraries in current VLE use through involvement with the eLearning strategies of individual institutions and, in this way, awareness of library services and resources is being raised. Examples of single institution’s efforts to increase library visibility in and access through VLEs are: the use of VLEs for information literacy instruction through the creation of instructional tutorials on the use of library resources (Ward, 2010); and a guide for academics with step-by-step instructions on how to add videos and tutorials to any module in the VLE (UCD, 2012).

The purpose of the study was to identify trends of subject librarians’ use of VLEs and to contribute to a better understanding of influencing factors and challenges experienced by subject librarians in relation to their use of online tools and involvement in VLEs to deliver course-specific support. Also, the study aimed to explore the underlying aspects that may influence subject librarians’ use of VLEs or attitudes towards library integration into VLEs.

Considering the role and the functions of subject

librarians, key areas of interest were defined for the study:

1. The extent to which subject librarians' use VLEs.
2. Individual experiences and attitudes towards library integration into VLEs.
3. Factors influencing subject librarians' use of VLEs.

## Methodology

In order to best address the key areas of interest, both interviewing and a descriptive survey were chosen as the most appropriate strategies to conduct the research. Anonymity was ensured during both survey and interview data collection.

The questionnaire consisted of ten close-ended questions and three open-ended questions that allowed for the collection of additional data from the participants. Fifty subject librarians from seven university libraries were invited to take the survey. Although, the survey returned low response rate of only sixteen replies; three of them were incomplete, leaving thirteen completed questionnaires for the analysis. This constitutes a response rate of 26% which, regardless of being low, is fairly common for questionnaire-type data collections across different institutions.

Out of seven university libraries, four did not provide any responses. Hence, the majority of the approached librarians who participated in the survey (13 out of 20) were from the three remaining libraries.

Additionally, five in-depth interviews with subject librarians from five different subject areas were conducted in three Irish universities' libraries.

While the size of the study and a low response rate of the survey did not permit conclusive generalisations about the whole population of the research, both interviews and the survey generated new knowledge in the research area and provided rich data that was utilised to investigate underlying aspects of the experiences, trends and issues of subject librarians' use of VLEs.

## Subject librarians' use of VLEs

Both interview replies and survey results showed that library presence in VLEs is very limited and subject librarians have minimum or no direct input into VLEs, i.e. the majority of respondents indicated that they mostly manage resources that are linked to VLEs instead of providing access to them through VLEs. Also, both the survey and interviews showed that VLEs are not fully exploited by librarians as a platform for outreach and personal support, and that discussion forums and blogging are the least used features, if used at all. These findings illustrate what has been defined by Shank and Dewald (2003, p.38) as a macro approach of integrating library resources into VLEs. That is, in contrast to recommendations from the literature on specific focussed help (e.g. course-specific databases and guides), the resources which are mostly promoted in VLEs are generic such as information literacy tutorials, library guides, opening times, etc.

Moreover, both survey and interview results show that VLEs, if used at all, are mostly utilised as a medium for delivering information literacy tutorials. This approach supports the definition of VLEs in the library context provided by Corrall and Keates (2011, p. 29-30) who state that VLEs are primarily used by lecturers for presenting course content and delivering information literacy skills tutorials.

Lastly, in contrast to the ideas of De Jager-Loftus (2009) and Whatley (2009) who advocated VLEs as an effective medium for library promotion and increased visibility, the study showed that subject librarians' integration into VLEs is not realised as one of the strategies of reaching wide audiences and promoting library resources.

At the same time, this phenomenon does not solely depend on librarians' commitment to better engage themselves in VLEs, but is rather a multifaceted case of related influencing factors.

## Challenges in using VLEs

While the importance and perceived benefits of seamless library-VLE connection (e.g. customised library information and direct input of librarians in individual VLE sites) are discussed and advocated in the literature, the study results showed that there is some VLE-library marginalisation. This may be partially due to multiple influencing factors that were repeatedly discussed during the interviews and indicated in the survey.



To start with, direct access and editing rights of VLE site content, as identified by interviewees and in the survey, depends upon the academics, i.e. the “owners” of the individual courses within the VLEs.

Also, the issue of feasibility and scalability of direct presence in individual VLE courses was an important feature of the overall library-VLE relation discussion. This issue was repeatedly mentioned in a number of responses – in both interviews and open-ended questions in the survey- regarding time and human resources needed for effective integration into VLEs. This issue is common in large institutions where small-scale initiatives are difficult to implement throughout the whole institution, mainly due to a large number of courses and limited number of subject librarians where their direct input to VLEs at course level is simply not feasible (Daly, 2010; Jeffryes et al., 2011). Therefore, regardless of librarians’ willingness to participate in VLEs at course level, such input might be too specific and not attainable in practice.

Interestingly, the study showed that the perceived role of a subject librarian has an important effect on his/her participation in VLEs and in the academic-librarian relationship in general. Research findings indicate that subject librarians have varying levels of interaction and acceptance by course instructors in different subject areas depending on how their role is perceived by the academics. These results are in line with the findings in the literature on studies that explored the impact of subject librarians on an academic community and

confirmed that disciplinary culture and approach of individual academics have a great impact on how the value of a subject librarian is perceived (Walters, 2008; Cooke et al., 2011; Corral and Keates, 2011).

Lastly, limited access to editing rights of individual VLE sites and barriers to effective integration (e.g. providing subject-specific links or resources within the VLE site) raise another important question about the role of the librarian in University teach-

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ing. While the literature shows that the teaching role of the librarian is evolving (Walter, 2008; Polger and Okamoto, 2010; Austin and Bhandol, 2013), the study results showed that, from librarians’ perspective, their teaching role is not recognised as widely as their support function. It has to be noted here that the authors do not claim that subject librarians have the same subject expertise as academics or that their teaching role is equivalent to that of the academics. However, a lack of recognition of subject librarians as a part of the academic structure in the institution may be perceived as a barrier to successful communication and collaboration with academics, including in VLEs. This, in turn,

can result in an overall reduction in the quality of the learning experience for the students and thus is a teaching issue that is beyond the scope of this study, although an important one that would be worth addressing in future research.

### **Perceived opportunities in VLEs**

Research findings confirm Buehler's (2004, p.75) statement that library resources are not perceived as an integral part of VLEs. Such claims recurred in the interviews and the survey where the majority of the participants agreed that library resources are not represented enough in VLEs.

The general attitude of librarians towards their institutional VLEs is another important aspect of library-VLE integration debate. Whereas literature presents multiple discussions and advocates library integration and active participation by librarians in VLEs, the study findings partly contradicted this position, i.e. interview participants expressed their doubts about the effectiveness of VLEs. Also, there was a level of dissatisfaction with VLEs expressed by the participants of the research: some described VLEs as "dated" and "clunky". This aspect can be viewed as an important factor influencing perceptions of a VLE as a content delivery platform and, also, the reason why VLEs might not be utilised to their intended extent.

Overall, the study results raised a new question of whether VLEs have become somewhat dated and if they still serve as an effective platform that goes

beyond fulfilling the purpose of course-content repository.

Lastly, the research results showed that a library presence in VLEs is endorsed by subject librarians. However, instead of direct input, it is interoperability, linking and automation that are considered the most effective ways to integrate libraries into VLEs. To be more precise, use of other content management systems to organize and present subject specific library content, e.g. Libguides, is perceived as an important and effective way to deliver course-specific support to large audiences.

In other words, use of Web 2.0 tools to automate library resource management and promotion is an alternative to direct presence of subject librarians in VLEs, especially in large institutions where staff numbers are inadequate for such initiatives to be implemented. This perspective is similar to the approach adopted in a number of initiatives encountered throughout the literature where library integration into VLEs was achieved by using Web 2.0 technologies to populate library links within individual courses in the VLE (Black and Blankenship, 2010; Jeffryes et al., 2011, Hristova, 2013).

### **Recommendations**

The research findings suggest that challenges experienced by subject librarians are at least partly caused by varying perceptions of librarians' role and status within the university. Thus, a practical

way to address this problem would require better library promotion and adoption of a systematic approach to increase library visibility in VLEs, e.g. automation of providing library links within VLEs.

Also, increased clarity of librarians' role in University teaching could be incorporated into institutions' policies and explained to the academics in a comprehensive way in order to address the gap in effective collaboration between librarians and academics.

### **Conclusion**

This study showed that the VLE-library separation in the researched institutions is common. However, with current progress in improving subject guides and making library materials easier to integrate into VLEs, we can ascertain that libraries have already found and will be finding ways to integrate into Virtual Learning Environments. This can be achieved by the direct presence of subject librarians in VLEs and also by harvesting resources that can be linked to or integrated into VLEs.

This study presented just a snapshot of subject librarians' attitudes, practices and challenges in using VLEs, the key issue discovered being inadequate communication and collaboration levels between the librarians and academics. It is a call for both of these parties to build relationships and find ways to best fulfil their role in VLEs.

This relationship needs to be clarified and improved for progress to occur and for the full

potential of VLE technology in enhancing the learning experience to be realized. This study showed the need for communication and review of the possibilities VLEs can or cannot offer.

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