

AGENDA ITEM: X.X



FINANCE AUDIT AND RISK MEETING ON:	3 June 2025
PREPARED BY:	Dr Jim Taylor (Head of Digital Education)
PRESENTED BY:	Debbie Buggs
SUBJECT	Institute-wide Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)
PURPOSE:	For noting
LINK TO CORPORATE OBJECTIVE	<p>IBMS Strategy:</p> <p>3a. Further expand usage and content in our e-learning platform.</p> <p>3b. Increase the availability of learning material and qualifications to more members at different grades, supporting current and new roles that develop, including those in informatics and digital applications.</p>
RISK IMPACT ASSESSMENT	Failure to approve the adoption of the proposed VLE and proceed with partner selection within the proposed timeline risks delaying the delivery of 2026 qualifications, increasing operational complexity and costs, and undermining the Institute's long-term strategy to consolidate and future-proof its digital education infrastructure.
<p>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</p> <p>In January 2025, we formally notified Ulster University of our decision not to renew their contract for hosting our Certificate of Expert Practice (CEP) qualifications beyond December 2025. This strategic move initiates an 18–24-month plan to rationalise our e-learning platforms, improving consistency, operational efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and data security across our education provision.</p> <p>To ensure this transition is manageable in the wake of our recent CRM replacement project – and to maintain agility within tight timescales – we deliberately limited the scope of our virtual learning environment (VLE) review to platforms already in use (Blackboard, Brightspace, and OneFile) alongside Moodle. Although not yet deployed, Moodle was included due to significant in-house expertise and its unmatched flexibility and extensibility to future-proof our e-learning infrastructure.</p> <p>Moodle is the only platform that fully meets our strategic, technical, and pedagogical requirements. As a widely adopted system in UK higher education and the NHS, it offers familiarity that reduces training needs. We propose adopting Moodle as the core VLE in a hub-and-spoke model, integrating content, assessment, and learner engagement. It will host our CEP and digital top-up modules from January 2026. Existing platforms such as Brightspace and OneFile will remain peripheral spokes in the short term and are roadmapped for rationalisation as contracts expire. OneFile, purpose-built for portfolio-based learning, will continue supporting the Registration Training Portfolio until at least 2028, but was discounted for broader use due to its limited applicability beyond portfolio-based qualifications.</p> <p>Moodle's open architecture enables scalable, vendor-neutral customisation, aligning with future CRM integration needs and minimising implementation risk through internal expertise. The next step is for IBMS to adopt Moodle as our new VLE and proceed with implementation partner selection. Previously approved costs (£75k in year one, £45k ongoing) remain a realistic projection.</p>	
PREVIOUS CONSIDERATION	FARC 3 September 2024
RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS	Year one: £75k, on going £45k already in budget

Additional information:

In response to a paper previously presented to FARC (September 2024), in January 2025 we formally notified Ulster University that we do not wish to renew the contract for them to provide virtual learning environment hosting space for our Certificate of Expert Practice qualifications beyond the end of the current contract, which expires in December 2025. The decision not to renew the contract was strategic and intends to start an 18–24-month process of rationalising the disparate platforms we use to deliver our qualifications in order to:

Simplify the user experience for members by providing greater consistency across our education provision, reducing supplementary system training needs/burdens, providing single sign-on (SSO), and a unified “shop front”.

Reduce costs by consolidating licensing requirements by maintaining fewer vendor contracts and thus incurring lower support overheads and benefitting from economies of scale by coalescing around fewer platforms.

Provide operational efficiency by simplifying onboarding/offboarding, unify analytics and reporting, streamline content management and version control

Improve data security and governance by maintaining fewer platforms, presenting a smaller attack surface for cyber threats, easier compliance with GDPR and maintenance of consistent data protection, access control, and retention policies.

Ensure evidence-led decision making for future qualification development through whole-institute insights into engagement and outcomes, also enabling early intervention.

Build future-proofed workflows and tools that offer the flexibility to evolve over time by adopting solutions that can be extended and adapted via plugins, APIs, and integrations without rethinking the whole infrastructure.

Reduce internal “digital silos” and develop stronger pedagogic culture to provide a more unified approach and promote both internal and external collaboration/consistency with a shared pedagogical approach (rather than each qualification using a different tool!).

Platforms currently in use:

Platform	Qualification(s)	Comments
Blackboard	Certificate of Expert Practice only	Contract expires in December 2025. This paper discusses a new “home” for these qualifications
Brightspace	Digital Specialist portfolios only	Contract due to expire in May 2026 – tentatively roadmapped to migrate learners to the new platform upon contract expiry
OneFile	Registration Training portfolio only	Contract expires in September 2025 – contract re-negotiation due to start in July 2025, the new VLE will dictate the trajectory for this. We need to retain OneFile until at least 2028 to allow existing candidates to complete their portfolio.
Turnitin	Registration Training portfolio and ad hoc Higher Specialist Diploma (and other higher quals)	Used extensively in OneFile, not used at all in Brightspace or by those completing other higher/specialist qualifications

Other	Most of our higher qualifications do not have VLE support e.g. HSD, ASD, DEP etc.	
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The Institute is currently emerging from a major CRM replacement project that required significant investment in time, staffing, and technical resources. As a result, there is limited appetite for embarking on another large-scale, resource-heavy IT transformation. We are now operating within a compressed six- to seven-month window to identify and implement a sustainable alternative in time to deliver the next iteration of the Certificate of Expert Practice qualifications in January 2026.

Given these constraints, broadening the VLE scoping exercise to include numerous new commercial platforms would be impractical and risk-laden; yet working through our [evaluation criteria](#) made it clear that all major platforms could meet our current, very simple [requirements](#). This insight led us to narrow our scoping exercise to include only platforms already in use or those we have the internal expertise to support. This approach ensures minimal disruption post-CRM, reduces procurement complexity, and enables delivery within our operational timeline. The new platform must be “go live ready” by October 2025, with user training starting no later than November, to ensure readiness for the 2026 CEP cohort and subsequent launch of the non-accredited degree top-up modules and the updated certificate of achievement (CoA) for support staff (see: [proposed timeline](#)).

Accordingly, this [options appraisal](#) focused on [Brightspace](#), [Blackboard](#) (including Ultra), and [Moodle](#). While Moodle is not currently part of our ecosystem, internal analysis has shown it is uniquely capable of meeting our strategic and operational requirements. [OneFile](#) was excluded as it is a niche platform tailored to portfolio-based, work-based assessment. While well-suited to the Registration Training Portfolio, it lacks the flexibility and extensibility needed to support our CEP and other broader (non-portfolio) qualifications. OneFile will continue to be used where appropriate but is not viable as a core VLE.

Our evolving understanding of current and long-term needs determined during our [qualification review](#) – particularly around customisation, integration, and scalability has confirmed Moodle as the only platform capable of meeting these requirements without vendor-imposed limitations. Its open architecture and plugin ecosystem offer long-term flexibility without lock-in, supporting the Institute’s goal of simplifying our digital landscape, providing a consistent “shop window” and building a (more) future-proof learning infrastructure.

Crucially, we have extensive internal expertise in Moodle, including the Executive Head of Education, Head of Digital Education, Head of Learning and Development, Head of Communication, Website manager and others. This significantly reduces implementation risk and cost, almost eliminating reliance on external vendors. Moodle's alignment with our constructivist qualification model, proven use in the NHS and UK schools/colleges and universities, and its status as the world’s most widely adopted VLE further reinforce its suitability.

Adopting another platform would require (re)training staff and onboarding new vendor services, creating additional cost and risk that could jeopardise the 2026 launch of the CEP and digital top-up modules. Choosing Moodle is not speculative – it is a measured, evidence-based decision grounded in sustainability, scalability, and operational readiness. The platform’s modularity allows us to adopt a mature, proven solution aligned with our current capabilities, while also enabling future growth.

We have shortlisted four implementation options for Moodle: two full-service commercial partners – [Accipio](#) and [Titus Learning](#) – who both offer end-to-end provision including hosting, support, and configuration; one back-end support partner, [LearnSci](#), who would provide infrastructure and technical support while allowing us full control over the front-end configuration, theming, and content management; and a self-hosting option, which could be delivered either on-premises or via a cloud provider such as [AWS](#). Our preferred route is to work with LearnSci to eliminate any vendor lock-in and with whom we already have a trusted relationship, as this model provides the greatest flexibility, control, and alignment with our existing in-house skills while mitigating key infrastructure and security risks.

To support our evaluation process, LearnSci have kindly provided a basic Moodle instance at no cost, as part of our existing relationship. This has enabled us to conduct initial testing and exploration to determine whether Moodle is fit for purpose, without incurring additional expense or being limited by vendor demos. While LearnSci is our preferred implementation partner due to their technical expertise and alignment with our desired support model, we have not yet entered commercial discussions or agreed any licensing terms. At this stage, conversations with LearnSci remain exploratory, and no formal commitments have been made.

While implementation costs are dependent upon partner selection, a previous paper to this committee (September 2024) anticipated a year-one cost of approximately £75k, with ongoing annual costs around £45k. By selecting Moodle, these figures remain realistic for hosting our full qualification suite (excluding the Registration Training Portfolio) while also supporting future qualification development/rollout without incurring additional costs (by comparison, Blackboard alone currently costs c.£110k p/a).

The scoping decision to adopt Moodle reflects strategic pragmatism, we are choosing the best-fit platform that we can implement successfully now, without closing-off future opportunities - the focus is on sustainable flexible delivery, not experimentation.

Therefore, the committee is invited to note the adoption of Moodle as the core VLE to support the next phase of our digital education strategy so we can proceed with partner selection and platform implementation

Proposed timeline:

Phase	Task	Start	End	Duration
Planning & Approval	Committee approval and partner selection	May-25	Jun-25	1 month
Contracting & Setup	Finalise contract with Moodle partner	Jun-25	Jul-25	1 month
Platform Configuration	Configure Moodle environment	Jul-25	Aug-25	2 months
Content Migration	Migrate content from Blackboard	Aug-25	Sep-25	2 months
Content migration will be short and quick (less than one week), but this timeline accounts for the disruption caused by Congress 2025, and potentially provides an opportunity for a soft-launch at congress to a closed user-group which will aid UAT.				
Training & Testing	Internal staff training & user acceptance testing (UAT)	Sep-25	Oct-25	2 months
Go-Live Preparation	Final system checks and launch prep	Oct-25	Oct-25	1 month
Go-Live	Launch Moodle for CEP qualifications	Nov-25	Jan-26	3 months
Post-Go-Live Support	Monitor & support users, fix issues	Jan-26	Mar-26	3 months

High-level Functional Specification/Qualification overview:

Qualification	Description	Priority	Assessment type	Duration (typical)	Approx. # enrolments p/a	Approx. # completions p/a	Pathways/ routes offered	Years post Reg (typical)	Training time given to complete?	Cost	Who pays?	Synchronous learning ?	Notes
Advanced Specialist Diploma (ASD)	Highest-level professional qualification for advanced practice in specific biomedical science fields.		Portfolio/ Written Exam /Practical exam*	2 - 3 yrs	<15		8?	5+ min	Yes	£501.00	NHS Lab or Trust	N	Wide variation in assessment arrangements and fee structure vary within the qualification - "An ASD in ..." Also duration. For example - cervical and diagnostic pathology costs are stated here. Possible changes - digital cytology exam? Revised Histological Dissection structure - rolling into pathways Some have a DEP prerequisite. There are common portfolio requirements across some (but not all) e.g. "case study" "log book" "data governance", number of cases expected. Submission and assessment process varies across portfolios. Qual relates to a job role - Trust support in majority. Some courses/webinars (not mandatory) may be delivered by Third Party. Development work - e.g. placental pathology
Certificate of Achievement – Part I	Portfolio-based qualification for Band 2 or 3 biomedical science support staff to demonstrate foundational lab skills.		Portfolio of evidence assessed by a training officer	1-2 yrs	Relaunching		? core + ? optional	-2		£158.00			Currently undergoing an update – all aspects; curriculum, assessment, delivery mode. Due for launch Sept/Oct 2025.
Certificate of Achievement – Part II	Qualification for Band 4 support staff, demonstrating advanced lab skills and knowledge. Used in Sci Council RegSci (?) award		Portfolio of evidence assessed by a training officer	1-2 yrs	Relaunching		? core + ? optional	-2		/			
Certificate of Competence	Required to demonstrate competence for HCPC registration		Portfolio of evidence, training officer	< 3years	1650	1000	1	0		£179.00		N	

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	as a Biomedical Scientist.		assessed and verified by verifier										
Certificate of Competence by Equivalence	For those seeking HCPC registration through non-traditional routes, demonstrating equivalent competence and skills.		Portfolio of evidence training officer assessed and verified by verifier	12 months	30	30	1	0		£179.00		N	
Certificate of Expert Practice (CEP)	Online certification for developing specialised skills in key areas of biomedical science.	1	Discussion interaction /two assessments per module + final online exam	6.5 months	270	260	5	2+	No	£770.00		y	Range of reasons why people take course depending on personal circumstances. Funding depends on the reason for doing the course. (Possible 75% Trust funded??) Teams sessions (complementary, additional not mandatory)
Diploma of Expert Practice (DEP)	Advanced qualification for biomedical scientists with significant experience, focusing on specific disciplines.		Portfolio of evidence (logbook)/ in person written exam (2 papers)/ practical exam*	2 yrs	50	35	5	3 to 5	Yes BUT	£441.00	NHS Lab or Trust	n	Not all qualifications have a log book fee (£31) All have a portfolio requirement but additional assessment structure varies. E.g. Largest Histological Dissection (e.g. this year 21/30 passed). 3 in development (workplace support requires time - e.g. observations, writing up (probs own time)). Funded by workplace (job role based) Very few from private labs. Courses (virtual or hybrid) may be run by ThirdParties to support learners (e.g. examiner is running a course on Portfolio Preparation) - requirement for evidence of courses/training
Diploma of Higher Specialist Practice (DHSP)	Alternative route to Fellowship through submission of a		Thesis (20,000 words) + Oral exam	1-2 yrs	<6	2 or 3	Chosen topic	3+	Yes	£411.00	Mixture	n	Niche and highly specialised. More likely to be 5 years

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	Master's level thesis in a highly complex biomedical science field.		+presentation										
Diploma of Specialist Practice (DSP)	An alternative to the Specialist Diploma, awarded based on dissertation submission in a defined field of biomedical science.		Dissertation (8,000 words)	1-2 yrs	10	10	Chosen topic	3+	Yes	£179.00	Mixture	n	Need to demonstrate that they are operating at the same <i>level</i> as someone doing the Specialist Diploma
Higher Specialist Diploma (HSD)	Master level qualification for those seeking senior roles in biomedical science, demonstrating advanced knowledge and leadership skills.	1	Portfolio of evidence/oral exam/written exam (4 papers)	2-3 yrs	50ish?	100 (in 2025)	9	Requirement for number of years was removed	Yes BUT	£411.00	Mixture	y	req used to say 5 years. Numbers have increased 4x . Do one at a time. Builds upon Specialist Diploma (not mandated). Must be a Member. Working in discipline with managerial responsibilities (not clinical). Evidence gathering in the workplace. IBMS delivered sessions (not mandatory) Exam technique and portfolio technique - not the content
Other - Member CPD journal	Self reflection and engagement with resources. Pixl8 CPD platform? (See CB re Pathology)		MyIBMS CPD ePortfolio	N/A				N/A		Member benefit		N	
Other - Top Up modules for non-accredited Route 3	Learn Sci courses provided by IBMS	1	?							£700.00		Maybe in future	No decision on charges? IBMS-curated and delivered TopUp content (flexibly and on demand). HCPC accreditation. Potential conflict of interests and unintended consequences? Candidates can receive TopUp from a range of accredited sources. Potentials for partnership

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Specialist Diploma	Demonstrates specialist knowledge and competence in a chosen biomedical science discipline. Not academic		Portfolio of evidence/oral exam/lab tour	2.5 to 3 years	882	214	12	2+	Not usually	179	Mixture	N	Individuals often start the specialist portfolio soon after registration, I doubt this is information we collect as we don't have a set period and don't ask when individuals first registered with the HCPC. Time given at work? Varied, probably not in most places, or not regularly at least. Costs: Mostly the Trust, sometimes the individual

Options appraisal of current VLE providers and Moodle:

OneFile was not included in the VLE options appraisal because it is a specialist platform designed specifically for portfolio-based, work-based learning and assessment. While it serves our Registration Training Portfolio effectively, it does not support the broader pedagogic and functional requirements of our Certificate of Expert Practice (CEP) or other qualifications. Its rigid structure, limited content delivery tools, and lack of extensibility make it unsuitable as a core virtual learning environment. OneFile will continue to be used where it delivers unique value, but it cannot provide the flexibility, scalability, or integration needed to support our wider education portfolio.

Feature	Brightspace (D2L)	Blackboard (Anthology Learn)	Moodle (Open Source)	Justification for choosing Moodle
Cost	High subscription/license fees + hosting (\$20/user) + setup/support costs	High license and support costs (£7-£13/user)	Free software; low cost if self/partner-hosted	No ongoing license fees; scale as needed
Support & SLAs	Vendor support with SLAs	Vendor-managed, global support	Community support or Moodle Partners (with SLAs)	Flexible: choose internal or partner-managed support
Customisation	Very limited – D2L controls roadmap	Some flexibility, but proprietary structure	Fully open-source and customisable	Total control over UI, UX, workflows, and functionality
User Experience (UX)	Clean, mobile-first interface	Traditional UI; improving (slowly!) with Blackboard Ultra	Depends on theme; modern themes available; totally customisable	Themes (e.g. Boost/Fordson/Moove) can be sleek and institution-branded
Mobile App	Brightspace Pulse app	Blackboard App – rubbish!	Moodle Mobile App (customisable) Must register site with partner	Moodle app is open-source and brandable; can integrate push notifications
Learning Analytics	Built-in analytics dashboards and early alerts	Embedded analytics via Blackboard Data	Configurable Reports, Intelliboard, or custom dashboards	Moodle gives direct access to raw data for tailored insight
Assessment Tools	Integrated rubrics, peer review, quiz engine	Strong quiz engine, SafeAssign, peer assessment	Advanced quiz engine, rubrics, peer assessment	Moodle's quiz engine is one of the most powerful in education tech
Plugin/Extension Ecosystem	Limited; curated D2L add-ons	Limited; Blackboard Building Blocks or LTI	1,900+ free and maintained plugins, SCORM, LTI	Moodle's plugin directory supports everything from AI tools to niche education models
Single Sign-On (SSO)	SAML, Azure AD, Google	Supports SAML, LDAP, Azure AD	Full SSO support: SAML, OAuth2, LDAP	No vendor lock-in; integrate with your institutional identity system
Hosting Options	Vendor-only (AWS cloud)	Vendor-hosted or managed	Self-hosted or via Moodle Partners	Full data sovereignty if self-hosted or hosted locally
Integration Ecosystem	Certified LTI integrations	Broad support, especially for publishers and tools	LTI compliant + extensive plugin support	Moodle allows rapid integration of new tools without needing vendor approval

Accessibility Compliance	WCAG 2.1 AA compliant	WCAG 2.1 AA compliant	WCAG compliant (depends on theme and plugin use)	Moodle community actively develops accessible themes and plugins
Data Ownership	Vendor-controlled (hosted data)	Vendor-controlled data	We own the platform and data	We (or partner) defines backup, retention, and compliance strategy
Vendor Lock-in Risk	High – proprietary platform, not portable	High – proprietary ecosystem	None – full control	Easy to switch host or customise code; no vendor dependency
Development Roadmap	Controlled by D2L	Controlled by Anthology	Community-driven + local development – we “take what we want” from this	We can commission features based on our timeline or customisation needs
Community & Innovation	Closed ecosystem	Centralised, less community-driven	Large, global open-source community	Innovations appear faster via the Moodle ecosystem
Migration Pathways	Complex export formats	Exports possible, but limited between platforms	Moodle has import/export for most formats making transition to this platform simpler	Migration into Moodle is often easier due to open format support
Implementation & Training impact	Only internally supported by one member of staff. Training burden for internal staff and new external users is high	Only internally supported by one member of staff. Training burden for internal staff and new external users is high	Moodle benefits from significant existing internal expertise among key staff, reducing the time and cost of training	Internal familiarity of Moodle mitigates many implementation risks and supports a smoother transition for both internal and external users
Scalability & Performance	All three platforms are proven to scale to large user bases. Moodle’s open architecture allows scaling through self-hosting or cloud hosting with Moodle Partners, providing flexibility in resource allocation and performance tuning. This scalability ensures Moodle can support current user loads and expand as our learner base grows without incurring prohibitive licensing costs.			

Platform evaluation criteria:

The following criteria were used for platform evaluation to inform the long- to short-list transition and produce the options appraisal shown on the previous page. Full mapping of how each platform evaluates against these criteria is available if required. It should however be noted that since our requirements are (currently) very low-tech, all platforms either meet these criteria “out of the box” or can be integrated/developed at cost.

Functional domain	Requirement
User Management & Authentication	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Role-Based Access Control (RBAC)▪ Single Sign-On (SSO) and MFA▪ User profile self service▪ User dashboards
Course & Content Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Modular Content Creation & Delivery▪ Content Version Control▪ Multimedia Support▪ Content scheduling (drip release)▪ Content personalisation (adaptive learning)▪ Interactivity & gamification▪ Assessment type▪ Competency mapping against a framework▪ Customisable templates
Assessment & Portfolio Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Progress management and tracking▪ Custom Assessment Workflows▪ Gradebook▪ Multimodal evidence upload▪ Plagiarism Detection▪ Discussion Forums for Peer Learning▪ Shared resources repositories
Communication & Collaboration Tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Online communities▪ Custom email templates▪ Messaging & Calendar integration▪ Integrated meetings▪ Role and setting-based reports and querying
Reporting & Analytics	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Benchmarking▪ Integration with external analysis tools▪ Predictive analysis of learner success▪ Online Exam Environment
Examination & Proctoring Tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Remote Proctoring▪ Secure Browser
Certification & Credentialing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Digital Badges & Certificates▪ Credential Verification Portal▪ Integration with Professional Bodies
Compliance & Data Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ GDPR Compliance▪ UK hosted data storage▪ Data Encryption▪ API Integration
Scalability & Integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ CRM integration▪ Cloud-Based Infrastructure▪ Mobile APP
Accessibility & User Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ WCAG 2.1 Compliance▪ Customisable UI▪ Multilingual Support/Accessibility