

Do virtual learning environments help deliver a consistent learning experience? Exploring the international delivery of UK Marketing degrees.

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Abstract

E-learning and virtual learning environments (VLE) are hailed as the fundamental tool that will take United Kingdom (UK) University degrees to global markets. Exclusive franchise programmes and distance learning are the most favored methods that are currently being used by several UK based institutions. Many UK and US higher education institutions have achieved considerable success using these methods whilst several of them have experienced challenges such as inconsistent use and application of technology, local regulatory requirements, cultural aspects and the delivery of consistent academic quality. This paper attempts to explore the challenges and opportunities that exist for the internationalization of Marketing degrees and the role of e-learning tools such as VLEs play in delivering a consistent learning experience. The paper employs a case study approach investigating three specific scenarios. The first case is investigating how a VLE is used to support the delivery of a BA (Hons) Marketing degree at a UK University. The second is to investigate how the same programme is delivered on a franchised basis in Malaysia. The third is a UK Postgraduate Marketing degree delivered exclusively using a distance learning (DL) model. This data is used in the development of a practical set of recommendations focusing on delivering consistent marketing degrees in an international market. The preliminary results of the investigation show that for UK higher education institutions to deliver real value to students undertaking marketing related degrees, students, staff and businesses should work across national boundaries, cultural norms and education legislation, integrating learning styles, teaching methods and different levels of facilities made available to students in host nations.

Keywords: E-learning, Virtual Learning Environments, Franchise programmes, Distance learning

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1 Introduction

Is the UK higher education brand under attack? The UK has for decades had a strong foothold in the higher education market earning recognition for high quality degrees recognised well throughout the world. This position has for long been able to attract non-UK students to British universities in particular students from Asian and South East Asian (SEA) countries significantly contributing to the higher education (HE) institutions' income and student numbers whilst building international communities. However, this favourable leadership position is at considerable risk as countries in Asia and South East Asia are building up 'HE hubs' of their own, able to compete with established UK and US institutions. The perceived high quality, consistency and recognition of UK marketing degrees used to be the main differentiator, however in times with fierce competition and economic growth in Asia and South East Asia this advantage is increasingly challenged.

During the last couple of decades the fast growing Asian economies have made it apparent that local institutions are capable of delivering high quality University education to the masses. Governments have allowed local HE institutions, both state funded and private, to award University degrees in a move to stop young students leaving their own countries and perhaps to curtail a brain drain. The response from UK HE institutions has been to internationalise UK degrees, cashing in on the brand equity of UK degrees.

E-learning supported by VLE platforms became a favoured tool used for several delivery modes, including distance learning (DL), franchised programmes and UK on-site delivery. VLEs were adopted as essential management tools for UK HE institutions to monitor and gauge the delivery of their programmes. The desire among in particular students from South East Asian regions to study for a UK degree in their home countries resulted in "growing awareness of lifelong learning and led to the increasing demand for higher education services. This invariably prompted HE institutions to use VLEs to remain competitive and cost-effective" (Poon et al., 2004, p. 374).

This paper will explore the e-learning and VLE platforms used by two UK HE institutions. It will investigate some of the challenges to the effective use of VLEs to deliver a consistent student experience. The case studies will discuss the use of VLEs as supporting tools in the delivery of a BA (Hons) Marketing degree at a UK University, the same degree at a franchise University in Malaysia and finally an MSc Marketing using a distance learning model.

2 Literature Review

2.1 E-Learning

E-learning can be defined as "Internet technologies used to deliver a broad array of solutions that enhance the instructional process" (Poon et al., 2004, p.374). The main purpose of using e-

learning is to enhance the students' learning experience by adding value to the teaching and learning activities. Bonk (2004) has identified a set of features from reviewing trends in online programmes in HE institutions and argues these are essential to e-learning; empowerment of the learner through access to course content online; focus on developing the teaching methods used in the delivery of distance learning programmes to incorporate 'real life situations' and finally; use e-learning to encourage "generative learning" among students rather than "passive reception". These trends are focused on throughout the paper and are believed to be essential to the delivery of a consistent learning experience.

The below table gives an overview of four levels of electronic education (Toth, 2006). When discussing the effective use of a VLE in the delivery of DL and franchised degrees, the paper will apply type 3, defined as a student-teacher communication system and a virtual class room where the content of the syllabus can only be acquired through cooperation of students.

	type 1	type 2	type 3	type 4
Knowledge	Web pages; Web presentations; Electronic course books	Computer Based Training (CBT)		Training as a combination of traditional and e-learning (blended-learning)
Understanding				
Application	Virtual classroom; Electronic communication system – on-line (VLE)			
Analysis				
Synthesis				
Evaluation				

pre-e-learning education
←————→
e-learning education

2.2 Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs)

VLEs are not only used in the delivery of DL programmes but have also become an integrated part of the delivery of UK on-site programmes with the aim of supporting the face-to-face (F2F) interaction in the class room between lecturers/students and students/students (Mitchell, 2007). VLEs can be used by lecturers as a knowledge management tool to encourage student learning (Joint, 2004). Stonebraker and Hazeltine (2004) argue that technology can be used to support F2F teaching and accommodates students' needs during out-of-class time giving them flexibility to access teaching material at their convenience and carry out discussions with other students via online discussion areas.

Alltree and Quadri (2007) argue that students increasingly have to balance studies with employment and family commitments, encouraging the development of more convenient and

flexible study modes, out-of-class access to teaching material and staff and independent learning. Working students are more mature and need less support and general differences between working and non-working students include “level of readiness, adequacy of support and quality of content presented online” (Poon et al., 2004, p.376)

According to a cross-cultural study carried out by Ruiz-Molina and Cuadrado-Garcia (2008) investigating the ability of a VLE to be used in the learning process of students studying at the London School of Economics and Political Science (UK) and the University of Valencia (Spain). Research shows there is a strong relationship between participation in the e-learning activities and final results in the course. Some of the indicators of participation include viewing the site, posting and reading messages and the length of time spent in the VLE. Furthermore, appropriate e-learning activities are successful at motivating students intrinsically and although students are not rewarded for participating in the e-learning activities they will participate if the activities are considered exciting and challenging. That is the case even when students have no particular interest in the course content in general.

Dyson and Campello (2003) have identified several aspects of VLEs that can be evaluated to understand their level of user-friendliness;

- *Frequency of interactions*: this refers to the level of usage of the different facilities the VLE provides – the usage level is linked to the learning process.
- *Quality of interactions*: this refers to the quality of the messages posted, depth of debates, clarity of arguments etc. – the quality of the interactivity and not only the number of accesses is required to assess the VLE.
- *Learner outcomes*: this refers to the VLE’s ability to support students’ learning.

2.3 Challenges to the Use of VLEs

2.3.1 Technical Factors

Alhabshi (2002) suggests that although e-learning can support students’ learning through the use of text, graphics, audio and video messages, there is in particular one area which could weaken the usefulness and effectiveness of the e-learning activities. The author points to technical difficulties such a server failure and bandwidth capabilities and the actual interface of the VLE as being areas where the usability and user experience could be negatively affected. Poon et al. (2004) identified five technological factors that affect the learning effectiveness of a VLE; internet accessibility, computer literacy, previous experience used or skill of surfing the Internet and time of logon to the campus homepage. Homan and Macpherson (2005) argue that the state

and level of technological development of the University will determine which kinds of e-learning solutions can be implemented.

2.3.2 Cultural Factors

Barajas and Owen (2000) highlight key areas that an institution should consider when implementing a VLE as part of a programme namely; the level of co-operation between the home institution and the partner organisation and the differences in the cultural and/or linguistic environments in which the teachers and students belong.

Cultural differences between countries and regions can affect students' learning needs, preferences and styles. This paper takes the view that culture is "the beliefs, philosophy, observed traditions, values, perceptions, and patterns of action by individuals and groups" (Chen et al., 1999, p.220). Stoney and Wild (1998) emphasise the importance of considering cultural differences when designing the VLE interface and instructions and argue that different cultures will respond to the layout, images, symbols, colors and sound differently.

McLoughlin and Oliver (2000) suggest a potential cultural tension between satisfying an international student body while simultaneously being able to accommodate for local differences in culture and learning preferences. This requires flexibility in the delivery of teaching materials and resources through the VLE to accommodate for a variety of needs and lack of such could create a hindrance to effective delivery and student learning. McLoughlin and Oliver (2000) mention several cultural issues that impact the instructional design of the VLE. Among these are the importance of understanding learners' needs and preferences; the tutor's role in terms of providing appropriate feedback and monitoring the activity in the VLE; and collaboration and co-construction in terms encouraging students to work in teams and share knowledge.

2.3.3 Legislative Factors

According to Barajas and Owen (2000, p.9) "international VLE activities demonstrate problems of legal and economic nature as well as problems that emerge from the differences in the learning patrimonies of the audiences." In this section the paper will discuss the legislative factors only. Generally in Malaysia, the government has an influential role to play in the development and quality control in the private education sector (Lim, 2008). One of the key legislative factors that affect the programme delivery of in particular franchised programmes in SEA is the local ministry of education's enforcement of local modules in the curriculum. This means when students have completed their BA (Hons) Marketing degree they would, in addition to the 24 modules decided by the partner University, also have studied several local modules such as religion, nation food and language. Additionally, the F2F time per module and the out-of-class contact time (office hours) at SEA's HE institutions is considerably more than what traditionally is the case in UK. Again this is enforced by local government. This could lead to a student culture reliant on lecturer led-teaching finding it challenging to fully engage with a student-centered VLE. The level of student engagement and motivation impact not only the usage of a VLE but also the level of interaction with teaching materials and student-centred

discussion areas provided through the VLE. Student usage of a VLE to support on-site delivery of a BA (Hons) Marketing degree shows that teaching materials/resources and discussion forums are two of the most used features of the VLE. Potentially students from SEA or other non-UK cultures will not take full advantage of the VLE's facilities due to a dependence on teacher-led learning.

2.3.4 Learning Styles

Learning styles and preferences are important for a consistent delivery and usage of a VLE. The differences in learning styles are seen in two ways; 1) as education systems and methods are culturally dependent so will students from different parts of the world have acquired different learning styles and 2) a VLE requires a different approach to learning compared with F2F delivery. Stonebraker and Hazeltine (2004) have summarised some of the key differences between traditional F2F learning and virtual learning which consequently have an effect on the required learning styles.

	Traditional academic learning	Virtual learning
Focus of course	Group	Individual
Focus of content	Teacher-centered	Student-centered
Form	Synchronous	Asynchronous
Time	Scheduled	Anytime
Place	Classroom	Anywhere
Flexibility	Standardized	Customized
Content	Stable, durable	Dynamic, transitory
Number of students	Space limited	Without limits
Instructor preparation	Some (transparencies)	Extensive pre-preparation
Distribution of materials	Hard copy	Electronic download
Interaction	Spontaneous	Structured
Range if interactivity	Full interactivity	Limited interactivity

Stonebraker and Hazeltine, 2004.

The most significant difference between F2F and learning through a VLE (and to some extent F2F supported by a VLE) is the switch of focus from the lecturer to the student. The responsibility is on the student to develop as a learner through co-creation, interactivity and initiative. Arguably this is a learning style not appropriate for all students creating barriers for an effective and consistent use of VLEs.

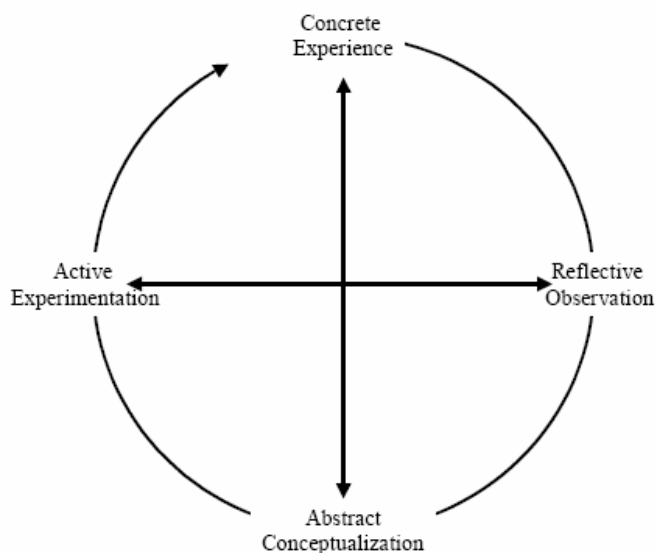
This paper argues that VLEs can also be used to encourage group work and interactivity through group spaces, discussion areas and wikis offering an online alternative to in-class student/lecturer activity as well as time management and organisational communication tools. This reinforces the

switch from lecturer- to student-focus however emphasises that communities and group spaces can be created to an extent compensating for the lack of F2F group-focused teaching.

Smith (2005) has identified several competencies that are necessary in the delivery of an efficient VLE. The key competencies are as follows; appropriate amount of student interaction with the teacher via email/telephone; teachers must have the abilities to use the technology; ability of the teacher to set up a well-structured course site; teachers should develop or encourage the creation of a community through collaborative learning and finally teachers should help students to apply online learning techniques to their personal learning style.

Students' level of motivation towards the use of a VLE as a supportive element of their learning has shown to be a great influence on its effectiveness as a learning tool. Several skills seem necessary for students to have in order for this to happen; self-discipline, cognitive engagement and technology self-efficacy (Poon et al., 2004). Moreover, students' level of involvement and participation in addition to their behaviour towards and perception of VLEs also impact the effectiveness of the VLE (Webster and Hackley in Poon, 2004).

VLEs provide a useful platform for peer-learning and diffusion of student and/or lecturer created content, in particular supporting the second and fourth stage of Kolb's (1981) experiential learning model, which if followed will lead to effective learning. It can be argued that many HE programmes lack practicality encouraging students to develop transferable and professional skills through problem solving in real-world settings. The conclusions derived from a study by Ruiz-Molina and Cuadrado-Garcia (2008, p.158) show that peer-to-peer learning through a VLE is more "efficient, effective and satisfactory" for students than other learning and teaching platforms.



Source: Kolb, 1981.

3 Hypotheses development

It is expected that differences in usage of the VLEs will impact on the students' learning experience and that the investigation of the three case studies will provide insight into which differences exist and how these are reflected in the student learning experience.

We hypothesise that franchised universities should use UK staff to deliver part of the teaching content to ensure a consistent learning experience. Furthermore, the paper investigates the elements of a user-friendly VLE and expects to find that a user-friendly VLE will lead to a more consistent and positive learning and student experience than if a less user-friendly VLE is used. Finally, technical, legislative and cultural factors in addition to learning styles as discussed above are expected to impact on a VLE's ability to deliver a consistent learning experience to all students. Therefore we hypothesise that these factors will need to be considered when using a VLE on on-site deliveries, franchised and DL programmes.

The following hypotheses are tested;

- H1:* It is necessary to have UK University staff to deliver teaching content to ensure a consistent learning experience on franchised programmes.
- H2:* A user-friendly VLE is essential to delivering a consistent learning experience.
- H3:* Understanding cultural norms, education legislation and learning styles is essential to delivering a consistent learning experience.

4 Methodology

The paper employs a multiple-case study approach investigating three specific scenarios, drawing conclusions useful for the development of a practical set of recommendations focusing on delivering consistent learning experiences in international markets.

The names of the universities will remain anonymous and referred to as University A, B and C;

- Case study 1: On-site delivery, UK – University A
- Case study 2: Franchised degree, Malaysia – University B
- Case study 3: Distance learning, International – University C

The data collected in this study is obtained from a number of sources including in-depth face-to-face interviews conducted at the Business Schools of two UK HE institutions; student usage

numbers of VLEs, link tutor reports and training reports in the use of a VLE at the franchise institution

5 Case study 1: On-site delivery – United Kingdom

UK HE degrees are approved and regulated by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) which has developed a set of guidelines used by universities to ensure an appropriate academic standard and quality. The QAA's main areas of influence are programme governance and curriculum renewal (Paton and Bevis, year unknown). The government's HE agenda is focused around key topics such as developing students' employability skills; enhancing UK degrees' competitiveness in a global market for HE; creating strong links with business environments; and encouraging flexible study modes through the use of e-learning tools (Clarke, 2003; Yorke and Knight, 2004). Even within UK the competition for students is fierce. The days are gone when universities could position and brand themselves based on "selectivity of students, the research standing of the staff, the prestige of one's customer base and the employability of graduates" (Paton and Bevan, unknown year, p.7). To become highly rated among students, universities must bring extra value to the student experience through creative deliveries, structure and content and by exposing students to 'real world' experience. In particular on marketing degrees can universities integrate innovative assessment and business engagement giving students' the skills they need in the 'real' world. Doing so, VLEs can be used by students to manage the learning environment and develop transferrable business skills. This will be discussed in the following case study.

Students today are generally more technology-savvy than previous generations and the usage of technology has a positive influence on their acceptance and willingness to use technology in learning. From research 74% were 'very' or 'extremely confident' using technology, whereas only 3% said they were 'not at all confident' (Jeffries et al. 2006). The majority of students found the facilities and resources available via the VLE either 'extremely useful' or 'quite useful' and 52% agree that the VLE has a positive impact on their learning (Jeffries et al. 2004; Quadri et al., 2007). In 2006 (Jeffries et al.) nearly 80% found the VLE supports their learning. The facilities and resources available include teaching materials, module information, email, module news, electronic resources (electronic library), group sites and class discussion.

The 24/7 access to teaching materials was highlighted as a key advantage by students (Jeffries et al., 2006) and could help students to become more independent learners with 55% of students agreeing that the VLE impacted their learning style in this direction (Jeffries et al., 2004). Barrett et al. (2007) investigated if a link between the access to teaching materials via the VLE and student attendance exists. With regards to attendance at lectures, 6% of students said they do not attend many because of the resources available via the VLE, whereas 14% gave that response in relation to tutorials. 61% of students said they attend some teaching sessions but appreciate the resources available from the VLE and 15% said that regardless of their attendance they also use

the discussion area on the VLE actively. The paper therefore argues that with the current research such a link cannot be established.

Student focus groups (Jeffries et al., 2004) identified two areas of ‘good practice’ in the use of a VLE; 1) Ease of communication between students and between students and lecturer, being able to contact the lecturer electronically (Quadri et al., 2007); and 2) posting of handouts and lecture notes prior to the lecture making listening and note taking during lectures easier and more productive. The main reasons for students to access the VLE are to download teaching material, to access their University e-mail and to communicate with the lecturer.

Jeffries et al. (2004) investigated academic staff’s usage of the VLE in teaching and found that most members of staff use it as an online information and resource platform. The key finding was the lack of interactivity on the VLE in terms of using group spaces and the discussion area. Jeffries et al., (2006) explain that lecturers at times ‘speak a different language’ as students when it comes to using technologies, which could cause limitations for a user-friendly usage of the VLE.

The shared point of view from students and staff underline the argument that VLEs should not replace F2F contact between lecturers and students, but be used to supplement in-class teaching. Generally students, although comfortable using technology, would not prefer their entire degree to be taught online, but still prefer a F2F teaching mode (Jeffries et al. 2004; Jeffries et al., 2006; Barrett et al., 2007).

The paper will now look specifically at usage data for three modules. The sources that can be monitored to show number of student accesses include the Definitive Module Descriptors (DMD) – a document that describes the structure of the module; discussion postings in the discussion area; view and posting of message in the group space; view and posting of news items and download of teaching resources.

5.1 Principles of Marketing (Level 1)

417 level 1 students were registered on this module that ran from October to December 2008. During November 2008 the module site was accessed on average 863 times per day, the highest number of accesses being 2747 and the lowest number of accesses 183. On this module the group spaces were not used.

Activity Sem. A	DMDs	Discussions	Groups	News	Teaching Resources
Total	22	6711	N/A	5687	2457
Daily Average	>0	16	N/A	14	6

The table shows that at least 16 students viewed or posted a message to the discussion area each day during semester A, 14 students viewed a news item and 6 students downloaded a teaching resource.

5.2 Marketing Planning in Practice (Level 2)

173 level 2 students were registered on this module that ran from October to December. During November 2008 the module site was accessed on average 366 times per day, the highest number of accesses being 1235 and the lowest number of accesses 68.

Activity Sem. A	DMDs	Discussions	Groups	News	Teaching Resources
Total	9	1168	625	2424	1897
Daily Average	>0	7	4	14	11

The table shows that at least 7 students viewed or posted a message to the discussion area each day during semester A, 4 students posted or viewed a message to the group space, 14 students viewed a news item and 11 students downloaded a teaching resource.

5.3 Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainable Marketing (Level 3)

294 level 3 students were registered on this module that ran from October to December 2008. During November 2008 the module site was accessed on average 393 times per day, the highest number of accesses being 1402 and the lowest number of accesses 59.

Activity Sem. A	DMDs	Discussions	Groups	News	Teaching Resources
Total	41	2527	N/A	1497	3426
Daily Average	>0	9	N/A	5	12

The table shows that at least 9 students viewed or posted a message to the discussion area each day during semester A, 5 students viewed a news item and 12 students downloaded a teaching resource.

5.4 Usage of the VLE

The VLE is used on all modules on the degree to communicate with students, post teaching material, upload news messages and respond to student queries. On some modules the VLE is also used to manage student teams via the group spaces allowing students to manage their projects and assignments. Additionally, wikis are used on some modules encouraging students to share knowledge and information with the class by co-creating documents and resources. However, on most modules it is used more as a managed learning environment focusing on distributing information and materials to students.

5.4.1 Lecturers' Engagement

The key finding from the report by Jeffries et al. (2004) showed a lack of staff encouraging interactivity in the VLE through the use of group spaces and discussion area. Since then the data above shows a considerable increase in the usage of such facilities. That lecturers use the VLE as an interactive information management tool could be due to enhanced comfort levels of using the technology and understanding of how to set up features to work on the module and for the

benefit of majority of the students. For example, Wikis are being used to encourage students to create their own content and information, potentially leading to peer-learning.

5.4.2 *Administrative Features*

The VLE allows students to self-register on modules that they will be studying each semester. This allows administrators and teaching staff to plan ahead and organize teaching material, groups and assessments. The VLE is also an inherent tool to communicate with students well in advance providing them with relevant pre-session reading material in addition to sharing the information with the teaching teams. The VLE enables the module leader to share information with the tutorial team and allocate students to the various tutorial sessions. The VLE provides the opportunity for administrators to optimize resources especially when the module is delivered across programmes and faculties.

5.4.3 *Student Engagement*

The interactive features on the VLE can take time for students to get used to in particular as they have many other means of communication, i.e. social networks, text messaging and email. In particular the group space often take time for students to get used to, however once familiar with the features, students often find it very useful to communicate with other members of the student team, the tutor and to upload material relevant to projects they are working on.

The VLE is also used to keep students up-to-date on events in the business world by posting and linking to news items online, potentially increasing student interest in the particular topic area and encouraging them to get involved in the module. In addition, the VLE is used to inform students about preparation for seminars, which are done in ways that create interest and curiosity about the particular seminar or lecture.

5.4.4 *Additional Student Support*

The VLE works as an additional source of support for students throughout as they review teaching material at their own convenience. Particularly for students with extenuating circumstances does the VLE work as a resource platform with all the material used on the module available to students. Lecturers also use the VLE to support students with the ability to review students' progress and take action to help and assist students that need special attention. On the second year module 'Marketing Planning in Practice' (MPIP) student teams work with 'real' businesses to create innovative business solutions and each group is mentored by an academic tutor. The students communicate within their teams and with the tutor using the VLE's group site. The tutor monitors the teams' group spaces and gives feedback on material the students write, student queries and generally monitor the progress, being able to take action if need be.

6 Case study 2: Use of VLE on Franchise Degree Programme - Malaysia

A study by Abdullah et al. (2008) asking ten selected CEO's from ten franchised colleges about which factors lead to satisfaction for franchise partners shows the following (in ranked order);

1. brand recognition, status and image
2. academic quality
3. supporting services (academic, administration and marketing)
4. communication, sharing of information/technology/expertise, programme activities sharing

These identified factors are of importance when evaluating the consistency of the programme delivery and how the VLE as an additional teaching tool to F2F teaching is contributing. Malaysia is one of the countries in SEA that has made use of the franchise model for a considerable period. The delivery model was initially what is referred to as '2+1' or '1+2' giving students the option to study part of their degree with the Malaysian institution followed by 1 or 2 years with a partner institution in a different country. However, increasingly the model '3+0' or 'franchising' is used where students study the whole degree at their Malaysian University. However, Malaysia is no longer as dependent on overseas franchise partners to recruit students. With a vision to become a 'HE hub' by 2010 Malaysia is attracting up to 100,000 foreign students from the SEA region and other continents (Lim, 2008).

The Malaysian HE sector and its regulatory system has restructured to 'keep' students at home for their HE thus providing accessibility to the majority and not making HE a luxury item for the wealthy and privileged. This strategy is part of their 2020 vision which Dr Mahathir Mohammed introduced in the early 1990's. Having the opportunity to graduate with a University degree is now a realistic dream to many in Malaysia. Increasingly Malaysia is becoming the chosen destination for students in the SEA region who would not have had the opportunity to study in UK or US due to financial costs of such degrees.

Due to the regulatory entry restrictions applying to non-Malay students creating a quota for the number of non-Malay students accepted to study at Malaysian universities combined with the growing economy has created a need for overseas degrees (Lim, 2008). For University A, the aim is to deliver the overseas degree at the Malaysian University to the same standard as the standard adhered to in the home country. However, delivering franchised programmes is rarely without challenges. The following case study will discuss this.

University A has been delivering four BA (Hons) degree programmes over the last decade with University B in Malaysia. The programmes are delivered in three locations and moved from 1+2 to a 3+0 in the last three years. At any given time there are approximately 1,300 students studying for a UK University degree and several masters programmes are now joining this format. University B has three yearly intakes compared with the one intake in University A.

Business relationship has been lucrative to both institutions whilst a rigorous quality evaluation and monitoring system is in place to ensure consistency of material, delivery and student experience. This includes the moderation of assessment by UK University staff, appointment of UK external examiners and a team of link tutors who visit University B at least five times a year. All quality monitoring and maintenance schemes have evolved over the years and many systems are now working well, ensuring strictest procedures are used to maintain quality of education and student experience.

For the purpose of this paper it is important to mention the main difference in usage of the VLE between University A and B. At University B, the VLE is only used at programme level, not module level as at University A. This is due to technological and administrative challenges faced by the University. When University B staff went to University A to experience how staff use the VLE it was expressed that a VLE at module level could be used advantageously at University B. This could potentially facilitate a higher level of consistency in comparable usage between the two universities.

In 2006 staff at University B received training in the use of the VLE. Out of 230 members of staff who took part in the training, 93 evaluation forms were received. From the feedback it became evident that staff were positive towards the software and its applications. However, some resistance was met due to the comprehensiveness of the VLE as the University already has a simple VLE in place. In terms of training the staff to use the VLE there was confidence among staff with 80% knowing how to access and use the VLE portal, 62% knowing how to access and use the VLE module and programme websites and finally 66% felt that the workshop would enable them to use the VLE more effectively in their teaching (Singer, 2006).

Interviews with the Associate Dean of Collaborations and a Franchise Link Tutor revealed that students at University B are eager to use the VLE facilities and have come to expect access to teaching materials and resources online and express dissatisfaction when access is not given. Students not only appreciate the teaching resources and information available, but also see the VLE as a source of confidence and comfort as the link with the UK University becomes more evident. The VLE creates a feeling of belonging and community across borders and cultures.

6.1 Challenges to a consistent learning experience

The VLE is used at a programme level and is used to communicate with students, post teaching material and upload news messages. Although the VLE is used by staff at University B, it is very limited compared to the staff usage at University A. There could be several reasons for this;

6.1.1 Staff Resistance due to Existing Simple VLE

Staff at University B does receive training in using the VLE, however expert user status has been achieved only by a minority. Some resistance has been met from staff when asked to adopt the

VLE mainly because the University already has its own simple VLE requiring staff to update both VLEs. This is time consuming and could lead to human errors in providing all materials through both VLEs.

6.1.2 *Use of Teaching Materials*

Staff at University B are faced with the unique challenge of using similar material to that used by University A staff as students in Malaysia expect local staff to use similar course content and material to that of the UK staff. This however is not required as the programmes are 3+0 and fully franchised. University A have always maintained that the specified learning outcomes must be the same as the UK programme but a 'local' context is encouraged. This however is not openly appreciated by students in Malaysia as they feel all material studied need to be similar to the UK

6.1.3 *Administrative Challenges*

Currently the VLE at University B is used as a content management tool only providing students with information about their programme (however all students have the ability to access any module at University A as a 'guest' giving students an opportunity to compare and contrast module teaching material, assessment and other module aspects). This is due to administrative challenges in terms of enrolling students on the appropriate modules during the relevant semester. The enrollment challenge is caused by the differences in delivery structures between University A and B; at University A modules are run over 12 weeks October-December and February- May. At University B, modules are run as 'short' and 'long' (either 7 or 14 weeks) and three semesters are run each academic year with three yearly student intakes. This make up a key challenge to the consistent use of the VLE.

6.1.4 *Work Experience & Business Integration*

The majority of students at University B tend to be family-funded why the need to work to pay towards their degree is unusual, compared with students at University A where 15-20 weekly hours of part-time work is common. The high number of weekly teaching hours, 17 compared with 8 weekly hours at University A leaves students at University B with less time part-time work.

Not only do students at University B gain little work experience during their degree, there is also less business integration (i.e. guest lectures, applied research and 'live' business case studies) on the degree. At University A, the VLE is used to a great extent on modules where students work on 'live' business projects and the VLE becomes the main platform for communication between students, lecturers and the business project helping students to develop their project and time management skills.

6.1.5 *Technological advancement*

Technological advancement and development is another important factor that impacts University B's ability to use all features in the VLE. At University B the network access is slow and at times

unstable prohibiting the use of features such as video and audio. It also means that the version of the VLE is quite basic keeping the student interaction at a minimum and the VLE is used more so as a content management and communication dissemination tool.

6.1.6 Staff usage of VLE

The learning styles preferred by many students at University B is focused on lecturer-led teaching and exemplified by the high number of contact hours per lecturer per week (16 hours, compared with 2 hours at University A). The high number of contact hours is enforced by the local MQA (Malaysian equivalent to UK QAA) and leaves limited time to prepare teaching material for staff. In the interview with the Associate Dean of Collaborations it was mentioned that the lack of time to prepare teaching material and resources is a reason for the limited use of the VLE. In addition, it is important to note that higher contact hours are not a positive feature if local staff do not use that time for creative in-class interaction, discussion and critical thinking. Staff at University A tends to use the VLE as a supporting tool to follow up lectures, provide additional material and prepare students for next week's sessions. Because staff at University B are 1) required to spend more time in class and 2) engaged in marking assessments and administrative work on an ongoing basis due to the three student intakes a year, this makes it difficult for staff to be innovative with their course delivery and use the VLE to encourage student learning and engagement.

6.1.7 Legislation

Generally in Malaysia, the government has an influential role to play in the development and quality control in the private education sector (Lim, 2008). Many HEI are governed by local Ministries of Education and are as such required to fall in line with these local legislations. The number of teaching hours and office hours may also be determined by these authorities although in many private HE institutions students will have access to their tutors throughout the day/week. In comparison, students have limited access to teaching staff and the successful embracing of the interactivity in UK may be due to this restriction. The legislative requirements will potentially have an impact on the use of VLEs and independent learning compared with UK teaching styles and contact time.

6.1.8 Cultural Differences

Malaysia is a multi ethnic country with three main ethnic groups; Malay, Chinese and Indian living and working in harmony (Fontaine and Richardson, 2003). Malaysia is predominantly categorised as a 'Muslim' nation where the majority belong to the Islam religion (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1999). The key to the success of Malaysia has always been the ability of their different people to live in peace despite very different cultural backgrounds, practices and beliefs. With the government legislation dictating the 'quota' system for entry into HE it is the private institutions such as the University B in this case that provide admission to the non-Malays wishing to study at University level.

Malaysian students tend to be wholly dependent on ‘teacher input’ and in many cases lack the initiative and confidence to undertake independent learning. This may be due to the teaching styles used in schools and early education. Students tend to have an enormous amount of respect for teachers and thus do not tend to challenge ideas and suggestions put forward by lecturers. This is evident in link tutor reports and moderation done by UK staff where writing styles are mostly non-critical and reliant on course books.

It is also important to note that students studying at University B are more enthralled by the fact that they are studying for a UK/British qualification driven by the preconceived notion that British qualifications are superior to that of local qualifications. Many students do not engage with University A and lack any ‘meaningful relationship’ with the degree provider where they will ultimately become alumni of. This is obviously a negative situation for the Franchise provider and detrimental to the future progress of 3 + 0 programmes in the long run.

6.1.9 Access to additional study skills resources - Academic Skills Unit (ASU)

At University A students have access to an Academic Skills Unit where staff help students with essay writing, editing and evaluation of feedback, presentation skills among other. The teaching material used to guide students is also available to students at University B through the VLE. However at University B no such ASU has been set up with members of staff available to help students. The lack of F2F guidance and workshops make the online resources less appealing to students and the full effect of the Unit’s study skill sessions are not fulfilled through purely online support.

7 Case study 3: Use of VLE on Distance Learning Programme - International

Evan and Fan (2002) define DL as “open learning applied to situations in which there is a geographical separation between the learner and the learning institution.” The key advantages of DL delivered through a VLE are the students’ opportunity to review the materials in their own pace; to omit material which the student is already familiar with, allowing more time to concentrate on new information and finally determine the learning process in terms of location, time and pace. On the other hand, the advantages of on-site delivery are student feedback in real time; adaption of teaching style to suit student needs and understanding of students’ abilities (Evan and Fan, 2002).

A study by Gan (1998) shows that students undertaking a DL programme prefer F2F tutorials compared to exclusive online learning and information. The results of this study are supported by the outcome of a study carried out by Schmidt et al. (2000) comparing DL with conventional learning. Almost half of the respondents (180 respondents in total) expressed that DL is unable to deliver as high a learning experience as conventional learning methods. However, this paper

does acknowledge that the studies were undertaken a few years ago and that at the time students' anxiety, lack of exposure to or inexperience of using computers and the internet might have had a significant impact on the results of the study.

Based on an interview with the Director of Distance Learning Programmes at a UK University – University C, case study 3 will consider how the VLE, Blackboard, is used to deliver the MSc Marketing to international markets.

Prior to adopting Blackboard as the main link between students and staff, the University relied heavily on hardcopy materials and simple online discussion facilities. However with Blackboard the University has moved “from a discussion board format to study support and programme enhancement” (Higgins et al., 2008, p.5). The main aims of this switch have been threefold; to give students technological tools to improve their learning experience; to give students access to additional teaching material and information in addition to material provided for each module and finally to create an opportunity for student centered-debate and exchange of information. According to Higgins et al. (2008, p.5) “The enhanced use of the VLE for structured teaching and learning activities will embed technology as an integral part of the delivery mode, rather than as an appliqué or extra dimension to it.”

390 masters students were registered on the course running October to September 2008/09. During November 2008 the course site was accessed on average 34 times per day.

Activity	Email	Announcements	Discussion Board	Communications Areas	Groups
Total	52	3730	4963	1208	188
Percent of overall usage	0.49%	35%	46%	11%	1.76%

The table shows that 0.49% of the accesses were done to check email, 35% to read announcements, 46% to post or read a message on the discussion board, 11% to contribute to the communications areas and 1.76% to upload a message or read a message in the group space.

7.1 Challenges to a consistent learning experience

The VLE is used on a module level and is used to communicate with students, post teaching material, upload news messages, create discussions and provide feedback and marks among other features.

7.1.1 Learning Styles

Dringus (2000, in Homan and Macpherson, 2005) proposes that not all types of learners will benefit from engaging with e-learning as part of a DL programme. He argues that students who seek much guidance in their learning and technology management, who need the motivation of

others to stay motivated themselves and who prefer to work with other people will gradually lose their interest in the activities, course and potentially programme. For students studying the MSc Marketing programme a similar pattern is seen and it is challenging for tutors to maintain student interest and engagement throughout the degree. Particularly because the programme is offered internationally it is demanding to create a VLE structure, content and instructions that suit all students' preferred learning styles. To overcome this challenge University C attempts to use a wide variety of learning tools and activities that appeal to different types of learners, however with the lack of F2F interaction a successful delivery and use of VLE is potentially more difficult than with on-site and franchised delivery. A further challenge experienced by University C, is the lack of student feedback on preferred learning styles, understanding of the module content, satisfaction with the module and level of engagement with other students. Due to the lack of F2F interaction between lecturer and students Palloff and Pratt (2003, in Smith, 2005) claim that for an online learning environment to be effective it must have a learner-focused approach, meaning there must be an understanding from the teacher of how students learn, engage with information, how the learning is applied, among others. The creation of a learning community is very important to the successful delivery of DL programmes as students' involvement in the learning process is impacted not only by the potential achievement of academic goals and results, but also by "social acceptance, academic self-esteem, classmates and teacher personal assessment" (Ruiz-Molina and Cuadrado-Garcia, 2008, p.158). Using learning styles that substitute the lack of F2F interaction for all students is one of the main challenges to the successful use of Blackboard.

7.1.2 Lecturer's Loss of Control

O'Neil (2006) argues that the most critical factor in DL deliveries is the role of the lecturer. The responsibility for learning was traditionally attributed the lecturer, however, with the use of VLEs to deliver DL programmes the learning initiative is increasingly taken by students as online learning is "student-centred and student-driven" (Smith, 2005, p.8). Delivering the DL MSc Marketing through a VLE means students are less dependent on the lecturer to provide information and material as online resources are available. This in combination with the student-centred learning approach could lead to a loss of control over the VLE from the point of view of the lecturer. For example, the lecturer has little control over the messages the students upload, the activity in the group space and the information added in the virtual classroom. Some issues and topics are best discussed F2F and with complete VLE delivery this prohibits students/students and students/lecturers from having F2F discussions potentially benefitting from student/staff input in real time.

7.1.3 Use of Alternative Media for Communication

Social networks, instant messaging and mobile text messages are the main channels of communication for most students. This could constitute a challenge to the effective use of the VLE as students might prefer to receive information through these channels and use such when communicating with fellow students. It is important that the lecturer clearly encourages students to use the VLE for communications related to their studies and to check the news, discussion and

resource area on a frequent basis in addition to their student email. That being said, University C seems to have realized that students spend a lot of their time in social networks, in particular Facebook, thus the University's decision to add the application, 'Blackboard Sync' to the VLE. This application allows students to download course materials, check and post messages, submit assignments and check grades. Potentially this integration of Facebook and Blackboard could have a positive effect on students' motivation and learning experience.

8 Discussion

The discussion is based on the main findings from the case studies, the secondary research and built around the hypotheses set out in section 4.0.

Our investigation into the franchise operations of University A and B and DL programme at University C reveal that there is much more that UK universities could do to improve the relationship, deliver a better student experience and consolidate the UK University status in Malaysia and internationally. There are financial implications to the suggestions we have made however, given the scenario that UK's HE positioning is at stake and many universities recording diminished franchise income during the last few years, we believe it is time that some of the following suggestions are considered.

The UK HE institutions are competing with other HE institutions from the US, Australia and New Zealand for a share of the market for franchise and DL programmes especially in Malaysia which is fast becoming the 'HE Hub of SEA'. Therefore suggestions and discussion themes are based on regaining the market leader position.

8.1 H1: It is necessary to have UK University staff to deliver key content to ensure a consistent student experience on franchise programmes.

The franchise model's evolution from a 1+2 to 3+0 delivery mode has resulted in several benefits and disadvantages to the UK institution. When University A launched its BA (Hons) Marketing programmes in Malaysia a UK member of staff was appointed to oversee the operations, train local staff and also undertake some teaching. This practice was later abandoned and the member of staff was replaced by a 'Communications Officer' who had UK HE administrative experience. Subsequently, even this position was taken away due to operational difficulties. University A now has a regional office in Malaysia which has a broader set of objectives including recruitment, training, alumni operations and enhancing overall student experience.

Franchise delivery is dependent on maintaining consistent quality of teaching and in many cases it needs to either match the quality standards of the UK institution or be able to recreate a similar

student experience. VLEs are at the heart of this operation. It is evident that University B faces several challenges and any improvements will need investment in administrative and academic staff time, facilities and expertise.

The VLE used by University A has user-friendly features and is capable of delivering excellent support to the in-class efforts of UK teaching staff. However, the successful delivery of a module at University A depends on how academic staff chooses to utilise the VLE and students' enthusiasm in engaging with online content. Many academic staff at University A use the VLE as an integral part of the module and engagement via the VLE is deemed critical for the successful completion of assessments. Many modules use the VLE to operationalise 'on-going assessment' which invariably engages students.

Compare this approach with University B, delivering the same module content with the same learning outcomes to students studying 3+0, it is mostly based on in-class teaching and very little interaction online. Both VLEs used by University B (their own VLE and the extended VLE of University A) are used more or less as information disseminating tools rather than VLEs that can engage students, use as a channel for providing value added feedback, on line support and peer learning.

As such we believe that University A should consider engaging UK academic staff with overall understanding and experience to plan, organise and deliver modules at University B. It is suggested that University A staff who have good overall understanding of the programme can, not only add value to the student experience, but also train local staff and be able to share good practice between institutions. University B staff will then be able to operationalise the use of the VLE in a more constructive way linking the teaching practices used in the UK and ensuring consistency of use. Even if this staff engagement is limited to only 2 -3 weeks per semester, it will help the local staff accumulate a considerable amount of knowledge in addition to building a relationship with the UK staff which can then be used to build a more 'internationalised' curriculum. These can include but not be limited to assessment techniques, student engagement initiatives and business facing activity that can cut across cultures, national boundaries and legislation which are fundamental to the successful delivery of Marketing degrees.

Comprehensive use of the VLE is critical to building this relationship for it to become a successful partnership. The UK staff could continue to work with staff in Malaysia after the initial 'team teaching' on the module in the first 2-3 weeks. This teaching commitment can be continued on a yearly basis where the UK staff can visit Malaysia at any point in the semester when the relationship is matured. This arrangement will also have other major benefits; UK staff could conduct collaborative research with staff at the Malaysian University; innovative assessment could be designed for UK and Malaysian students to work in collaborative teams; and modules could collectively build business integration initiatives that can be generated from

UK and Malaysia. Importantly such activities could lead to students at University B feeling more integrated with the UK University leading to a better student experience.

8.2 H2: A user-friendly VLE is essential to delivering a consistent student experience.

It is evident that the VLE at University A has become more user-friendly over the years. More staff and students use the VLE and some modules use this facility not only to communicate with students but to add 'real value' to their learning experience.

The MPIP module considered in sections 5.2 and 5.4.4. is designed to bring students, staff and businesses together for delivering mutual benefit. In 2007-08, 23 students groups (5 in a team) worked with 17 business organisations. The VLE was central to executing this module and the teaching and tutorial teams could not have managed this complex module without using the VLE creatively and efficiently. The VLE at University A allows students to be managed in smaller groups which enable one-to-one feedback, dedicated guidance, progress monitoring and administration. Overall the module's success is dependent on the successful use of the VLE.

On the other hand University B struggles to use innovative assessment and integration with business although delivering the same BA (Hons) Marketing degree. Students in Malaysia are hardly exposed to guest lecturers from industry experts and do not get the same opportunity as UK students to work with real businesses. The three intakes per year and the constant assessment and marking loads prevent University B staff from taking initiative to launch such value added schemes. The VLE is not as user-friendly as the VLE at University A as it does not provide students with the opportunity to take part in online discussions, use the group space to communicate with other group members and get additional feedback from tutors. To support the students at University B, much time is spent in class and allocated to office hours, indicating the importance of F2F teaching to student learning.

Staff training is important to understand how the VLE can be used to encourage student learning. Staff at University A and B are offered training sessions during the academic year and these are generally well-attended. In addition, at University A staff can draw on student mentors who are trained specifically in the use of the VLE and can assist staff in setting up features and making available resources students appreciate having access to. Such facilities are however not available at University B.

It is evident that a user-friendly VLE is needed to provide a consistent learning experience and those differences in the advancement of the VLE and the availability of interactive features can impact on the teaching method, the level of business integration, the ability to encourage peer-to-peer learning and the students' opportunities to develop transferable skills. Considering Dyson and Campello's (2003) criteria for a user-friendly and successful VLE, it is identified by frequent student usage, positive learner perceptions and ability to support students in their learning.

Referring back to Toth's (2006) four levels of electronic education, (section 2.1), the authors argue that the VLE at University A is currently a type 3, however developing into type 4 with the support of the University's Blended Learning Unit. Contrarily, the VLE at University B is still in its early stage classified as a type 1. Therefore the VLE at University B is not yet fully user-friendly and therefore the learning experience generated for students at University A through the VLE is not fully transferred to students at University B.

On the other hand DL can be categorized as the opposite to franchise programmes where very little F2F is used by the provider but much of the student learning is provided online. University C uses Blackboard as its central learning tool in addition to module handbooks and recommended texts to deliver content. Local tutors are also employed to assist students who undertake DL studies. University C is one of the leading DL providers in the UK and sees Blackboard and its features as a necessity to deliver DL programmes successfully across Europe, Africa, Asia and other regions in the world. However, based on the interviews with the Director for DL at University C, it is predicted that technology although much improved and more user-friendly than in the recent years, will not be adequate to sustain the University's leadership position. He is of the opinion that enhanced tutor support on the ground is essential whilst the user-friendliness of the VLE will be essential to sustain recruitment.

8.3 H3: Understanding cultural norms, education legislation and learning styles is essential to delivering consistent student experience.

Although the effective use of VLEs as supporting tools in learning and teaching can advantage students and staff, there are potentially many limitations that prohibit a consistent student experience.

8.3.1 Cultural norms

The culture of a society impacts "how we do things" and how people relate to other people in private and professional situations. It influence how people of the society relate to other societies and also influence individual ambitions and to some extent creates a framework for what is 'normal' behaviour in that given society. Hofstede (1993, 1997 & 2001), Trompenaars (1993) and Schwartz (1994) are some of the main theorists describing cultural compositions of societies, organisations and individuals. Hofstede has identified five dimensions; power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity and Confucian dynamism. The dimensions of most relevance to this paper are power distance and individualism/collectivism. Power distance describes the extent to which the less influential in societies, families and organisations expect and accept power, decision-making and status to be distributed unequally. Individualism/collectivism describes the extent to which individual versus

collective achievements are valued and the importance of the group versus the individual (Fougere and Moulettes, 2006).

There is a high level of power distance in Malaysia (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1999) which is also seen among students who use a formal way of approaching lecturers and are often dependent on such to provide teaching material and instructions, whereas independent thinking and development of own ideas is not prevalent. This supports the collectivistic nature of Malaysians (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1999) indicating that students are most comfortable with group projects relying on input and support from other students. Students from such a culture might find it more difficult than students from an individualistic culture to use the VLE as this is focused around student-initiative. Understanding the Malaysian culture and accommodating teaching methods and material to suit this culture and preferred learning style is a challenging task, however it is even more complicated to accommodate students in DL programmes representing a number of different countries and cultures. It is therefore argued that franchise Marketing degrees may need to take into account that even with efficient VLEs the direct transfer of learning and teaching techniques used in UK may not be appropriate in other international markets. With reference to hypothesis H1, the use of experienced UK teaching staff will invariably help deliver a more consistent programme but also adapt to cultural norms that prevail in the host countries.

DL programmes may also need to consider incorporating better F2F teaching elements to add to their current tutorial support and UK staff visits. Such could be arranged as summer workshops for 2-3 months held in different areas of the world for students in that region. Several universities could be used for teaching and tutors running the DL programme in addition to regional DL teaching teams to deliver the lectures and seminars ensuring a consistent delivery while adapted to local needs and learning styles. This is to say a 'one size fits all' model is no longer appropriate and universities offering DL programmes can use the VLE to some extent, but as it cannot be used to deliver a consistent learning experience to all students, tailored F2F teaching could become part of the delivery mode.

8.3.2 Education legislation

The legislation of the country or region where students are taught can have a significant impact on the programme content of the Marketing degree and the required teaching structure. The paper has discussed how the students studying on a franchised programme in Malaysia are required to study additional 'local' modules and are also given extended F2F teaching hours. This could potentially support or foster a student culture which is heavily reliant on in class guidance, assistance and time from tutors and lecturers. This regulatory structure could potentially create barriers for the consistent use of a VLE as part of the delivery of a programme; reasons being that a VLE requires students to work independently and take responsibility for their own learning. The extra hours of teaching and office hours (compared with UK standards) leaves less time for lecturers to prepare teaching material and update the VLE. Therefore, it can be suggested that the education legislation such as longer teaching hours could impose a barrier

to the consistent use of a VLE on a franchised programme. Understanding the education legislation with the aim of adjusting the programme content and/or teaching structure to create a more identical programme (compared with that of the franchisor) is therefore essential.

8.3.3 Learning styles

Students' learning styles affect their acceptance and use of the VLE and ultimately the impact the VLE has on their learning experience. When constructing a VLE that considers students' different learning preferences lecturers should consider the way the instructions are designed, the channels of communication used and the structure of information. As VLEs are student-focused, students need to be independent, show evidence of initiative, co-creation and interactivity to get the most out of the VLE's features. This can be challenging when students are not used to this type of teaching and are more dependent on guidance given by the lecturer. This is the case with students at University B, who appreciate F2F teaching and time with the tutor/lecturer and are not using the VLE fully. For the DL programme it is even more challenging to create a consistent learning experience using the VLE as students have different levels of technological capabilities and a variety of learning styles acquired through the exposure to different cultural environments. No matter the delivery mode, a VLE requires the student to be an independent learner, and not all students prefer that style of learning. Therefore, it is necessary to identify critical aspects of learners' adaptation process in a VLE by deploying different learning styles in addition to creating an element of F2F teaching.

9 Conclusions & Applications

In the near future, UK Marketing degrees delivered overseas can only continue to prosper if supported by comprehensive VLEs, supported by some contribution of F2F teaching by experienced UK staff. This approach will not only create better learning experiences for 'out of base' students but also enhance their engagement, belonging and levels of satisfaction. VLEs should be used to encourage experiential learning, vital to marketing students, and provide online facilities that develop students' skills and abilities to work and communicate in teams and manage projects (in particular time management and planning skills are emphasised). The VLE should provide students with an online area that allows them to carry out discussions amongst each other enhancing opportunities for peer learning. Potentially these are skills employers expect marketing graduates to possess upon graduation.

Marketing is a constantly evolving subject area. Lecturers who teach on these degrees must not only keep up with industry knowledge but also be competent and keen learning and teaching technologists. The authors suggest that it is vital for UK Marketing degrees, franchised and DL, to have comprehensive understanding of cultural norms, the impact of local HE legislation, the local University staff and students' technological comfort and the operational and administrative challenges. Such understanding is critical for the successful delivery and a user-friendly VLE is central to meeting these challenges. With UK degrees facing fierce competition from other

emerging nations and the perceptions of non UK degrees on the increase, UK HE institutions must endeavour to 'add real value' to their participants.

The suggested practical applications are as follows;

- Enhanced student engagement through the more efficient use of VLEs is pivotal to delivering a consistent student experience.
- Engaging experienced UK staff to teach, plan and work with franchise and DL staff in HE hubs is critical, potentially leading to better 'working relationships' that can be fostered to achieve consistency across borders.
- VLEs should not only be used to disseminate programme specific communications, but also to build much needed business integration into marketing degrees that can emerge from a multitude of nations.

10 Areas for Further Research

The authors acknowledge that further research is needed into a number of areas which will enable a further understanding of how VLEs can assist in the delivery of HE programmes in international markets. Among the topics for further investigation are VLEs importance in blended learning projects; the technology acceptance model by Davis (1989) to investigate students' and academic members of staff's acceptance of VLEs and finally; the criteria for an 'effective' VLE used across cultures and geographical borders.

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