Setting up department-level VLE spaces: what I tried and why

In setting up departmental student information sites, I tried out a number of different organisational arrangements.

IT Services at UoL have created a <u>Pseudo Course application</u> for creating course spaces that are not directly linked to individual modules. Users with permission to use this application can create new courses to suit the needs of their subject area.

Either as part of creating a course space or at a later point, the app can also be used to set up auto-enrolment of students and staff into the course. Roughly speaking, the application reads the student database once a day and updates the course membership on Canvas accordingly.

There are fixed options for the criteria that can be used to control this auto-enrolment. These have different advantages and disadvantages for the purpose of communicating easily with students.

Idea 1: A cohort-based site that follows students across years

Having one course space for each cohort of students makes it easy to communicate information that only applies to one group of students. This means messages can be sent only to those students to whom they apply, rather than to all students, reducing the number of messages students are sent that are not relevant to them. The higher the signal-to-noise ratio in our communication, the more likely it is that students will take notice of the messages we send them. This is particularly helpful in settings where students might misinterpret information they see that isn't intended for them, such as cohorts viewing programme information related to teaching before/after a curriculum change.

The set-up of the student information sites should be as seamless as realistically possible from the perspective of students. Each course space has a distinct name and tile on the student's Dashboard. Ideally, we want students to see a single space that covers the full duration of their programme, without them needing to be aware of what we are doing in the background to implement this. We would need to modify which information is available to students over time as they progress through the programme, but this could be done reasonably easily. Accordingly, I first created a site intended for a single cohort of students (that is, based on their year of entry). Some students effectively change cohort during their studies, for instance as a result of repeat years, but the number of such students is small enough that it is reasonable to make manual adjustments in those cases. Another potential problem with this set-up is that the cohort to which a student belongs for practical purposes is not determined solely by the year they begin their course. For example, students who begin on a foundation year can be recorded as being in a higher year of their programme than the students they are studying with who did not take the foundation year. In our case this particular problem

However, there is no auto-enrolment scheme available in the Pseudo Course app to support this set-up. There are four 'templates' available for courses.

- An Empty course has no auto-enrolments.
- The Programme and Module types are both tied to an academic year. These create a new course space each year, and students would retain access to those from earlier years. This could cause confusion, particularly where students had access to information that was no longer up-to-date. Having so many different course spaces would also make maintenance cumbersome.
- The Department template type enables auto-enrolments into a multi-year course space. However, it selects students based on their year of study, not their year of entry.

Idea 2: Programme-year based sites that students switch between

Given the available settings for auto-enrolling students in multi-year courses, I next created fixed courses for different year-groups. Students would then automatically switch between these courses over the summer when their year of study changed on the student database.

With this arrangement, students will be able to see the existence of the different sites. However, these can be named with the year in the title, so this should be sufficiently clear to avoid students becoming confused. Only one site will be visible to a particular student at any one time. On the other hand, it would not be necessary to change the information visible in each site from year to year, unless the information itself changed. A further advantage is that students who change cohort will automatically stay in the correct site, without needing to be moved manually. It is possible that a students might not have the correct year recorded in the system; this could mean that they can't access quite the right set of information. However, making this datapoint more visible to students could help to identify and correct any errors more rapidly. Information that applies to a single academic year, such as announcements, would need to be cleared out each summer in time for when the students move into a new site. This is more easily achieved than it was now that start and end dates can be set on the availability of both Announcements and Pages in Canvas.

One group of students cannot be included in these courses automatically: those who study joint programmes that are owned by other departments. For us the number of such students is (just about) low enough to add these students manually. However, they will not move through the sites as they progress through their programme, which might cause them confusion, even if they don't actually need any of the year-specific information.

Alongside these year-group sites, I created one that contained academic staff (with the 'Student' role). This was needed to enable them to access the information students could see, for example when guiding their academic advisees. This also created a space where teaching-related materials could potentially be shared with teaching staff. In our case, there were already alternative plans in place.

Idea 3: Annual spaces

At the point of setting up the sites, we had two master's programmes running within the department. The differences in context of these students compared to the undergraduates means it is useful to be able to communicate with them separately. In this case, it is also convenient to be able to distinguish between the two groups. Because the students are usually only on their programme for one academic year, setting up annual sites by programme code works for these students unlike for the undergraduates. In rare cases a student might stay for two years, but that would not cause significant problems.

Idea 4: A single site for everyone

The setup described above functioned as expected. One disadvantage of this arrangement though is that different course spaces have different numbers appearing in their web addresses (with no particular structure to the numbers). This means that it was not possible to give a single web link to a specific resource that works for students in different years.

For shared resources, everyone can access them by navigating through the site by the same sequence of steps. However, in practice many people will disengage from instructions of this form, particularly those students who are most in need of the support the sites are intended to provide.

Alternatively, it would be possible, if necessary, to provide multiple links pointing to each of the different sites. Doing so on a regular basis would be impractical, though, and would be likely to cause frustration for users.

Because of this problem, we decided to change to having a single course space for all undergraduate students and staff. This makes it easier, for example, for academic advisors to direct their advisees to resources addressing their immediate concerns. As a consequence of this decision, we lost the ability to easily send messages to individual cohorts of students.

Idea 5: A single site with subdivisions

My preference would be to have a single site that includes all staff and students, but also has students organized into Sections according to a range of characteristics such as year of study, programme, and home/international student status. Canvas allows resources such as Announcements, Pages, Quizzes and Discussion boards to be made available to specific Sections. This would retain the advantages of having a single site while also allowing more fine-grained control over what each student has access to. For example, one discussion board might be restricted to students in a single cohort to provide them with a level of privacy, while another board might be open to all cohorts to enable knowledge-sharing between years.

As far as I am aware, UoL currently has no mechanism for the automatic creation of Sections. There are some considerations that would need attention if such a mechanism were to be set up.

To be useful, Sections containing students with particular characteristics would need to be easily identifiable to staff who need to send messages to them. On the other hand, some such information should not be shared widely, particularly to other students. For example, while it isn't possible to completely hide from other students those students who have changed cohort, it would be inappropriate to provide easy access to this information. Within Canvas it is possible to <u>hide Sections from students on the People page</u>, but we would need to be sure that information was not available via other routes.

It would also be important to consider which groupings to divide students into. Currently, Canvas allows you to assign a resource to all students who are in one or more specified Sections. It does not have the option to require a student to be in both of two Sections. Having multiple overlapping Sections can also lead to unexpected behaviour of some functionality. For example, Group Sets can be set to 'Require group members to be in the same section', but this has no effect if there is a Section that contains all students in the course. For these reasons, having smaller Sections that can be used in combination seems more useful. On the other hand, having too many different Sections would make them frustrating to use when a much coarser subdivision is wanted.

Accordingly, a balance would need to be struck to achieve a useful subdivision of the students. Since <u>academia varies</u>, the best combination will probably depend on the local context of each subject area. It would therefore be important for a mechanism for automatically setting up Sections to offer the flexibility to suit different use cases.

Idea 0: A blueprint site

When setting up the student information sites, I wanted to be able to tailor the information available to different students, but at the same time keep the sites easy to maintain. A key tool in achieving this is the Blueprint functionality in Canvas.

A blueprint course isn't directly accessible to students. Instead, it functions as a template that other course spaces match. Some resources, such as the homepage or announcements directed at all students, can be 'locked' so that each of the linked course spaces show an exact copy. This allows the same information to be displayed to multiple groups of students, but only one copy needs to be updated if the information changes. Other resources can be left 'unlocked' so that they can be modified to suit each individual group of students, such as pages or announcements relevant to a single cohort.

An additional advantage of this arrangement is that it separates out the role of a site developer/administrator from that of a user. It is not uncommon for one person to use a single site with both of these roles at different times. Having edit access is obviously necessary to be able to update the site as required. However, such access also makes it possible to accidentally make changes without intending to. Because the 'locked' pages can only be modified from within the blueprint course, a staff member who can edit the site there will still see the same view as students from within any of the child classes, reducing the likelihood of errors.

The blueprint course also provides a space for developing and checking new material before it is ready to release to students. Changes made to the master copy in the blueprint course will not propagate to the child classes until the administrator chooses to synchronise them.