Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) Operational Policy

1. Introduction

When considering the activities that should be located within the VLE, it is useful to consider the Web Enhancement Framework adapted from Bell *et al*. (2002) and used by UCISA (Universities and Colleges Information Systems Association) for their biennial survey of the use of technology-enhanced learning in the UK higher education sector (Table 1).

Although the Web Enhancement Framework is not a hierarchy (i.e. Category C is not 'better' than Categories A or B), one of the aims of implementing a VLE is that there will be meaningful, and intentional, student interactions with the online resources and that activities within the VLE will fall primarily within Category B.

Table 1: Web Enhancement Framework (adapted from Bell *et al.*, 2002)

Category A	Web supplemented, in which online participation is optional for students
Category B	Web dependent, requiring participation by the student for an online component of a face to face course, measured against three subcategories of participation: Bi interaction with content Bii communication with staff/students Biii interaction with content and communication
Category C	Fully online courses

2. Activities Located Within the VLE

Four broad headings are proposed for activities that are appropriate to be located within the VLE:

1. Modules
2. Short courses and continuing professional development (including staff development)
3. Course-level sites
4. Co-curricular activities

2.1 Modules

All current undergraduate and postgraduate modules that are recorded in SITS should have a presence in the VLE. This will be the primary use of the University's virtual learning environment.

A presence in the VLE does not necessarily mean that all relevant learning and teaching resources should be located within there (e.g. these resources may reside within an e-portfolio), but there should be a link to the relevant resources from the VLE. All students should be able to access any current modules within the VLE and locate key information about their modules and know how to find supporting resources. The minimum requirements outlined in Appendix 1 will apply to all taught modules that are recorded in SITS.

2.2   Short courses, CPD and staff development

Short courses, continuing professional development (CPD) courses and staff development activities should all involve interaction between learners – which may include students and members of staff – and online resources. It is therefore appropriate to locate these courses within the VLE.

The relevant minimum requirements outlined in Appendix 1 will apply to all taught courses (e.g. short courses, professional CPD). (Note: not all short courses will have an assessment task and therefore no assessment brief will be required.)

2.3   Course-level sites

It is recognised that for many University courses there are generic materials and documents that are used by multiple modules within the course. Maintenance and updating of these resources would be impractical if they were all located and replicated within individual module sites in the VLE. Course-level sites are therefore a useful way of providing students with access to relevant overarching materials. These sites can also be useful in helping to develop students' course identity and a holistic view of the course.

2.4   Co-curricular activities

Co-curricular activities are ones that relate directly to students' academic learning. Examples include health and safety courses that are a compulsory requirement for some students (e.g. students using the laboratories in the Rosalind Franklin Building).

The development of resources by the Skills for Learning team will form a key component of the co-curricular activities within the VLE. These resources are essential to support all students' academic development, regardless of their location of study (i.e. also supporting students from partner institutions).

Decision around what is and is not co-curricular shall reside with the VLE business owner (CoLT).

3.   Platform Choice

Canvas is the institutional virtual learning environment (VLE) platform within the University. Where it is proposed to use an alternative platform, approval must first be secured from the Digital Strategy Committee. The University's VLE platform will be reviewed by the Digital Strategy Committee from time to time to ensure that the platform most directly meets the needs of students and staff.

4.   Availability and Accessing the VLE

In order to have a presence on the VLE, all taught modules (traditional modules, CPD and short courses) must be recorded in SITS. In turn, students who require access to module resources within the VLE must be registered on the relevant modules within SITS. Creation of taught modules within the VLE will be undertaken by members of Faculty administration staff, who will be able to associate the modules within the VLE with the relevant SITS module/iteration to enable automatic student subscription.

In order for course-level sites to have a presence on the VLE, the relevant course must be recorded in SITS. In turn, students who require access must be enrolled on the relevant SITS course. As with taught modules, the creation of course-level areas within the VLE will be undertaken by members of Faculty administration staff, who will be able to associate these areas with the relevant SITS module/iteration to enable automatic student subscription.

Co-curricular and staff development activities within the VLE will not need to have a presence on SITS and students will be able to access them either by self-subscription or via a circulated URL. Staff can be added via the usual channels within Canvas. In order to enable appropriate governance in the use of the VLE, creation of these courses will need to be approved by the VLE Business Owner (i.e. the College of Learning & Teaching).

5.   VLE Users

5.1   Student users

All student users who need to access the VLE must be registered on SITS (this includes students who have joined courses late). The University will support the automatic access to relevant modules within the VLE based on student enrolment/registration data within SITS. This also allows for automatic access to module guides and the relevant e-submission points within the VLE.

5.2   Staff users

All members of staff (including external account users' e.g. external examiners) with a University IT account have access to the VLE. In order to protect personal data, members of Faculty administrative, Module leaders and Academic staff will be responsible for granting staff access to courses, with the exception of the following roles:

- Student Enabling Centre note-taker administrative staff
  in order to add note-takers to appropriate modules within the VLE
- System administrative staff
  in order to support the VLE from a technological perspective
- College of Learning & Teaching staff
  in order to provide pedagogic advice on the use of the VLE
- Faculty administrative staff
  in order to support academic delivery

Appendix 1: Minimum Expectations for Modules within the VLE

A1.   Introduction

A number of UK higher education institutions provide minimum expectations for modules within institutional virtual learning environments (VLE). Comments from an Association for Learning Technology (ALT) Jiscmail discussion (16-17 March 2016) regarding minimum expectations for VLEs suggests that the primary reason for adopting this approach is to ensure a consistent experience for students. In most cases this consistency is across an institution, but in some cases there are local (Faculty or School) variations. The consistency of experience can relate to course structure and navigation, in addition to expectations about when material, such as presentations, will be added to the VLE (i.e. uploading of presentation files at a set time prior to the face-to-face session).

A2.   Minimum Expectations

Having reviewed information regarding minimum expectations at other higher education institutions, the proposed minimum expectations for the VLE are presented in Table A1. It should be noted that there may be additions to the minimum expectations list in the future, depending upon the outcome of other University discussions (e.g. electronic management of assessment, including the location of feedback on assessed work). The minimum requirements shall be reviewed and updated annually.

Table A1: Minimum expectations for the use of the VLE

Minimum Expectation	Additional Information
Every module will have a site within the VLE	
Information available at the start of the module[1]	
Announcements	This is the key location for students to find notifications and updates regarding the running of the module.
Key module information	Key module information should include[2]: - Module description - Learning outcomes - Module timetable - Schedule of activities/sessions - Summary of changes made to the module as a result of module evaluations from the previous year - Resource list (e.g. journals, books, websites), with an indication of essential and further reading
Assessment information	Full assessment briefs should be available, including assessment criteria and details the module learning outcomes being assessed by individual assessment activities.
Staff contact details	Contact details of all members of staff contributing to the module should be available to students.

	Preferred methods of contact should be stated, with expectations about response times where appropriate (e.g. highlighting office hours or an expectation to respond to an email query within 72 hours).
Information added during the module run	
Guided learning resources[3]	All essential module resources (e.g. PowerPoint presentations, if used) should be provided to students in an electronic format. Ideally, these resources should be uploaded at least 48 hours prior to a face-to-face session. The guided learning resources will also include Capture recordings, where available.

[1] In order to support Module Leaders in meeting the minimum expectations, key module information will be brought into the VLE from the SITS student record system. This will ensure that the relevant module information is available to students in a consistent format.

[2] It is recognised that there are current reviews of the purpose and content of Course and Module Guides, and Library Management Support software (including support for the development of reading lists).

[3] All module resources should be hosted within the VLE, or there should be a clear link to the location of the resources if they are held elsewhere (e.g. within an e-portfolio system). All students should be able to locate essential module information and resources by accessing the module site within the VLE. Support and guidance on how to do this is provided through self-help guides and training.