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# Virtual Learning Environment (VLE): Prospects Awaiting Higher Education

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## Introduction

“Teachers open the door, but you must enter by yourself,” a Chinese proverb says. The same can be said about technology in the field of Higher Education. If used properly, technology opens the door to a whole range of opportunities. We live in an era of information explosion. Once there was famine of information, today we are drowned in the deluge of information.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has become a catalytic agent. A Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is a multi-user environment where developers may create, store, reuse, manage, and deliver digital learning content from a central object repository. The marriage between education and Internet technology has made a deep impact on perspectives about teaching and learning. The role of the teacher, the nature and context of learning, as well as the function and relative importance of course content have all been challenged and redefined. Technophobic teachers have no place in this new world order.

Efforts can be made to harvest newer possibilities of revitalising and empowering universities and colleges through network, e-resources, online learning, archiving of contents. Several programmes like Digital Repository, Network of colleges and universities, course wise e-content development, CEC, audio-video centers, etc. are going to be launched by UGC during the next plan period. The thrust area of UGC eleventh plan relates to the same five goals of access to higher education (reflected in enrolment ratio), equal access to socially and economically disadvantaged groups or inclusiveness, and quality and excellence, relevance and value oriented education.

More students need to be enrolled. This is possible only through web-based learning because it's difficult to increase infrastructure, man-power, etc at such a pace and it also will require more monetary investment, which may not be afforded by State Government. The easiest solution is to do investigative work on how E-Content Development can help in teaching-learning, and if effective implementation of such network is possible, it can help in more intake with less investment on man-power and infrastructure. Quality and Excellence is of great relevance in education: it can be seen that (a) VLE can deal with promotion and empowering the students and (b) it can also increase employability of students.

## What is VLE ?

A Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is a software system designed to support teaching and learning in an educational setting, as distinct from a Managed Learning Environment (MLE) where the focus is on management. A VLE will normally work over the Internet and provide a collection of tools such as those for assessment, communication, uploading of content, return of students' work, peer assessment, administration of student groups, collecting and organizing student grades, questionnaires, tracking tools, etc.

Technologies in Open Source Course Management Systems (CMS) allow even non-technical teachers to set up and maintain a Web site. The students can log in, access course information, interact, share, and teach others in an open source Course Management System (CMS). It is also known as a Learning Management System (LMS) or a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). It has become very popular among educators around the world as a tool for creating online dynamic web sites for their students. To work, it

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needs to be installed on a web server somewhere, either on one of your own computers or one at a web hosting company.

There are a number of free software packages that allow an individual or a community of users to easily publish, manage and organize a wide variety of content on a website. These are open-source software distributed under the GPL ("General Public License"). A VLE is a computer program that facilitates computerized learning or e-learning. It deals with synergism of computer technology and content management sites like DRUPAL, MOODLE, WebCT (Course Tools), INTERACTIVE LEARNING sites. Creating online dynamic web sites for students will have profound relevance for interdisciplinary teaching and learning. Its outcome can bring paradigm shift in the way things are taught and will be taught.

In addition, the VLE will be capable of supporting numerous courses, so that students and instructors in a given institution or across institutions experience a consistent interface when moving from one course to another. At the heart of any learning platform is the concept of a personalized online learning space for the pupil. This space should offer teacher and pupil access to stored work, e-learning resources, communication and collaboration with peers, and the facility to track progress.

### Possibilities of VLE

The extensive use of web components like Internet, Blogs, E-groups, SMSs, Emails, Socializing portals, E-dictionaries, Encyclopedia, PowerPoint presentations, Web-casting, Audio-video etc are used now a days to make the classrooms more interesting. The teacher-student community will be motivated to make use of cyber cafes and GPRS mobiles. Here again, use of ICT in form of DVDs of Encyclopedia, Internet resources, Graphical presentations, audio books, movie clips, etc. can be of tremendous help.

Use of VLE can help in teaching for it deals with synergism of computer technology and content management sites even hosts discussion forum, chat, quiz, etc. The built-in functionality, combined with dozens of freely available add-on

modules of the VLE has features such as Blogs, collaborative authoring environments, Forums, Peer-to-peer networking, Newsletters, File uploads and Downloads and much more.

The open source license of VLE and its modular design allows a developer to create additional modules and features. Its very similar to a learning management system, but it has many more standard features. It can be used in many types of environments such as in education, training and development, and business settings. Developers can extend its modular construction by creating plug-ins for specific new functionality. Many VLEs that are being presently used support many types of plug-ins for various activities (including word and math games), question types (multiple choice, true and false, fill in the blank, etc), data field types (for the database activity), its graphical themes and its resource types.

It has its unique system for its authentication methods (can require username and password accessibility), or even for enrollment methods or as content filters. The VLE users can use PHP to author and contribute new modules. It must be admitted that the development of VLE has been assisted by the work of open source programmers. This has contributed towards its rapid development and rapid bug fixes. E-learning systems can have many dimensions of interoperability. VLE provides various types of questions - Calculated, Description, Essay, Matching, Embedded Answers, Multiple Choice, Short Answer, Numerical, Random Short-Answer Matching, True/False.

### Outcome of VLE

The Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) includes a constructivist and social constructionist approach to education, emphasizing that learners (and not just teachers) can contribute to the educational experience. The basic objective of VLE would be to communicate to the youth population of the country the excitements of creative pursuit of knowledge and attract talent at the ripe stage and build the required critical human resource pool for strengthening and expanding the Humanities or Science & Technology system and R&D base. It relies on the efficacy of the existing educational

structure. The strength of the innovative infrastructure of a nation has enormous significance in the competition between emerging knowledge economies. The realization of VLE calls for action and a well designed innovation infrastructure.

VLE shall expose teacher and students to e-libraries, e-resources, e-information and make them free from close-minded outlook towards education and life and to share and extend experience of using the Internet in teaching in order to increase the effectiveness of the teaching/learning process. It shall facilitate the exchange of information and networking among teachers and trainers interested in using information technologies in their teaching and to exploit the potentials of teachers and develop their training skills with the help of web resources.

Generation and nurturing of a human talent pool capable of utilizing and developing first principles in science, humanities or any stream is both a pre-condition and integral part of such an innovation infrastructure. VLE can add talent to the excitement and study of science at an early age, and to help the country build the required critical resource pool for strengthening and expanding the S&T system and R&D base. These are programs with long term foresight.

The advantage of VLE in the long run is that it can establish common platform at various content management sites to develop more e-resources which can be used by teachers and students. This may be made accessible by the mediating Teachers. This is a great step towards further complementing of our educational system. We can, then, take a step in the direction of copyright to free access realm, which is of great importance to Third World countries.

### Conclusion

Information and communication technology has changed the way people looked at education.

We live in an era of information and knowledge society. This new society, to fulfill its needs, requires innovativeness in teaching and learning. Of all the disciplines of education. Social Sciences and Humanities make least use of new technologies. It is urgent need of the hour to make them aware of the importance of the use of E-content Development. A VLE should make it possible for a course designer to present to students, through a single, consistent, and intuitive interface, all the components required for a course of education or training. Although logically it is not a requirement, in practice VLEs always make extensive use of computers and the Internet.

Traditional teaching methods have become obsolete. They are no longer yielding expected results. It is the urgent need of the hour to find out better ways to use E-content Development and make teaching-learning more effective. Thus arises the problem whether our teachers are equipped for this new wave and the question whether our infrastructure is suitable for extensive use of VLE.

Internationally, all the renowned universities and educationists are engaged in research and development in how to make effective use of ICT for improving & empowering education system. Worldwide research on use of E-content Development for teaching-learning is going on. Indian Universities should not be left behind in this research and development. Indians have proved their mettle as an intellectually powerful nation of the world, thanks to IT technocrats and software engineers working in multinational IT companies. But still our education system is not coping with the current trend. Foreign universities are eyeing entry into India. They are well equipped with IT facilities to woo our students. If our universities/ colleges need to stand the competition, they shall have to revolutionize their education system with the help of ICT.