

Virtual Learning Environment (Blackboard) Policy and Guidance Statement

Introduction

This statement is designed for all members of the University community – staff and students – who use or intend to use the University’s supported Virtual Learning Environment, Blackboard. The statement is intended to:

- i. ensure that all University students can access and interact with appropriate materials and activities to support their studies
- ii. encourage and support University staff to take an active role in student learning
- iii. ensure that the tools which support student learning are appropriate, reliable, accessible, and secure
- iv. ensure that staff and students are provided with appropriate information and training to support their use of Blackboard.

The statement should be read in conjunction with other relevant University policy and strategy documents, particularly the Learning and Teaching Strategy, Internet Code of Practice, Regulations Concerning the Use of University Computing Services and the Academic Codes of Practice. The Service Level Agreement for the Virtual Learning Environment is maintained in tandem with this policy, and provides service-level detail to the statements herein.

Enquiries regarding this statement should be addressed to the Learning Technology Management Group c/o the Group Secretary – please email qualoffice@le.ac.uk

1.0 Virtual Learning Environments – Definition

As defined by the Joint Information Strategy Committee (JISC, 2001):

“the term Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is used to refer to the ‘online’ interactions of various kinds which take place between learners and tutors. The JISC MLE Steering Group has defined VLE as the components in which learners and tutors participate in online interactions of various kinds, including online learning”.

[Source:

<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/buildmlehefe/lifelonglearning/mlebriefingpack.aspx>]

In respect of this Statement, the above definition is narrowed to refer to the core online service or location where the majority of a student’s learning and teaching resources or activities are hosted.

The single supported Virtual Learning Environment (hereafter VLE) within the University is Blackboard:

<https://blackboard.le.ac.uk/>

Three Blackboard use cases or “instances” are recognised within the University:

- i. Programme - Virtual Learning Environments associated with a complete programme or course of study and accessible to students on all modules comprising the programme
- ii. Module - Virtual Learning Environments associated with a specific taught module or academic information resource such as the University Library or Career Development
- iii. Administrative - Virtual Learning Environments associated with other University functions that directly support learning and teaching activities – such as Virtual Learning Environments for Student-Staff Committees, year/departmental teaching administration, the University Library or Career Development.

Other uses – including Blackboard instances for research groups or for other committees/groups – may exist where alternative platforms are not available; but such uses are not covered by this document.

Where other online learning resources or services are utilised within a programme, Blackboard should normally act as a primary central facility through which students can be guided to these other services. These services should also be provided such that students receive an equivalent level of access to and quality of learning resources to that laid out in this statement; although specific design and delivery requirements herein are not applicable.

2.0 Institutional Governance

Overall responsibility for institutional use of and policy relating to VLEs rests with the Academic Policy Committee. The Learning Technologies Management and Advisory Groups provide detailed input and are concerned with the use and support of the VLE under this statement.

3.0 Platform Choice

Blackboard is the standard platform for VLEs within the University. Where it is proposed to use an alternative platform, approval must first be secured from the Academic Policy Committee.

Approval for an alternative platform will normally be given only where there are strong pedagogic reasons for its use. Note that this requirement does not apply to those programmes delivered in partnership with other institutions, although students should receive an equivalent level of access to – and quality of – learning resources to that laid out in this statement.

The standard platform for VLEs within the University will be reviewed by the Learning Technologies Management Group from time to time to ensure that the platform most directly meets the needs of students and staff.

4.0 Availability and Access

Where appropriate, each taught University module should have an associated Blackboard instance (whether directly in a module instance, or through an overarching programme instance).

The naming of Blackboard instances must follow the format of: “Programme code: Programme name” for programme instances, and “Module code: Module name” for module instances; using the same names and codes as are allocated by the Registry (and used in the Student Record System) when programmes are approved. Administrative instances should be named clearly so that students can locate them within their overall instance list, beginning with the programme or department name.

University students should have access to a Blackboard instance for all taught modules on which they are currently registered. Additionally:

- i. Students should continue to have access to the Blackboard instance for any module which they are required to repeat in full or in part; departments should take steps to provide such access through either a dedicated version of the associated VLE instance or by enrolling such students on the next live iteration of the module, as appropriate.
- ii. Students cannot be given access to Blackboard instances associated with future modules – accordingly, alternative approaches should be used where access to future materials is necessary, such as making fuller module descriptions, reading lists, etc. available through programme-wide Blackboard instances for optional module selection.
- iii. Some programmes may require that students have access to Blackboard instances associated with previously completed modules (for reference to, or revision of, key topics or skills); departments should provide such access through a dedicated or archived (see section 10) version of the associated Blackboard instance.

IT Services will check the compatibility of core Blackboard functions with all core University supported web browsers, and as far as possible other popular web browsers known to be used by the majority of students and staff. As far as possible, core Blackboard functions will be available to all users regardless of browser type, computing platform or location.

The preferred VLE platform will adhere adequately to current accessibility guidelines, providing an equivalent experience to all students on our programmes; learning and teaching content within individual Blackboard instances must also meet current accessibility guidelines.

5.0 Upgrades, Maintenance Periods and Withdrawals of Service

Minor upgrades to Blackboard (“service packs”) will be tested against a set of core features to ensure continued compatibility with existing instances. Any additional features available through such upgrades will be considered by the Learning Technology Advisory Group, and approved by the Learning Technologies Management Group for installation during the next maintenance

period.

Major upgrades to Blackboard will be considered as and when available by the Learning Technology Management Group and recommendations made to the Academic Policy Committee. If, at any point, a major upgrade fails to match the needs of the institution, a review will be undertaken as detailed in 3.0.

Maintenance work involving the complete withdrawal of access to Blackboard will as far as possible be restricted to:

- i. Major Scheduled Maintenance – duration of Summer degree congregations period
- ii. Minor Scheduled Maintenance – two days at the end of both Autumn and Spring terms

Although the above periods apply primarily to Blackboard, where possible maintenance affecting related University-supported learning and teaching services will be restricted to these periods also.

6.0 Registration of Blackboard Users

Registration of Student Users

The registration of student users for Blackboard must be via the University's central Student Records System (SRS).

The University will support the registration of student users via the SRS for all module and programme Blackboard instances, and the majority of standard administrative instances (see above *1.0 Virtual Learning Environments – Definition*). This includes registration of student users to Blackboard instances for academic support or resources – such as the University Library or Careers – where the records for student users can be categorised as a coherent group.

Ad hoc registrations of student users – for example, for a student who has joined the course late – must also be via the SRS. Registration of students to Blackboard following registration in the SRS will take no longer than 24 hours, although some linked services (such as Turnitin) may require manual updating.

Registration of Staff Users

The VLE Administrator (see *7.0 Virtual Learning Environments - Staff Roles* below) is responsible for the registration of staff users. In order to protect personal data, only staff with a direct learning, teaching or support role in the programme/module should be given access to the associated Blackboard instance. Senior management or other approved staff receive reasonable access in order to study and improve systems.

Registration of Guest Users

Sections of Blackboard instances can be opened to “guests”. Any person, worldwide, is then able to connect to that instance as a guest, and gain access to any materials or data within it. Opening Blackboard instances in this way should therefore normally be avoided and, in particular, instances must not be opened to guests where this could compromise the security of any personal data held within, or open copyrighted materials (such as library resources) beyond their prescribed bounds.

Note that there are special “guest access” Blackboard instances which can be used for marketing

or open access purposes: these would normally contain no personal or restricted-access material.

7.0 Virtual Learning Environments – Staff Roles

It is recognised that there are variations in how staff responsibilities relating to the ownership and maintenance of Blackboard instances are shared or distributed in local practice. Without seeking to be proscriptive in how such responsibilities are shared, the following staff ‘roles’ are defined for the purposes of this document, targeting of training courses, etc.; they *are not* changes or additions to existing formal staff roles, but may help line managers to identify particular existing responsibilities:

- i. VLE Convenor – the academic lead for the Blackboard instance (often synonymous with the programme or module director) having overall responsibility for the content and quality of the programme/module and copyright compliance.
- ii. VLE Administrator – the administrative lead for the Blackboard instance having overall responsibility for the registration of student and staff users, and controlling access to materials.
- iii. Content Creator – adds or amends material within the Blackboard instance, with devolved responsibility for the quality and copyright compliance of that material.
- iv. Tutor/Moderator – checking, moderating or supporting student contributions to the Blackboard instance.
- v. Assessor – assessment of, and feedback on, student work within the Blackboard instance.

It is recognised that these roles will vary by department, programme, module and Blackboard instance; that several of the roles may be held by academic *or* administrative staff; and that in many cases individuals may hold more than one of these roles.

8.0 Design and Navigation Standards

To support the development of a high quality VLE, VLE Convenors should ensure that the following guidance on standards for design and navigation is adhered to:

- i. Include an outline of the module/programme with a statement of learning outcomes (by quoting from or linking to approved versions held in the SRS), and a module/programme calendar where relevant, under the main navigation heading of “Overview”.
- ii. Learning and teaching content should normally be stored under the overarching main navigation heading of “Materials and Activities” and organised in such a way as to aid student navigation – for example, content might be arranged chronologically with reference to the module/course calendar; by theme or topic; or by group activity – but other formats may be used as appropriate to the programme/module.
- iii. Key contact information for academic, administrative and technical support should normally be provided under the overarching main navigation heading of “Help and Contacts”.
- iv. Where the VLE instance includes references to, or actual, assessment of student work, collected information about the assignments, plagiarism advice, deadlines and submission methods/boxes should normally be provided under the main navigation heading of “Assessment” (even if individual assignments are provided or discussed elsewhere within the course materials - internal links can be made in these cases).
- v. Where a significant form (or forms) of online interaction are included within a programme or

module, a direct link to relevant sections of the VLE should be included as a main navigation heading. For example: “Discussion” or “Group Area”.

- vi. Headings and subheadings should be clear and consistent.
- vii. Downloadable files and other materials should be named in a way that is consistent and descriptive of their content, and provided in a form which affords access by all students registered on the VLE instance. For scanned materials provided by the Library, this should be done by entering the appropriate naming text in ‘Name of Link to File’ (in Blackboard) rather than amending the actual file name.
- viii. Folders and information (including announcements) which are out of date or not in use should be removed from the navigation structure or deleted altogether
- ix. Regular checks (at least once per academic year) should be made by VLE Convenors of the currency of materials available through their VLE instances – this includes references in texts, links to online resources, etc.
- x. Prominent and appropriate links to key academic information resources should be included in any programme or module VLE instances. The Library, Careers, Learning Development and Student Welfare should provide regularly updated information for departments to include on their VLE instances, where possible targeted through collaborative work between the departments and services.
- xi. Major changes to the design and/or navigation of a live VLE instance should not normally be made part-way through a module or programme; where this is unavoidable, users should be:
 - given as much notice as possible
 - told what is changing and when
 - given support in using the new design or navigation features
 - told who to contact should they need assistance

9.0 Use of Third Party Learning Resources (including Reading Lists)

‘Third party’ learning resources is used here to mean learning resources which are not created by the University and are obtained or linked to from elsewhere such as eBooks, eJournals, external Websites etc.

To avoid copyright infringement, VLE Convenors should ensure that when re-using third party materials as part of their course content, open source materials are used where possible. Some non- open source third party materials (this includes materials embedded within hand-outs/slideshows) can be made available either under one of the University’s licences (e.g. CLA) or by obtaining permission from the copyright owner. Extracts from most printed books and journals can be scanned to include in the VLE under the terms of a licence with the Copyright Licensing Agency. The Library provides a service for this, and advice on the use of any third party material: contact copyright@le.ac.uk.

Due to licensing restrictions *links* to third party resources (including eResources provided by the Library as well as materials found on the web), should be used wherever possible, as opposed to embedding actual materials (e.g. PDFs, word documents).

Where students are provided with a reading list, use of the University’s reading list system is strongly encouraged:

<http://readinglists.le.ac.uk>

A link from the left hand side navigation menu is provided automatically from a Blackboard instance to its reading list on this system.

The reading list system provides:

- A convenient way of gathering information automatically about publications and other resources from catalogues, publishers' Websites and Amazon
- 'Live' information about book availability in the Library
- Reliable links to eBooks, eJournals and other content both on and off campus
- A way of sending orders to the Library for new resources

10.0 Copyright and Intellectual Property

Ownership of materials created for use within a Blackboard instance will be subject to the provisions on intellectual property set out in Section 3.14 of the University's Financial Regulations.

All materials created within the University for use within a VLE instance should be either labelled as © **University of Leicester, all rights reserved** with the date of creation, or made available via an open Creative Commons Licence. For further advice on Creative Commons licensing, please contact copyright@le.ac.uk

See section 9.0 for details of copyright restrictions in relation to third party materials.

11.0 Assessment and Feedback Practices

To support the development of an effective VLE, VLE Convenors should ensure that the following guidance on assessment and feedback practices is adhered to:

- i. All assessment and feedback practices within Blackboard must be consistent with the Academic Codes of Practice (particularly the COP on Assessed Work), and the Protocol on Student Feedback.
- ii. Summative assessment information, instruments and weightings must match those approved and recorded on the SRS.
- iii. Departments should publish their expectations as to the amount and type of engagement that students should have with the Blackboard instance – normally this will be through the student handbook, with reminders placed within the Blackboard instance "Overview" area. This is particularly relevant where discussion or other student-tutor activity is included within the Blackboard instance (see vi below).
- iv. Summatively assessed work should be submitted through the SITS Assignment Handling System where available/possible, via a dedicated link from the Blackboard instance.
- v. Where assessed work is submitted through Blackboard, feedback on that work should also be provided or signposted through that Blackboard instance – noting though that:
 - student assessments that are submitted/marked within a Blackboard instance must have final component and module outcomes recorded in the SRS. The institution will seek to provide streamlined flows between Blackboard and the SRS in due course; until this is available, and in general:
 - departments should review their internal processes and aim to have as few steps as possible between data creation and input to the SRS; where possible data

downloads/transfers should be used to help protect data quality.

- vi. Blackboard instances can be used to publish the marks for assessed work – but staff and students should both be clear that marks published in this way are provisional until such time as they are formally confirmed by the Registry following the meeting of a Board of Examiners.
- vii. Where communication tools (eg. discussion boards, blogs or wikis) are used, the VLE Convenor is responsible for ensuring that:
 - areas are monitored as regularly as is appropriate for the context – normally such monitoring would be undertaken by the Tutor or Moderator (see above *7.0 Virtual Learning Environments – Staff Roles*) - and any material which contravenes the Internet Code of Practice, UK copyright law or otherwise compromises academic integrity or the programme aims should be removed (and see below).
 - students are given clear expectations as to the frequency with which they should contribute and the frequency with which staff will check/respond to contributions.
 - there is a disclaimer associated with the area to the effect that inappropriate or abusive content should be reported to the VLE Convenor and will be removed immediately and that cases where a student is found to have submitted abusive content will be handled under the Student Code of Conduct.
 - where anonymous submissions are accepted other users should not normally be permitted to identify a contributor; however, it is suggested that departments may wish to make it clear that steps will be taken to identify anonymous contributors where there is a good reason for doing so – for example, where abusive material is posted or there are concerns for the contributor’s welfare.

12.0 Recycling and Archiving

When a module completes for a particular cohort, the Blackboard instance will need to be properly archived, and a new instance for the module created for the next cohort.

Instances can be archived and prepared in two ways:

- The **Re-use** method
In most cases, a particular instance will not need to be used again live. Therefore, once the current cohort has completed, the instance (including all content and student data) is *archived* and stored securely on a backed up area. All student data is then deleted from the instance, leaving the content: this instance is then ready for use for a new cohort.
- The **Clean Copy** method
In cases where students will need to refer back to an instance later in their course (for example, to review research methods or other material), or where students will need access to the instance for resits or retakes, the instance will remain live on the system with the same student registrations as long as it is needed (when no longer needed, the instance should be archived as above, and deleted). A *copy* of the instance (content only, no student data) is then created ready to be used for the new cohort.

IT Services will provide support to departments (through tools and training) for these two methods.

Archiving of Blackboard instances should be in accordance with the University’s retention schedule (provided by Information Assurance Services, and currently the duration of the programme plus one year). Where material consisting of and/or containing personal data is

needed for continuing purposes – such as assessment records – this must be outside of Blackboard and must be transferred to or already held within the SRS. When a Blackboard instance which contains scanned third party material provided by the Library is archived, this material must be removed. Notification of archiving should be sent to Copyright Administration either in response to an annual renewal notice, or via an e-mail to copyright@le.ac.uk.

Where a Blackboard instance is to be *clean copied* – that is prepared for re-use by another student cohort – the VLE Administrator is responsible for ensuring that it is first cleaned of any personal data belonging to members of the previous cohort. Again, where material consisting of and/or containing personal data is to be retained before deletion – such as assessment records – this must be outside of Blackboard and must be held within the SRS.

When a Blackboard instance is to be *clean copied*, it is possible to retain scanned third party material provided by the Library. Notification of the new instance should be sent to Copyright Administration either in response to an annual renewal notice, or via an e-mail to copyright@le.ac.uk.

13.0 Training and Support for Staff

IT Services and the Academic Practice Service will:

- i. provide training for the recognised VLE staff roles (see above *7.0 Virtual Learning Environments – Staff Roles*)
- ii. make available online resources to allow staff to complete all requirements outlined in this statement
- iii. provide support for contextual issues around the use of Blackboard

Initial training for staff in academic roles is provided as part of the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice in Higher Education. Staff in non-academic roles and academic staff needing further guidance can undertake VLE workshops provided by IT Services. Guided learning sessions are available for staff needing more tailored support and IT Services will continue to provide supplementary support in the event of major software upgrades/introduction of new software versions.

Training on licensing, copyright issues and use of the reading list system is provided by the Library.

Support for Blackboard instance Production and Population

IT Services and the Academic Practice Service will provide templates to help staff develop effective Blackboard instances together with training in the use of these templates. Assistance will also be provided for the production and population of new VLE instances in both pedagogic and technical areas.

14.0 Training and Support for Students

All Blackboard instances should include easy-to-find and regularly maintained support materials/resources which are accessible to all student users. IT Services and the Academic Practice Service will provide central support materials which departments can use or incorporate with their own.

All Blackboard instances should identify clear contacts for academic and technical advice under the heading “Help and Contact”. The first point of contact will vary according to the situation and/or local practice.

Advice on use and functionality of the materials and resources within a Blackboard instance should be available to students as and when they need it. Approaches to the delivery of such advice may vary locally with some departments making all information available at the start of the module/course and others providing it as it becomes relevant. It is suggested that the latter approach may be preferable and provide a more effective means of support. IT Services and the Academic Practice Service will provide central resources to aid in the provision of this advice.

15.0 Quality Assurance

Student responsibilities relating to the use of Blackboard will be in accordance with those set out in the University's Regulations and other applicable Codes of Practice.

Student end of module/course evaluation exercises should explicitly address the quality of experience relating to the use of associated Blackboard instances.

Departmental annual developmental reviews will explicitly address the use of Blackboard and associated issues relating to its design and contribution to the overall learning experience.

16.0 Monitoring

Two levels of monitoring are recognised in relation to Blackboard:

- i. service-level monitoring, relating to the performance of the Blackboard service as a whole. Such monitoring is covered by the concomitant Service Level Agreement for Blackboard;
- ii. instance-level monitoring, relating to student and staff activity on individual Blackboard instances.

Support for Instance-Level Monitoring

IT Services will provide tools to allow departments to undertake instance-level monitoring of Blackboard – for example, to support monitoring of student access and activity. The VLE Administrator is responsible for carrying out such monitoring, and ensuring that reports are integrated with overarching departmental monitoring/progression schemes. Where Blackboard supports tracking of user activity – such as numbers of page views or downloads – departments are encouraged to make use of this and use such information in their quality assurance processes (see above *15.0 Quality Assurance*).

17.0 Innovative Practice in Virtual Learning Environments

It is recognised that VLEs have a role to play in the development of innovative teaching practice. However, this must not be done in such a way that the quality of the student experience could be put at risk.

VLE Convenors should note that:

- i. new learning tools should not normally be tested on students within a live Blackboard instance, except where agreed with the students in advance and not adversely affecting any learning outcomes or assessment for those students
- ii. in-built learning tools within Blackboard should be preferred to externally available third party tools, where features and services are broadly similar
- iii. when third party tools are used to extend the VLE environment beyond University hosted/supported services, this should be for strong pedagogic or administrative reasons.

Additionally, student personal data must not be compromised or stored in third party hosted services except where approved by the Registry and Information Assurance Services.

- iv. where innovative practice within the context of points i to iii above has led to successful outcomes for students and staff, this practice should be shared with colleagues across the institution through College representatives on the Learning Technologies Advisory Group and/or at the annual Learning and Teaching Conference.

18.0 Use of Virtual Learning Environments for Mass Communications

It is recognised that both the University email system and Blackboard are used by departments for the purposes of mass communications with students. Departments should be consistent in which of these systems is used and ensure that students are made aware at the start of the module where to look for new messages.

Where a Blackboard instance is used for mass communications with students, key announcements should be flagged as such.

Announcements and other time-bound communications within Blackboard instances should be removed from student view once no longer relevant.