

## Blackboard – Good Practice Guide

Blackboard enables you to provide online resources and activities that support your students' learning. This short guide offers advice about simple, practical steps you can take to enhance its educational value and improve their experience.

### Essential Practices and Resources

These practices and resources should be present for all modules:

- Use **Announcements** to keep your students informed about important course information and deadlines. Select the option to email a copy of the announcement so they don't have to log in to Blackboard to find and read them.
- Provide basic **staff information** such as your name, email and office hours for this module. For courses with multiple tutors, a photo is also helpful.
- Provide **information about the module** such as the module profile, timetable, reading list, and assessment details. If any of these are already available (for example on your Faculty website) just provide links to avoid duplicating files.
- Provide **information about assignments** including any guidance you wish to offer as well as marking criteria and deadlines.
- Provide copies of **lecture support materials** such as lecture notes and PowerPoint slides. These should be organised in folders so that they are easy to locate, for example by week or topic.
- **Organise the course resources** so they are easy to find. More details on this below.

Note that printed copies of information about the module and lecture support materials should still be given to students. If they lose their copy or miss a lecture, they will be expected to obtain replacements from Blackboard rather than you or the Faculty office.

Although posting announcements and uploading documents takes a small amount of time, this will be more than repaid by the time saved dealing with individual requests and queries from students.

### Recommended Practices and Resources

These practices and resources can save you and your students' time, effort and worry:

- Create a **welcome message** (Announcement) at the start of the module that explains how you will be using Blackboard to support their learning and your expectations (e.g. *"You should log into this course the day before each lecture to see a summary of the key learning points and a link to a paper we will discuss in class."*)
- Manage **student expectations** by clearly stating that you will (for example) *"reply to emails within two working days, so I will reply to an email sent on Friday by 5pm Tuesday. Please look at the Frequently Asked Questions before you email me"*.
- Create a list of **Frequently Asked Questions** (and their answers). You can use a content item, a discussion forum, a wiki or a blog to do this. A wiki or blog could be set up to enable students to answer each other's questions, saving you time.
- If you add **links to external websites**, select the option that opens them in a new window and are not framed by Blackboard. This makes them easier to read and use.

## Organise the course's resources

When students were asked for feedback on Blackboard, their principle complaint was about poorly organised courses in which all the resources were jumbled together in a single area. Here are some guidelines on making your course easier to use:

- It is a good idea to plan the structure of your resources before you start adding resources. You can add folders to a content area to organise your resources according to your **organising principle**. This might be a numbered series of lectures or seminars (e.g. "*Week 3: Principles of Post-Operative Care*") or a set of themes (e.g. "*Care of the Elderly*").
- Avoid having folders within folders if at all possible.
- If you need to reorganise an existing course, the easiest method is to create a new content area with the folders you need, and then use the **Move** option from the **Modify** button to move your resources one-at-a-time to their new location. Don't forget to delete the old Content Area when you are finished.
- Give each folder a **clear title** plus a **brief description** that summarises the topic of the lecture or the theme. Also add a short description for each item, unless the title is sufficient (e.g. "*Week 3 PowerPoint slides – Principles of Post-Operative Care*").

## Resource Store or Blended Learning?

Students do appreciate (and even expect) online access to resources and most tutors already provide these, but they don't make any difference to how the module is taught.

The next step is **blended learning** or using Blackboard to deliver some online learning activities that complement or replace face-to-face activities. The aim is to support, extend or enhance your students' learning. Here are a few examples:

- Providing students with video guides to laboratory techniques that allow them to study the techniques and procedures before they get to the lab.
- Creating short weekly self-test quizzes which allow students to check that they have grasped the key points from a lecture and provides them with formative feedback. Their results are recorded and provide you with feedback on their progress.
- Using a discussion forum to facilitate a structured role-playing exercise for groups of students. You could set up a scenario with supporting documents, and then get each group to research other relevant information and agree a solution by a deadline.
- Set up a blog for each student which they should use to record their thoughts about the readings you have provided. Use these to start debate in a seminar session and thereby encourage everyone to complete their readings and think about them.
- Create a self-study learning resource to replace some face-to-face didactic teaching. This could be an audio podcast, a narrated slideshow, a slideshow with embedded questions and feedback or an activity created using a Learning Object Creator tool.

One of the advantages of this approach is that you can incrementally adjust the blend by adding appropriate online activities as time and effort allow.

Always make sure you provide clear instructions to help your students make effective use of the resources and activities. These instructions can be included in the description of the relevant item or provided as a printable Word file:

- What is the student expected to do? Alone or in collaboration with others?
- Roughly how long should they spend on it? Is there a deadline?
- What are the outputs? How are these submitted or shared?
- Is this work checked or assessed? How does it link with face-to-face sessions?

## Accessibility

All tutors have a legal duty under SENDA, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001), to make **reasonable adjustments** for disabled students. In many cases, such adjustments benefit all students:

- Many dyslexic students find it helpful to review the lecture notes and slides in advance of the lecture. All you need to do is make sure they are uploaded to Blackboard a few days in advance rather than a few days after the lecture.
- Use a **clear folder structure** to organise online learning resources into coherent groups rather than dumping them all in a single 'lecture materials' area. Students with dyslexia or visual disabilities find long lists of resources very awkward to navigate.
- **Text resources** should use a file format that can be understood by text-to-speech software; for example PDFs of PowerPoint slides are just pictures and therefore not accessible.
- **Web links** should include a brief description of the website and why your students might find it useful to visit. For example "[Permanent Storage of CO2 in the Marine Environment](#) – this paper describes a technique to safely sequester carbon dioxide in deep ocean sediments."
- **Visual or audio resources** should have a text summary of their content. For example "*Plan view of a ship with array of vertical storage silos for frozen CO2 penetrators, mobile crane gantries used to move penetrators in and out of silos, and 'moon pools' used to drop penetrators into the deep ocean.*"

## Copyright

You rightly expect your students to obey the University's academic integrity regulations and avoid plagiarism by respecting other people's intellectual property rights. It is only fair that you show similar respect when uploading material to Blackboard:

- Do not upload journal articles (for example PDF files) that you have downloaded. Provide your students with a direct link or make them practice their information literacy skills by simply giving the article's bibliographic details.
- Do not include images you "found on the web" in PowerPoint slideshows unless you are certain that you have permission to use them. There are [many sources](#) of images that can be freely used in education.
- It is usually OK to make links to resources you find on the web, although it is polite to ask permission before linking to another academic's website. Avoid linking to any resources that are clearly illegal, such as a bootleg scan of a current textbook.

## Creating a visual identity for your Blackboard course

Most Blackboard courses look very similar. This is generally a good thing since students can rely on a consistent user interface, but does mean that they lack a distinct visual identity.

- You can add a **graphic banner** to your course's Announcement page, which is usually the first page students see when they access the course. [This page](#) describes how you can do this and includes a link to a selection of free online tools that you can use to create the banner I recommend [Bannerfans.com](#)
- You can use other graphics software to create the banner, or perhaps ask a colleague who already has the skills (or even your students) to produce one for you.
- You can edit the style and colour of the **Course Menu** (the navigation links on the left of the page). Graphic buttons with patterned backgrounds can be hard to read, so use plain buttons or stick to text. Make sure there is a good contrast between the background colour and the text colour. [This page](#) provides guidance.

## Talk with your Academic Liaison Librarian

Your [Academic Liaison Librarian](#) will be able to help you find useful resources and link to them using Blackboard. Examples include:

- An online archive of past exam papers;
- Online reading lists with links to the WebCat library catalogue;
- Scanned book chapters and older journal articles;
- E-Books – online reference works or textbooks.

## Develop your students' Study Skills and Information Literacy

On some courses you may wish to embed activities that develop your students' study skills or information literacy.

- You could direct your students to specific activities on the **Study Skills Toolkit** course on Blackboard. All students are automatically enrolled on this course, and staff can enrol themselves. Unfortunately you cannot make a link from your course to an activity, so for example you will have to create an item that tells students to *“access the **Study Skills Toolkit**, view the **Learning Materials**, open the **Academic Writing skills** folder and use the activity **Using quotations effectively**.”*
- To enrol yourself in the Study Skills Toolkit and see what activities are available, log in to Blackboard, click the **Courses** tab near the top of the screen, search for “study skills”, identify the correct course from the list and click the **Enrol** button to the right of its name.
- The [Intute Virtual Training Suite](#) provides around 60 discipline-specific tutorials to help your students develop their Internet research skills. They provide guided tours of the most important and useful websites, organisations, reference works, databases, publications, news services, gateways and teaching materials.

## Store your resources on EdShare

Blackboard makes it easy to upload files, but only students enrolled on that course can see them. If you need to use the same resource in several courses, you have to upload a separate copy to each course. If you update the resource, you have to update each copy.

EdShare ( [www.edshare.soton.ac.uk](http://www.edshare.soton.ac.uk) ) is the University's repository for learning and teaching materials. The key idea is that you upload your resources to EdShare and then make links to them in Blackboard. This offers several advantages:

- Staff and students from across the University can discover and use your resources. Sharing your work this way is encouraged but not obligatory; you always remain in control. Sharing options include just you, selected users, your school, the University or the world.
- You may be able to find resources that you can use or adapt for your own courses, especially from colleagues in your School or cognate disciplines. EdShare will become increasingly useful as more tutors use it rather than locking their resources in Blackboard.
- Resources can be located using EdShare's own search tool or through a general web search (e.g. Google). If you allow it, academics and students across the world will be able to download and view your work. This is in line with a global movement to develop and share [Open Educational Resources](#).
- If you have several courses that link to a resource on EdShare, you only need to update a single file.

If you would like advice or support about your use of Blackboard, please contact the [Centre for Innovation in Technologies and Education](#) (CITE)