Virtual learning environments (VLEs) are a commonly used tool at colleges and universities, providing students with an online portal through which they can access resources like lectures, assignments, forums, and assessments. But it’s not fully clear how VLE usage relates to students’ grades.

With purely online courses, research has found that how much a student engages with their course’s VLE correlates to what grade they’ll earn, but at brick-and-mortar schools, where there are multiple ways to interact with a course, the relationship between VLE usage and grades is less understood. Now, however, new research from the University of Exeter is giving us a look at how VLE usage and grades are linked at traditional universities.

For their study, published in *Computers & Education*, the research team analyzed student engagement with the University of Exeter’s VLE. In order to assess VLE usage across multiple disciplines, the researchers studied one program from each of the university’s six colleges. They then collected VLE usage data from all of the modules first-year students are required to take within each of those six programs. In all, they collected data from 2025 students across 38 modules during the 2015/2016 academic year, looking at how much time per day the students in these modules spent on the VLE dedicated to their course.

**A not-so-simple story**

In general, the team found that high engagement with the VLE was related to higher grades, but lower engagement wasn’t necessarily linked to low grades – a finding that suggests the story is more complicated than a direct link between VLE usage and grades. It turns out the relationship between VLE engagement and grades varies quite a bit depending on the discipline, with students taking modules in the biological or medical sciences showing a stronger relationship between the two and English or political science students demonstrating a weaker link.

A possible explanation lies in how different disciplines use VLEs. At the University of Exeter, biological and medical science courses tend to post necessary information about practical sessions on the VLE and they have students’ complete assessments online as well. Conversely, English, math and political science courses will more often feature assignments, such as essays or worksheets, that are completed offline. However, even within disciplines, the study found that an individual instructor’s learning design can have an impact on how much time students spend on the VLE and how that time relates to grades.

Therefore, it appears that with a traditional brick-and-mortar university where there are multiple ways to engage with a course – by attending lectures or meeting with instructors, by participating in study groups, by visiting the library, or through a VLE, – simply looking at VLE engagement isn’t
enough. It's one part of a larger story.

**VLE engagement is still a useful measure**

Chris Boulton, lead author of the study, says VLE usage is still a valuable measure as long as you keep these differences between disciplines and in learning design in mind. And even though VLE engagement on its own may not be a great predictor of, say, the final grade you'll earn at a traditional university, because it is only a part of how students have to interact with a course, it’s something that they should keep an eye on as they move through a semester.

"**Virtual learning environment usage is a valuable measure as long as you keep the differences between disciplines and in learning design in mind.**"

In this regard, Boulton says, “On a much more personal level, I think it helps individual students.” He uses the following example: If a tutor is working with a certain student, seeing how that student has been engaging with their course’s VLE and whether that activity has shown any significant changes over time could be used as an indicator of how that student is performing. It could also help both the tutor and student see how they might redirect their attention and where more effort should be put in.

In fact, the University of Exeter is experimenting with that idea, and is now offering students a [dashboard](https://bold.expert/university-students-engagement-in-virtual-learning-environments/) that keeps track of their engagement with learning tools like the school’s VLE and the university app. If a student wants to see the time they've put in with their VLE, they can now easily find that information and use it to inform how they study and work.

Going forward, the research team is looking at how offline engagement relates to grades, and they’ll be assessing activity like lecture attendance, interactions with instructors, working with friends, and time spent on campus.

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