

Enhancing the learning environment

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Introduction

The University of the Highlands and Islands uses Blackboard as its Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). The VLE is the web-based platform that enables students to access learning resources, communicate with lecturers and other students and provides the facility for submitting assignments online.

The VLE is a fundamental part of the university's curriculum delivery and provides a learning environment where students can become familiar and build their knowledge and skills in their discipline and in digital literacy. Importantly, the VLE is supported by the institution through an IT infrastructure which encompasses curriculum delivery across every academic partner and every programme.

This guidance aims to support you in creating and enhancing the delivery of learning in a blended or online environment. It will help you create learning experiences which meet the needs of you and your students. The guidance is accompanied by a VLE checklist which can be used as a starting point to assist in the development and maintenance of your module space. The topics explored within this guidance are:

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- delivery models
- course planning and design
- communication and collaboration
- Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL)

VLE Checklist

Download this [VLE checklist](#) as an aid when developing your VLE space.

Delivery models

The learning delivery model chosen will reflect the needs of students, their location (geographical and time zone), the requirements of the programme and the available infrastructure and resources including technology. Delivery models range from fully online to fully classroom based and any point along this continuum, known as ‘the blend’.

Blended model

This model offers a flexible mix of face to face contact (f2f) and access to web-based resources.

Online model

This model offers minimal face to face contact – usually in the form of a programme induction and provides students with the flexibility to access and study in a manner that meets their requirements in terms of time and place.

Further reading

[‘Blended’ Learning at the University of the Highlands and Islands: A Case Study in Self - Awareness and Policy Making](#) explores the evolution of blended learning practice in the context of the university.

Core elements

Fundamentally, these models need to be underpinned by the following core elements:

- adherence to [academic standards and quality regulations](#);

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- learning and teaching materials aligned to learning outcomes, activities and assessment;
- a consistent and accessible learning environment;
- a supportive learning environment underpinned by effective communication practices;
- a flexible approach to learning.

In practice the online student may be engaged through techniques such as:

- regular communications with their lecturer;
- lectures / discussions that contain a voice [audio] – augmented presentation as currently offered by the traditional face to face lecture;
- opportunities to discuss issues with fellow class members;
- timely, informative and appropriate feedback;
- well-structured, logically sequenced learning with clear and obvious navigation;
- clearly set out expectations;
- a range of appropriate tools that allow the task to be completed as required;
- regular opportunities to track learner progress [e.g. formative assessment].

Course planning and design

The course design is informed by one of the following key documents:

- SQA unit descriptor
- CUR03 module descriptor.

Reading these documents should be your starting point and will help you plan, write and structure your content.

Providing a quality student experience

Providing a high quality student experience is dependent on both the delivery and the content of a course. Delivery requires the appropriate level of subject knowledge and teaching skills. In an online environment these teaching skills include the ability to use

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technologies and manage learning environments including using features such as asynchronous collaborative sessions, video conferencing and discussion groups.

The quality of the content, although the responsibility of the teaching staff, is governed by legal aspects such as copyright and accessibility. For more detailed information on copyright and accessibility visit the [Support Portal](#).

Planning content

When designing your learning environment the primary factors that influence the final product include:

- **Personal** – your areas of expertise and specific interests will influence where you place more emphasis.
- **Institutional** – your institution will have its own set of standards and expectations, usually laid out by the Learning and Teaching department.
- **Governmental** – funding, assessment and curriculum bodies such as SQA will have clear expectations of your delivery. At some point during the life of your course you will be required to demonstrate that you have met these expectations.
- **Industry/external** – industry professional bodies and employers are becoming more involved in the direction that education is taking. Involvement of appropriate bodies and organisations is an excellent way to ensure that employer requirements are aligned with curriculum delivery thus increasing the possibility that our learners will be successful in gaining employment post education.

Structuring VLE content

Structure applies to both your VLE space and the content contained within it. The structure of your course is significant as it will indicate to students the order and importance of the learning content.

Break your module into weeks or topics using the VLE folder structure. Use folders and sub-folders as storage areas if you want to present a lot of documents or resources at once, this will prevent a long cluttered main page.

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The VLE provides a default menu structure which is considered usable and navigable for students and includes direct links to library services and student services.

If the default structure does not meet the needs of your course then it is possible to change the look and feel, however there are certain options that should always be made available (e.g. staff profile, module information and course information) and an order that should be observed (e.g. Introduction, Induction, content, assessment). Keep the interface clean and try to avoid placing too much information on the first page as this will increase the cognitive load and overwhelm the users.

If you are using the Blackboard module template then the sections will have been predefined, although you may have requested some additional ones to meet specific requirements.

Tip - If you want to get your course up and running quickly with all the recommended options then speak to your VLE Support Officer about using the EDU VLE template.

Example VLE Template

A recent EDU project involved the creation of a VLE template incorporating many of these recommendations. This template was informed by practitioners and the [attached guide](#) explores in more detail its use including customisation and the use of activity icons.

Writing content

When writing content for your module it is important to ensure it is appropriate to the:

- subject
- level
- audience
- delivery.

Structuring activities

Activities should be clearly structured and be designed to meet the learning outcomes or objectives. John Biggs, Australian academic and writer provides a [short introduction to the](#)

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[concept of 'constructive alignment'](#) and although using the [SOLO taxonomy of learning](#) it is compatible with other taxonomies such as Bloom's. His book, '[Teaching for Quality Learning at University](#)', co-authored with Catherine Tang is an excellent resource for anyone looking to reflect and explore enhancements to the quality of their teaching.

By ensuring that your material has a clear structure you will make it easier for your learners to navigate. This is particularly important when your learners are working in an online environment, and you are not available to point them in the right direction.

Again, break your learning content (whether Word, PDF or webpages or other format) into sections and subsections using heading styles as this will provide your students with a familiar interface. By "chunking" the learning content into manageable sections, you provide your learners with appropriate breaks to reflect on their learning and to structure their thinking.

Writing for online delivery

Writing for online delivery is not the same as writing for face to face. [Lynda.com provide an excellent short course \(1h24m\)](#) that will guide you through the process and provide you with some useful tips. You will need to log in with your institutional username and password.

Communication and collaboration

Communication is key in any educational context, however when delivering education using an approach which is fully online or which includes an element of online delivery, it takes on a higher level of importance.

Whilst bringing the obvious benefit of delivery anytime, anyplace and providing access to education to those who previously would have been unable to access it due to geography or personal/work commitments, online delivery, nonetheless also has some disadvantages that need to be overcome. The lack of physical connection in time and space can lead to feelings of isolation and the reliance on technology can induce levels of stress, delay and provide conditions for being less participatory.

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To mitigate some of the challenges associated with online communication it is essential that you set expectations on how you want your students to communicate. The best way to do this is to lead by example. A [netiquette guide](#) provides an excellent starting point.

Core course information

Core course information provides your students with the key supporting documents and additional information which underpins all aspects of the delivery. This should be reviewed as part of the preparation for each delivery and each new cohort of students.

Module information

Include any additional information you can provide the students about the module e.g. the student handbook, field trip information, important calendar dates, specific support sites, links to tools you think will be useful. Try to keep this section clean and uncluttered, there can be a temptation to fill it with everything you think the student will need. Remember there are other places in the VLE for much of the information students require so try to be discerning about what you put in the 'module information' section.

Module description

Depending whether you are delivering units or modules you can either use the SQA unit descriptor or the CUR03 module descriptor. Providing this to your learners allows them to see clearly what is expected of them in order to successfully complete their course.

- Click here to go to browse [SQA NC subjects](#)
- Click here to go to the [SQA HNC/D Unit search](#)

Reading list

Provide your students with an up to date reading list. Ensure that you have communicated your module requirements to your subject network librarian who will check availability and inform you of any new additions.

Your reading list should include:

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- essential reading – these are core to the subject and students must read these to be fully across the course.
- recommended reading – these tend to expand on the essential reading and students should read these to broaden their knowledge.
- further reading – these provide useful background information and students may read these if they have time or interest.

The reading list should be laid out in a clear and logical format with publications grouped by type i.e. book, ejournals, websites.

Find your module reading list

All current module core and recommended reading lists are [available via Rebuslist](#).

Module plan

The module plan outlines how the module will be delivered. It should include detail relating to what is to be achieved (objectives/outcomes), how it will be achieved (activities), how it will be evidenced (assignment/assessment) and when it should be achieved by. In addition, a list of the resources required should be included.

Assignment, assessment information

This should be provided to students at the start of their module and should include assessment guidelines for completion, submission process and deadlines and feedback/feedforward return date. Assignment cover and return sheets should be up-to-date. It may be important to include information on second marking if appropriate.

Study guides

Studying effectively requires a range of skills. The [essential student skills website](#) provides an excellent suite of resources including note-taking, preparing for assessment and exams, referencing, effective reading and time management. The SQA also provide an excellent resource on creating a study plan and one on [coping with stress](#).

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Core communication

Core communication provides ways for students and staff to exchange and share information.

Welcome message – provide a message that students see on their first entry to the online environment. In a VLE this is usually as an announcement. Ensure that the announcement actually welcomes the student and provides some brief instruction about where to go or what to do next.

Staff information and profile – in a fully online environment your students may never actually see you so it is important that they are able to make the connection between your name and you the person. Do this by creating a staff profile that has a good clear head and shoulders image of you, a brief autobiography and contact information. This will allow the student to see that you are a real person.

Create a social/coffee area – this can be created in a discussion group and has multiple benefits. Firstly, it provides students with an easy entry to discussion boards and the technology. Secondly, students can post about things they are comfortable talking about without the pressure of course expectations. Thirdly, it provides students with a space to socialise and chat about non-course related topics, keeping the course related discussion areas clear of chat.

Create an FAQ page – where students post and respond to questions about the course. This is an excellent way to encourage peer to peer support. It keeps all the support related questions in one place and encourages group collaboration. The teacher should dip in every so often just to check that any advice given is correct, making suggestions where required without being critical.

Course feedback – this is important to staff and students. For students it is their opportunity to say how their course has gone and suggest future enhancements. Feedback is one of the tools the university uses to monitor quality, it also provides a mechanism whereby areas of excellence and areas for improvement can be identified. The [university's surveys webpage](#)

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provides information on the surveys which are carried out over an academic year. Although directed at students it is of equal value to teaching staff.

Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL)

The majority of the technology that you will use in your course is supported by the university. University supported services have been assessed as 'fit for purpose' and are backed up by Learning and Information Services (LIS). LIS provide a comprehensive suite of [IT Help](#) on the university website.

Generally, you will find that the university provides all the technology you require. The university encourages and supports innovation in learning and teaching and sometimes that requires the use of external services.

There are lots of factors to be considered in these cases, some of them legal, therefore if you do decide to take this approach you should ensure your decisions align with the [university social media policy](#) ().

This is important to ensure that, among other things:

- the university does not breach any data protection issues;
- the service meets requirements;
- adequate measures are in place to backup and recover data;
- there is a fall-back plan in the event of failure.

Blackboard YouTube Support Channel

Blackboard also provide [support videos on their YouTube channel](#).

Engaging students

Virtual Learning Environments like Blackboard and Moodle provide a range of tools that enable teaching staff to engage learners in an online environment. By structuring the learning experience and making your online environment active you can encourage your students to participate.

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The [Support Portal](#) includes a section on 'Technology Enhanced Learning' which includes engaging learners at a distance, the use of video and web conferencing and other engagement/communication tools such as wikis, blogs and discussion boards.

Engaging Students at The University of Central London

[The University of Central London](#) also provide some good examples of how you might achieve this.

Summary

This guidance provides a range of information focusing on enhancing the use of the VLE in a blended or online delivery. Using the guide can help you create learning experiences which meet the needs of you and your students.

The accompanying VLE checklist has been created to support the development and maintenance of unit and module spaces within the virtual learning environment. Although not an exhaustive list it can be used, on a regular basis, as a starting point to identify areas in the VLE module space to develop.

Download the [VLE checklist](#).