

School use of learning platforms and associated technologies

Case Study: Secondary School 3

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Secondary School 3

This case study is part of a suite of 12 case studies which inform the 12 benefits identified in the main report and should therefore not be read as a stand-alone.

1. The school and the school community

The school population is homogeneous and although around 10 per cent of learners come from ethnic minorities, they require little support and their English language skills are good. Around 90 per cent of learners continue into the sixth form.

The demographics of the area in which school is located may be described as middle class (C1, B and A). The school offers small conference/meeting rooms, a large library that can be also used as an auditorium, a second purpose-built auditorium and well-resourced classrooms (with interactive whiteboards). Corridors are used to display learners' work, for example costumes for an upcoming play. The resources of the school include an e-learning support team comprising five staff members, as well as a group of support staff who have specific responsibilities relating to the operation of the learning platform: a data manager who is responsible for monitoring staff and student data (using an MIS), an attendance officer who is responsible for the truancy call system, a library staff member who is responsible for the operation of the virtual library, and others.

The school has numerous IT suites. However, some learners report that access to IT rooms and desktop computers is difficult owing to high demand. Members of staff are provided with new laptops every three years. The school also provides laptops/netbooks for all learners. This is done with the support of parents through a laptop scheme in which parents currently pay £10 a month for a period of three years. Alternatively, parents may provide their child with their own laptop or purchase one outright through the school (avoiding the need to pay VAT). The previous headteacher and other senior managers initiated the vision for the laptop provision scheme, which has now been running for six years. A home–school agreement underpins the scheme. Parents and teachers are involved in a Friends of the School charity organisation which supports the laptop scheme through fundraising.

The school has, for many years now, been renowned for its use of technology and learners who choose the school (and staff who work there), feel they have to live up to the high expectations this generates. Teachers and learners join the school knowing that they will be using technology to a great extent. There is also a clear vision for the school to utilise technology appropriately, to enhance teaching and learning. Senior leaders emphasised this and teachers were also aware of this vision. Because of the long tradition of technology use in the school, and the support of parents for the laptop scheme, learners in this school have long passed through the 'novelty factor' motivation for using technology. On the contrary, and this was a matter expressed by learners but also observed in practice in classrooms, learners

have learned to be critical about the use of technology; they question its use in a variety of situations and they demonstrate a high level of digital literacy.

The school has a specialism in Business & Enterprise and Languages. It is a participant in a variety of international programmes such as the European Comenius programme, which facilitates exchanges with teachers from Italy, Romania and Finland. A visit to Japan recently took place with learners and staff being hosted by a partner school there. The school participates in visits to twinned cities/schools as a support for language learning and other international links are generated via the language coordinator who also visits primary schools to set up collaborations which enable learners from the school to teach younger learners. Learners also run ICT skills lessons in a club for mothers and the over-60s.



ICT tutorials for staff from the E-learning Support Team

2. How the learning platform is used

General observations

The school uses an MIS and has a commercial learning platform as its learning gateway. Before implementing the current learning platform, the school used an alternative one which was mainly used by teachers to upload materials. However, the use of the latter was not directed by a specific purpose, teachers had no guidance on its use, and staff described the experience of using it as poor. The school tried out a range of other learning platforms (as many as six, both Open Source and commercial) but found that these did not meet their needs and expectations. The Assistant Head had previous experience using the adopted commercial learning platform and looked at this system together with the ICT Manager before deciding to pilot this with staff as a communication tool for a period of six months. When the new Head came to the school, three years ago, the Assistant Head and the ICT manager suggested using the current learning platform as a learning gateway alongside the adopted MIS. A decision was made to invest in these infrastructures with the agreement of the Senior Management Team. The current learning platform was rebuilt and a cascading training model was initiated, with first the Head and lead teachers, then heads of department, and then teachers being trained. The current learning platform has now been used for two years at school-wide level. Initially, for one year, only staff used it. Thereafter, the student portal and the governors' portal were created. The school also uses an Open Source server and is currently looking at integrating parts from it with the commercial learning platform currently being utilised as a learning gateway.

The commercial learning platform was considered to be a widely recognised, stable and sustainable system. The school's specialism in Business & Enterprise influenced its choice of a system based on industry standards. The implementation team looked on the adopted learning platform as a base upon which elements from other systems (such as Open Source solutions) could be added in order for it to be developed appropriately to meet the school's needs.

"It wasn't 'out of the box'. I like the fact that you can get a lot of support and you can get a lot of bits for it. If there's a problem, you can find half a dozen forums with support for these products and you're not on your own, and I think it needs to be a rigid, stable platform really. I think in terms of sustainability, having something that's a recognised product means that other people can come into it and get hold of books and manuals and things to support them. We could develop it to suit the environment here, to suit how we teach, how we wanted to be as an organisation." (Assistant Head, ICT Manager)

Management and administration

The focus of ICT implementation in the school was on learning. A lot of emphasis was given, therefore, to collecting, tracking and monitoring learners' progress. A Data Manager is responsible for monitoring this data on the MIS. Staff members, however, have restricted access to the MIS. Reports are produced for the Local Authority three times a year based on this data. Tracking of data is embedded in various processes including during fire drills, to check attendance. Student groups are created based on the data and interventions, and progress targets are determined through it. School expectations of staff include use of data to inform their teaching and planning. While most teachers do this, according to the headteacher some teachers still struggle with data management and manipulation.

The school is considered to be outstanding in terms of the way in which it monitors and tracks data on learners' progress, and staff members from other schools in the area regularly visit the school to observe and share in its practices. Results have improved in the last few years. Data tracking enables the school to identify learners capable of participating in accelerated programmes of study. The Data Manager also provides training and consultancy to other schools, generating profit for the school. Similarly, lead practitioners who are experts in the use of interactive whiteboards provide training both for school staff and staff from other schools.

As mentioned earlier, the school has a long tradition in using ICT and is renowned for being at the forefront with technology; the implementation of the learning platform has been a continuation of those developments. Senior Management Team members are ICT literate, the Assistant Head is also an ICT teacher and the Head is an advocate of technology use. Staff members have had laptops for many years, and the majority are used to having a shared area on the school network. Use of the learning platform was firstly targeted at staff, then to learners and governors, and finally to parents.

The learning platform has been employed to meet one of the school priorities – raising attainment standards – alongside its implementation in relation to a range of other initiatives, such as developing an individual learning pathway for learners:

“That has been a big shift in the last three years... getting the curriculum right; to have an individual learning pathway for each child. Making sure the teaching and learning is right. That's the big focus of where we've gone, towards quality, and the use of technology to make sure the teaching and learning is right and appropriate. So ... you can't just hang it on one thing, it needs to be the whole package.” (Headteacher)

One of the intended uses of the learning platform in the beginning was the organisation and communication of information, which was perceived to be a problematic area at the school.

“We’d got a massive problem with communication and information – duplicate information – and people not knowing which list was which and various people having the same information and developing those bits of information. So the whole organisation of information was an issue.” (Assistant Head)

The learning platform was therefore initially used as a place for establishing communication between stakeholders.

A further problem the learning platform was employed to solve related to email communication. Previously, staff had to deal with a large volume of emails to circulate materials, a practice that was described by some as chaotic. The learning platform was therefore used as a space for gathering and organising these materials.

“The teachers’ email, we are really into email here in a big way. They email all the materials to the students but the students could only keep probably a week’s worth of email. They were then having to download and organise those materials and so there was a lot of dependency on the students and although we have very clever girls, some girls need a bit more organisation than others. So the learning gateway now allows the teachers to organise those materials for them so there’s a historical archive of the lessons.” (Assistant Head)

To push teachers and staff to start using the learning gateway rather than email, the implementation team decided to withdraw the email system during term-time.

“That was a deliberate thing to do during term time, again, to remove that dependency.” (Assistant Head)

Once the communication of information, and communication between staff and learners was established, staff began to use the learning platform to support curriculum activity.

To achieve sustainability of use, numerous people were involved in the implementation; support staff kept the learning platform updated and all teachers began publishing on it. The school’s senior leaders were keen on keeping the school at the forefront of technology, so their vision has been an important part of the implementation process. Providing training to staff, having lead practitioners and continuous support by the e-learning support team are factors that have contributed to the school’s success. A strategy employed to enable implementation was to re-organise the technical team and create a well-organised university-type support team which staff and learners could turn to.

“It’s not a tiny little room in the back... I think that is a problem with lots of schools, they’ve got that very stereotypical technician in the cupboard... and it all goes on in the background... you know. What’s needed is the right person to answer the right question rather than somebody saying ‘I don’t know’, which was our previous experience.” (Assistant Head, ICT Manager)

Within the E-learning Support Team, individuals undertake specific responsibilities (one is network manager and responsible for the infrastructure, another is the front desk person who deal with requests by staff and learners and other minor issues, etc.). The Team deals more generally with requests by learners and staff about log-ins, printing, saving work, using the wireless network, and other issues relating to ICT equipment. In helping staff to use resources, they also consider issues of copyright. Members of the team are involved in delivering training and helping staff to download resources, modify them and generally to apply their ideas:

“We do initial training on how to do basic attachments, how to add resources, how to put a little pretty picture on the front of the site. Leave it quite simple. Then, what I often say is, ‘Let’s book an appointment for a month’s time...’ because a lot of them have some ideas but they don’t know how they can articulate them. I’ve had a lot of diagrams, drawings in the past with colour coding for this and they tell me how they want them to look. And then I just go back and say, ‘Right, we can do this and we can’t do this’, and then we work it around that.” (E-Learning Support Team Member)

The E-learning Support Team also prepares tutorials and makes these available to staff to support use of the learning platform. Staff, learners and families can send emails or phone the team to get help. Within departments, staff members also support each other.

Another strategy for enabling implementation was the use of lead practitioners to cascade training for staff. Lead practitioners are individuals willing to develop skills in a particular area, for example, using the interactive whiteboard. They will then train other staff through the school’s CPD programme. They run workshops after school as well as providing one-to-one sessions or departmental training to staff.

“These two members of staff have been outstanding in terms of the support that they’ve given to help others move on. Always, in performance management, it’s about staff moving to the next level. So, I’ve always said to them, their role will change as the priorities within the school change. So they’re working very much now with staff, in terms of the next stage and how we get things onto the learning gateway, and using interactive whiteboard resources and other resources.” (Headteacher)

Having their own laptops, staff can experiment with the learning platform (and other applications) and they are more willing to use them than a desktop in ICT suites:

“All the teachers have a new laptop every three years. So, if you give them the right tools to manage it, they’re happier to do it themselves. So if they’re expecting to turn up in an IT room and use a desktop, they’re less likely to put themselves out, but if they’ve got a laptop and they tinker on it in between lessons or in the evenings, they can teach themselves as well.” (E-learning Support Team Member)

Discussions in staff rooms initiated more interest for staff to use the systems put in place. A member of the senior management team described this journey as an ‘organic process’ where individual staff members are on their own journeys of adopting technologies. Staff presenting their ideas at training sessions, initiating interest amongst other staff members and sharing ideas, was also one of the ways of getting everybody on board.

“They were very quiet, reserved people who you wouldn’t expect to do that. They gave a presentation in a staff training session. That was a real – well, if they can do it, you know... We didn’t think that they could do that kind of stuff, so then we can do it too... As soon as they had their resources it was like, ‘Oh, I’ve got some stuff I need to send to some students but it’s too big for email, could I use something like the learning platform?’ Okay, then. So if you generate enough of that interest...” (Assistant Head, ICT Manager)

To deal with resistance by some staff very early on (when the laptop scheme was first introduced) the school organised ‘super user’ groups – individuals who were keen on using ICT and were confident with computers. They trained other teachers who were initially resistant to using the learning platform. As a result, teachers were ICT skilled when the learning platform was put in place and new staff members were adequately trained.

“And the size of the groups, the small groups, made this very effective and eventually all the teachers became so familiar with it that they like it so much now they wouldn’t want to be without it. But it was quite a steep learning curve at first.” (Chair of Governors)

In addition, some of the workload for teachers was removed, for example administration responsibilities.

Senior Management Team members indicated that there had been a quick take-up and e-learning support team members expressed their enthusiasm about the progress that has been achieved in the school. The leadership style of the senior management team is coaching, setting goals and helping staff to achieve them. Additionally, there is open space for everyone to bring ideas.

This year, development of the learning gateway is a target in the performance management targets for staff and part of that involves uploading exercise books (for which the school has licences) onto the learning gateway so that learners can access these books at home.

Curriculum and teaching

Teachers use the learning platform to organise lesson resources, to gather materials, to organise their time, and to do collaborative marking. E-safety and digital literacy are an integral part of all subjects. Teachers as well as library staff provide guidance and direction to learners to enable them to identify good resources to support their learning. Using technology when appropriate and not for the sake of it has been achieved as a result of ensuring availability of technology for learners and staff over many years. This has taken the novelty factor away. Learners, especially after Year 9, can choose whether to use their laptops or not and staff use technology if they think it will enhance their teaching and learners' learning. Learning platform tools that staff members have referred to most are the calendar and the tool for uploading resources. A many-layered calendar is integrated into the staff portal area to enable timetabling and different people update information.

A member of the support staff updates information on the calendar regarding CPD participation and staff meetings and another person is responsible for information regarding classes going on trips. This information enables other staff responsible for CPD to manage the staff CPD programme and to arrange teaching cover where necessary. A data manager is responsible for updating information relating to class timetables using the MIS. The MIS also offers a room booking system.

Using the virtual library via the learning platform, learners develop skills searching for books and journals online. Learners can access indexed journals (those not generally indexed have been indexed by the library manager) and other resources that specifically address them and their needs (such as journals specifically written for GCSE). The library provides learners with guidance and direction for accessing appropriate materials. Teachers also use the virtual library to search for sources and to compile bibliographies for learners. The virtual library is currently in the first stages of implementation, as it is only the first year and first term that it has been implemented. However, the library manager has received very good feedback from learners who find the virtual library exciting. As the library manager noted, it has balanced the computer with the traditional library, providing a fashionable tool that is useful for advancing in learners' skills that they will need later, e.g. in university, higher education or for work.

Since last summer the school PTA have had their own area on the learning gateway where they host the minutes of meetings, the school development plan, business plans and policies.

Learning and learners

During lessons a combination of resources were being used (textbooks, laptops, learning platform, internet) and learners worked independently, asking for teachers' or peer help when needed. Teachers used the learning platform when doing whole-class discussion, to give instructions and to direct the lesson. The learning platform is a port of call for learners to extend their learning. They can also customise their own profile page on the portal.

Learners access homework, resources (such as links to websites), coursework, past learners' work/papers and exemplar work. They have a personal space where they can save their work, and another where they can give/get feedback on work and do collaborative work using shared documents. Practices amongst learners involve downloading podcasts from the portal to listen to foreign languages.

"In Spanish we use it for sharing information with the students through the announcements. We use it also to put extension activities or support activities, with language games. We can upload them there so they can just open them. We use some in the classroom, but then they can go back home and revise the vocabulary...we have also extension materials for A level and GCSE. We also run trips. We have uploaded the pictures of our first trip this year so that students who took part in the trip can see them, and you know we can all share experiences." (Spanish Teacher)

Vertical grouping of learners is applied on the learning platform. This means that learners can access learning from different levels (i.e. other year groups) that is appropriate for them.

Using various discussion forums and online questionnaires accessible from home, staff collect feedback from learners on various issues concerning school life (food, or quality of lessons for example). Teachers can also publish reminders on the learning platform for learners.

"This is a reminder that these tickets are available in reception and it's the second last day that you can get them." (Student Year 7/8)

The learning platform has also enabled peer assessment:

"It's almost like email but it doesn't take so long. So you can just put on your ideas and then the rest of the people in your group can come look and then see what they think, and then they write back." (Student Year 7/8)

Year groups are involved in supporting charities and each charity is presented on the student portal, through photos and other information such as fundraising events.

“On the student portal because I am in charge of charity, I set up my own page to tell students about our uniform days and things like that and put the photos up there so students can look at them... on the website I put the links to other charities.” (Student)

Similarly a group of learners, who are involved in enterprise, use the portal to advertise their products to other learners. The school’s specialism in Business & Enterprise encourages learners to be involved in such activities. A group of learners have set up their own business, taking a loan and buying shares, to develop and sell personalised materials such as calendars. They have been using the learning gateway to advertise their enterprise, publishing photos of their prototypes, the order forms and other information for fellow learners.

A Student Enterprise site on the learning gateway

Parents and families

Following the government's recommendations for online reporting by 2010, the school planned a programme for parental engagement. A pilot involving attendance data for sixth-form learners took place some time ago. The parents' portal is currently being trialled by a group of parents who are members of the school's PTA and who have expressed an interest in working on schemes such as this. The parent group trialling the parents' portal includes one parent who doesn't have internet access at home so that she could advise the school on the impact of this.

"There's one parent who doesn't have internet access, and so we've brought her into that group, so then she can help advise us on what it will mean for a parent that doesn't really have access, because everything is moving in that direction, so to help us know what we can do to support those parents that can't access that at all." (Headteacher)

Another parent who took part in the trial informed us that this was easy to access and useful. However, lack of skills and time may prevent parents accessing the learning platform. He suggested it is useful for getting information through the calendar, about the timetable, and the curriculum. Being informed about what the school is doing, checking their child's attendance and information about the teachers was deemed important.

According to learners, some parents are IT literate and are involved in their children's learning when they are using the learning platform, while others indicate that their parents cannot use computers. Parents like the fact that learners can see past exam papers. Becoming aware of their children's work allows parents to talk through subjects/issues with their children.

"My mom sometimes comes to me and asks what I'm doing on the internet. I say I'm on the student portal. She asked me what it was, so I explained it's where we can get homework and any other documents, talk to any teachers. And she said it's a really good idea. And she does come and sit with me and ask 'Oh where do you get this, where do you get that?', things like that, asks me about the homework." (Student Year 7/8)

"If my mum knew how to use the computer, she would go on the portal but she doesn't know how to start the computer." (Sixth Form Student)

Learners at the school offer ICT lessons to mothers and over-60s at school.

The school governors moved from posting documentation to using email and, currently, to electronic management of information through the learning platform. Governors use the portal to store their policies, meeting agendas and minutes, to

access the calendar, host the statutory panels and accommodate other information about the school and the federation (links to the school websites, prospectuses etc.). They also use it to have discussions:

“We also use it for governor discussions. If there’s an education white paper, for instance, or some other new document from the County Council, that can be loaded on there and governors can easily see it. And we have an E-bulletin that comes out every week from the County Council which alerts anybody, really, staff or governors, to key issues that are happening in education in the area. And it reminds us of certain deadlines for returning certain papers, and particular things, so it’s used in quite a lot of ways.” (Chair of Governors)

The Chair of Governors informed us that they had a hand in setting up the governor portal, however as it is relatively recent, not all areas have been explored yet.

3. Benefits of using the learning platform

Findings from the case study are described below.

Improved information management and communication

The learning platform facilitates the centralisation of information in one space, the ability to keep a historical record of files and to provide access to live data on timetabling, calendars, room booking and other activities and resources. The ease and immediacy of accessibility to this information improves organisation and management of school activities. Timetabling has been made more efficient and this has enabled staff and learners to organise their time and work.

“With common files... unless you had them all listed together you didn’t know which version you were using and who changed it. Now they are all on the learning gateway, there is the version, there is the date, there is the time, and details of who last accessed it, and also you’ve got a historical record of changes.” (Assistant Head)

“There were loads of systems for this, for that, for, you know, for timetables, for whatever. Now everything is in one place and you can just log in and find whatever you need. You know, everything is there. You just use the search facility and, yes, basically, there are links to other portals. So it’s easily, you know, accessible.” (E-learning Support Team Member)

For governors, accessibility to information and documents on one central space is also beneficial:

“I mean, the advantages are that all the governor information is there in one place, instead of having to search back in your emails to find it, or to store it on your own computer.” (Chair of Governors)

Improved monitoring of learners’ progress

Monitoring and analysing learners’ data has become easier with the use of the learning platform and informs planning and delivery of teaching and identifying learners for whom interventions could be helpful. Demonstrating data or presenting information to inspection/observer bodies is easier and quicker now.

“Data is analysed in-house... we will look at the whole school, so we will look at individual departments and how they perform, so what percentages of As and A stars they are getting...then which students do really well, which aren’t, who gets letters of commendation success, who we need to do intervention strategies with.” (Headteacher)

“Because...at the drop of a hat, the Ofsted inspector can look at all the governor documents, probably in half an hour, as opposed to having to go through lots and lots of reference volumes, which would take him, probably a day rather than half an hour.” (Chair of Governors)

Ease of access to quality/appropriate resources

Learners have constant access to resources, selected by teachers as appropriate. In addition, learners can access colour materials (rather than having them printed in black and white) and large files such as art pictures on the learning platform, which they wouldn't be able to get through email. Older learners (Years 10 to 12 and the sixth form) find it useful to access past exam papers to improve their work and having them on the learning platform saves them time looking for these.

“Obviously it's a visual subject so... uploading quite a large library and official information for the students to access, so that's been one of the main benefits for us, but the main thing has been the image database. Also I think it sort of saved students' time in Googling and finding really, really poor images, wasting time finding the wrong images, whereas if we put them up we know they are really high quality, and it's the right sort, they are on the right trail.” (Art Teacher)

“They can end up spending hours looking for one bit of information so normally we point them in the right direction. We have links on the student portal so they can actually use those, to find the right sorts of websites that will help them.” (Teacher, Lead Practitioner)

“I enjoy looking because the teachers sometimes put good pieces of work, I enjoy looking at what people have done and seeing how I can do as well as them, like improve my work from that.” (Student Year 7/8)

Increasing student voice

Through discussion forums and other spaces on the learning platform learners give their opinion about issues that concern them and provide feedback about aspects of the school (there is a discussion forum regarding advantages/disadvantages of the laptop scheme, for example). Learners also enjoy having options as to what methods to use to send their work to teachers (email/upload).

“I like going on the questionnaires. Sometimes they ask your opinions of stuff. They had one about ICT lessons, about how interesting you find them.” (Student Year 7/8)

Continuity of learning

The learning platform allows learners to save their work and access it at any time and when they move year groups within the school.

“There’s a place that we used last year for our, put our movies, which we carried on this year...” (Student Year 7/8)

Enhanced personalised and independent learning

Access to resources on the learning gateway enables learners to select the resources that suit their learning style (whatever year group they belong to) and teachers to differentiate materials for individual learners. Access to equipment for all learners enables independent learning.

“They are automatically in a vertical grouping within their learning, so when they go to the learning gateway, they will be accessing appropriate learning for them at that level, so it’s not restricted by year group.” (Headteacher)

“For A level coursework I might have six students doing completely different things and I can say ‘There’s an article on that for you, that for you, that for you...’.” (Teacher)

Development of ICT skills and digital literacy

Alongside developing ICT skills, learners report that the presentation of their work is more professional. Developing digital literacy involves learners learning to be critical about sources they find on the internet.

“Teaching them about websites that are good to use as sources is really important, why they wouldn’t want to use something like Wikipedia, which often comes up in a Google search...” (Teacher, Lead Practitioner)

“In ICT we did this project where, well it wasn’t really a project it was just a day learning about how you can download items on to the student portal.” (Year 7/8 learner)

Improved communication and collaboration between learners

Communication has been enhanced with the use of messaging tools and emails. Some learners report that they can use the tool to ask each other about school work when at home in the same way they use chat tools.

“I like the use of email, that we can like, email our work to teachers and they email us back and they give us feedback.” (Student)

“In IT we are doing research, and we are all doing the same research and you can, like, post what you found up there so you don’t have to keep emailing each other ... we were working with Flash and trying to basically make a prototype with it and we were just researching actions groups and stuff and then if one person found it, they would just post it for everyone else and then they can find it easily.” (Student, ICT class)

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the address bar displaying 'https://'. The website being viewed is titled 'Help Save The ENDANGERED PACIFIC NORTHWEST TREE OCTOPUS From EXTINCTION!'. The page has a green and brown color scheme. On the left, there is a large illustration of a pinkish-red tree octopus. Below it, a 'Cephalopod News' sidebar lists several news items from 2009. The main content area is titled 'About The Pacific Northwest Tree Octopus' and contains a paragraph of text describing the species' habitat and behavior. A small photograph of a tree octopus is shown on the right side of the page. The browser's address bar shows 'https://'. The website's navigation menu includes 'Information', 'FAQs', 'Sightings', 'Media', and 'Activities'. The page footer includes the text 'Done' and 'Internet'.

Learners learn to assess the trustworthiness of internet sources

Collaboration between learners in the classroom is also promoted through activities so that learners may work in pairs to complete tasks, even though they may be using their own laptop. An example of collaboration between learners was observed in a Spanish lesson when one learner used the laptop to put the lesson questionnaire on the screen while another learner used the laptop to search websites to find the answers and together they worked to complete the questionnaire.

“We were able to communicate with each other through one document. So in one file, somebody would write something on there, that group can access it and give their opinion, if you want to change it or anything.” (Student Year 7/8)

“In ICT we also try using the discussion boards, the discussion forums we create, I found that with Year 8 when they were making a game, that was very useful because they were able to sort of help each other along, encourage each other, give each other hints and tips on to how to use the software because it was a new software...so I think it did improve their attainment and the quality of the games they were producing ...” (Teacher)

Enhanced learning through practising and revision

The use of podcasts and other resources for practising (especially in languages) has enhanced learning.

“Our teacher recorded us doing our orals and then put them on to the student portal and we could download them on to our iPod and just listen to ourselves speaking and that is really useful to hear, and obviously she then said she listened to them as well, it’s good to hear the accent.” (Student)

Flexible access

Learners report that the resources, their uploaded work, and class work is always there for them to use it. Learners who miss school (because of illness, for example) can access work at home and keep up with schoolwork.

“I think students that have been absent, they know where they can find material and that makes life easier for everybody.” (Teacher)

“If you’ve been off ill, you can catch up with work.” (Student)

“Students like it. They like the fact that they can access it from home, and access resources, even if on a simple level, and not have to carry around five to ten books.” (Headteacher)

Sharing of resources and collaboration amongst staff

Teachers share resources and are informed about others’ work and can do that out of school hours and remotely.

“One of the ways I’ve found the learning gateway quite beneficial is that we also know, within the department, what everybody is doing. You can share resources quite easily and quite quickly. You can access other resources that people have uploaded.” (Teacher)

“We share a mark book. You can mark again with real ease and that’s the benefit there, the speed of the access and the fact that you can all make sure that you are on the same page basically.” (Teacher)

“There is now a much greater opportunity to share resources that can be accessed from home, because the learning gateway can be accessed from home, whereas before it was just the e-portal and just the reporting side of things that could be accessed from home.” (Headteacher)

Resource saving

Access to resources on the learning platform saves time and costs as teachers avoid photocopying for large numbers of learners.

“Previously we’ve been trying to photocopy I suppose images and sheets, so in that way and in the long run, if the project runs for more than a year, it’s been more than worthwhile.” (Teacher)

Better communication between governors

The governors’ portal has been beneficial for disseminating information more quickly and more efficiently. Access to school policies and documents in one place is considered beneficial for their role as they can monitor the schoolwork better and be critical friends. Links between federation schools have also been enhanced and transition from primary to secondary is becoming smoother.

“For the governors, they had informational CDs. They didn’t know which CD is which. If we updated the policy we had to cut the budget for new CDs. They didn’t have the information they needed. They found it difficult to communicate with each other. So, in terms of how they work with two schools it’s about how they could all get at the information – accessibility of information; they’ve got collaboration tools as well for discussion.” (Assistant Head)

“The advantages are that all the governor information is there in one place...with the portal it’s like a library.” (Chair of Governors)

4. Challenges and solutions

Although one of the school successes in using the learning platform was in the area of monitoring data, this remains hindered by the constraints of the systems being used. The Head expressed a frustration in that there is no software that can host databases that run together and become integrated, therefore there are currently two systems running in parallel. The use of the MIS by teachers for analysis of data, although desirable, is also not possible at the moment because the system is too complicated.

“The MIS is so wonderful and so powerful, but we don’t let teachers have access to it. It’s support staff who have access to it. I pull my hair out and think this is just daft because actually we do need the teachers to have access to it, but because it’s just so big and powerful, we can’t. It’s not right enough. It’s frustrating because you think with the technology we have today it should be there... You’ve got to buy bolt-on things of the things you need, and they’re generally made to be generic and then they don’t always do what you want them to do, certainly not the detail that we need.” (Headteacher)

In terms of equipment use, as the school purchases laptops every year, the Assistant Head described the constant battle against upgrades as a challenge. New laptops/netbooks come with up-to-date operating systems, which poses a challenge to staff. However, staff members having their own laptops and being supported by the e-learning team makes transitions between operating systems easier.

The Chair of Governors identified a challenge regarding the technical terms used on the learning platform, which may not be clear, especially to people who don’t use it as often as staff and learners. A simpler interface would enable governors, and potentially parents, to utilise the learning platform.

5. Drivers

The Senior Management Team have been driving implementation with their vision for the school to be at the forefront with technology. The Assistant Head and ICT manager, having a background in ICT, are knowledgeable about various systems and can implement ideas.

“So it’s, well, we have flashes of inspiration, don’t we? We had some this week.” (Assistant Head)

Senior managers having a shared vision for the school, and the ample availability of equipment and expertise of workforce, were described as driving forces for e-learning in the school by a member of the Senior Management Team.

“The number of servers we’ve got... We have a phenomenal amount of resources that I do appreciate other schools just don’t have. And, the expertise within that group as well, so, the development of our adopted learning platform under the leadership of the Assistant Head and with the E-Learning Manager alongside, working on that has been tremendous. But, all the way through, there’s been a very clear direction with the Assistant Head and this is where we want to go, and this is where we want to be at this time as well. I think that helps, just to keep everyone focused and within a timeframe that’s realistic.” (Headteacher)

Staff have been proactive and are involved in developments for the learning platform.

“You do have staff who turn up and say ‘I want to do...’ and that’s been really good as well so when you’ve got that kind of push–pull situation it’s much better, and then there are conversations in the staff room around IT and so on, so I think that’s good as well because those learning conversations are important.” (Assistant Head, ICT Manager)

6. Conditions for success

Taking the heads of the school on board and ensuring their support was crucial for successful implementation. A shared vision and clear direction set by the Senior Management Team is a condition of success outlined by the SMT members themselves.

“The first thing was to sell it to the Head – ‘This is a good idea, we need to go with this’. He, it was a different Head; he was supportive, very supportive, of it. It’s taking the senior leadership with you because if you don’t, you’ve got the Head saying yes, and you’ve got senior members of staff who are not supporting, who are not asking the right questions.’ (Assistant Head, ICT manager)

Initiating teachers’ interest and engaging them in the development of the learning platform was an important step forward.

“Putting it as a communication tool for staff and not letting them know that they were going to be delivering learning materials through it was the best way.” (Assistant Head, ICT Manager)

The school’s previous experience and background with implementing technologies was an advantage. The school is very well resourced and the expertise within the school is used appropriately.

“It’s based on a lot of experience of dealing with LEAs and things and knowing what worked and what didn’t work and it has been quite successful.” (Assistant Head, ICT Manager)

7. Lessons learnt and future plans

The development of the learning platform has been an ongoing process. For the Head it was a learning curve when she joined the school and realised that everyone felt they had to use technology all the time as a lot was invested in it. She believed that this was hindering teaching and learning, so she felt she had to redefine goals and advise staff to use the technology appropriately.

“A classic would be within a maths lesson. There was one lesson where a member of staff was trying to get the students to do a grid in an Excel, a 1:100 square. It took them so long to actually do the grid in Excel that the purpose of the lesson, which was just to find out the prime numbers or whatever, was lost. It would have been quicker just to photocopy it, give it out, and do the usual shading in, and I just sat and thought, 25 minutes has gone past, and I said to the teacher, ‘Why?’ And the response was ‘Because we have to use it. We’ve been told we have to use it’. That was a bit of an eye opener! I thought, ‘No, this is not right’. So, I knocked that on its head and I said to staff, ‘No, you will only use IT when it’s appropriate’, and you could see staff looking at me... So they now know much more clearly that I only want them to use it if it’s going to benefit learning.” (Headteacher)

In terms of plans for the near future, online reporting is currently being trialled by a group of parents and will be further developed based on the group’s feedback. A launch of the parents’ portal is imminent. Stakeholders interviewed expressed the view that the parents’ portal will enable parents to get more involved in their children’s learning.

“So many parents find it difficult to understand what their children are learning, and when the children have homework and they ask their parents, ‘Can you help me with this particular thing, Mum?’, Mum doesn’t know in what context that question sits. So if she knows a bit more about what the child is learning at school, because she can access the parent portal and she can see that the child is learning about the Tudors and Stuarts, for instance, in history, when she can see on there the scheme of work which the child is learning from, then she is far better positioned to be able to give the right pointer to the child to help them complete their homework. And it also helps, I think, parents, to understand the pressures of work that the child is going through, because they can see at a glance the kind of work and the amount of work that a child has got to do, and they can, you know, also communicate far more quickly and easily with their teachers if the child has a problem.” (Chair of Governors)

The Assistant Head and ICT Manager are planning to initiate redevelopment of the school website and to situate the learning gateway within that. Also using the commercial learning platform as the base, they are looking to further extend it using

other systems. For example, the team recently looked at an e-resource system as an extension to library services. Integration of aspects of the MIS with the learning platform includes timetabling so that learners will be able to see live information on changes about timetable. The Assistant Head who is also in charge of CPD developed a database to be integrated in the learning platform and, in collaboration with the ICT Manager, created a calendar to enable teachers to book CPD online; these are currently work in progress.

One of the next steps, according to the Head, is to ensure that the curriculum becomes available on the learning gateway so that learners can learn at home.

“So they can learn from home, if they’ve missed work because they’re sick, and revision work when they go on study leave, that sort of thing.” (Headteacher)

Another plan is to use the PTA group area on the learning platform for discussions and getting feedback. Also in the plans is the aim of providing a single sign-on for stakeholders.

The Chair of Governors mentioned that in the near future the governors’ portal will have links to other areas of the learning platform, for example, the learners’ and parents’ portals, so that they are informed about how these groups use the learning platform and to be able to monitor schoolwork and give feedback.

Other schools in the federation are also starting to use the same commercial learning platform and this will enable transfer of expertise and teaching practices as well as exchange of information.