WebLearn Student Experience Project (WLSE)

Requirements Gathering Report

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INTRODUCTION

The central WebLearn team is located in the Academic IT Services group and is responsible for maintaining, supporting and developing Oxford's Virtual Learning Environment - WebLearn. We primarily support academic and administrative staff in thinking about how WebLearn may enrich their work environments, enable them to take advantage of the affordances of the virtual learning platform, and ultimately enhance the student learning experience.

In 2011/2012 a university wide 'Student Digital Experience (DIGE)' work stream was initiated to "define the Oxford student online experience that appropriately supports Oxford's traditional teaching methods, graduate skills expectations and social dimensions of student life".[1] WebLearn is included in the collection of digital tools available to students and was mentioned by some respondents in the DIGE study. The following recommendations were made in the Executive Summary of the DIGE Report:

> "University resources should be released to WebLearn to assist faculties, departments, and colleges in:
>
>   a. enhancing the user interface and user experience (ES5a);
>
>   b. overhauling and redesigning their sites in the system (ES5b)."

This project is an initial attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the feedback provided in the DIGE study by engaging with students, listening to their voices, and investigating their experiences in using WebLearn. Being an open source software platform, WebLearn is customisable and its development has always been driven by Oxford University's particular nature and requirements; it is clear that it should also be informed by consultation with students and by observation of their behaviour in using the system.

The WebLearn Student Experience (WLSE) project was run during Michaelmas term 2012. We collected and analysed student feedback to produce a number of generic recommendations for departments, colleges and the central WebLearn team. The findings are exploratory and should be considered in the light of current pedagogical practice, the nature of the particular subject matter, and the experience and preferences of academic and administrative staff members[2].

Although specific suggestions may emerge about particular departmental WebLearn sites, the focus of this project was on generic suggestions to enhance WebLearn as a central service.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

The project investigated how students currently use WebLearn in support of their learning, i.e. we focused on gathering information about student behaviour in finding, navigating and interacting with their current WebLearn areas. The following questions guided the empirical work:

- How is WebLearn perceived and experienced by students in terms of the layout of the user interface, structure of the sites, and navigation?

- What do students think of the way in which academic staff use WebLearn to support the learning environment?

- How do students themselves use WebLearn in their learning?

- What improvements would students like to see in WebLearn?

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[1] http://blogs.oucs.ox.ac.uk/melissa/files/2012/08/Digital-Experience-Executive-Summary.pdf

[2] hereafter referred to as 'staff members', or where necessary, 'tutors' or 'lecturers'

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this project was to investigate student behaviour and preferences in using WebLearn, and to gather their suggestions for enhancements. We therefore adopted a qualitative research approach in order to enrich the inquiry process and use insights from students themselves to gain a perspective on their behaviour in using WebLearn.

Data were collected from 14 students, including undergraduates, taught postgraduates and research postgraduates with teaching responsibilities. We conducted 7 individual guided walkthroughs, which combined a semi-structured interview with observation of how students actually use WebLearn. We conducted one workshop with 7 participants. The workshop used the Nominal Group Technique[3] complemented by discussions to elicit a list of suggested improvements that students voted for, depending on feasibility[4].

The two DIGE report recommendations that this project addresses (see ES5a and ES5b on page 3) encompass the use of WebLearn by faculties, departments, and colleges, as well as possible enhancements that could be implemented by the central WebLearn team. We thus generated two separate sets of recommendations:

- To the WebLearn staff user community: best practice in designing WebLearn sites, based on student feedback;

- To the WebLearn team: specific enhancements to and further development of the WebLearn software, based on student feedback.

The following sections present the findings for each constituency, leading to particular recommendations. A summary of all the recommendations is provided at the end of this report.

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[3] http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/evaluation/pdf/brief7.pdf

[4] 'feasibility' refers to the feasibility of both academic staff and the central WebLearn team in implementing the suggestions, depending on available capacity and resources

FINDINGS

The devolved nature of the WebLearn service provision means that faculties, departments and colleges take ownership of and responsibility for the design and content of their WebLearn areas. The central WebLearn team maintains the software and provides consultation, guidance, support and training for staff[5] WebLearn users.

According to this devolved model, the findings are separated into those applicable to the WebLearn staff user community, and those to be considered by the central WebLearn team.

FINDINGS FOR THE WEBLEARN STAFF USER COMMUNITY

From the evidence collected, three themes emerged which are applicable to the WebLearn staff user community. This section reports the findings for each theme:

- Student use of discipline-specific course sites in WebLearn

- Student induction and training in using WebLearn

- Usability of WebLearn course sites

To preserve anonymity, student respondents are identified according to the following coding scheme:

U=Undergraduate; P=Postgraduate; S=Social Sciences Division M=MPLS Division

1. STUDENT USE OF DISCIPLINE-SPECIFIC COURSE SITES IN WEBLEARN

Getting information – what students find valuable

The majority of the students in the sample use WebLearn mainly for accessing lecture notes, slides, hand-outs and reading lists. They appreciate having on-demand access to these learning materials and feel that it facilitates their learning in various ways. Most of the students interviewed use lecture slides and notes to prepare for their lectures, to catch up with lectures they missed during the term, or for revision before exams:

"[Without WebLearn] I would struggle to catch up on work that I missed. I'd have to email tutors. I'd have to read books quite heavily by myself without having any prior knowledge. It'd be lot of more difficult to catch up on work if I did not have WebLearn" – UM7

Students prefer the lecture notes/slides to be uploaded at least one day before the lecture takes place, so that they can familiarise themselves with the material, print it out and annotate it during the lecture:

"Upload lecture hand-outs the day before instead of hour before" – US13

"I use WebLearn predominantly for accessing lecture slides. It would be useful if lecture slides were uploaded a greater time in advance of lecturers (for me, at least, this would not preclude attendance)" – a student at the workshop

In subjects where images, diagrams and photographs are a necessary part of the learning process, such as in Medical Sciences, students appreciate having electronic, colour copies of the images to study both before and after the lecture:

"Sometimes it's more helpful to have them like as a big picture on screen to look at full screen. When I look through the lecture materials after a lecture, I went on WebLearn to do that. I also

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[5] Student orientation sessions can be organised on request, and indeed are recommended (see REC2.1b).

want to get bigger diagrams that I want to use in essays. I have used it more than once a week after term time for revision, a lot more. It is nice to see the photo in full colour. We usually get them before the lecture as a printed copy, but if you want to look over it, it is easier to do online" – UM2

Students highlighted the importance of consistency in lecturers uploading lecture notes and slides into WebLearn. They appreciate lecturers who upload materials regularly during the term, either shortly before or directly after each lecture, rather than all at once at the end of term:

"Some lecturers use it more often than others. For example, they told us the reading materials are in WebLearn, which is more convenient than finding them ourselves. They also upload lecture PowerPoints/PDF. Some lecturers did not use it at all" – PS4

"I prefer if they do provide similar materials as well 'cos you will get more backup with the notes, etc. One lecturer's course is really good: everything is up and ordered and organised. Some of them have not really put anything up" – UM5

"Another problem is not with WebLearn: it's that the lecturers don't always put the lectures up, so you can't read them" – UM6

⇨ **REC 1.1**   Where feasible and relevant, consider uploading lecture slides, notes and images[6] into WebLearn **regularly and consistently** (preferably in advance of a lecture), for students to access at their convenience.

Students feel that having recordings of lectures uploaded into WebLearn would be beneficial, especially if they need to catch up on lectures they have missed:

"I think the video recording of lectures is a really good idea" – UM5

"I know UCL has video recording of lectures. It is a bit much, but yes, it'd be nice to have those besides just having lecture notes" – UM7

⇨ **REC 1.2**   Lecturers are encouraged to make recorded lectures available in WebLearn. This can be done using various tools and techniques such as WebEx[7], audio commentaries on Powerpoint slideshows, students making audio recordings of lectures (with permission), sourcing existing relevant podcasts etc. Contact the IT Services podcasting or WebLearn teams to find out more.

Many Oxford lecturers have had resounding success with recording their own lectures and publishing them under various licenses, or as open educational resources (OERs), in the Oxford podcasts web portal (podcasts.ox.ac.uk). Students could be involved in making audio recordings (with permission of the lecturer), which could quickly and easily be uploaded into the WebLearn "Podcasts" tool[8].

Communication and interaction

Although Facebook is a popular tool amongst students, most of the students who attended the workshop agreed that it would be a good idea to have discussion forums in WebLearn for self-organised activities e.g. a forum to support a lecture topic, or FAQs with respect to practicals and tutorials. Students reported that they would use a forum largely in a self-organised manner, but they

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[6] Consult your library specialist about copyright implications.

[7] More information is available at http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/webex/faq.xml

[8] It is not feasible or practical to upload large video files in this way.

also felt that a tutor's presence would be welcome, especially in a situation when students themselves are not able to solve a problem. The current practice is that students email their tutors, but the advantage of having a discussion forum would be that all students could see the answers and benefit from the interaction.

"I'd like to use forums more and chat rooms. It would be really helpful. Not all of the students are on Facebook, and there are always 1 or 2 that miss out on the discussion going on. So having a forum - with e-mail notifications would be a good solution" – TS9

"It would be like talking about group meetings on WebLearn and being able to arrange to meet up at the pub on Facebook" – PS10

"WebLearn is more organised in terms of your forum messages are all there and your folders are there, whereas when you do it on Facebook, the attachment does not always work... and if you've got a big group, people don't tend to stick to the work because you're gonna talk about social things as well ... so things get lost. The difference is, WebLearn is so much more organised" – PS9

Students would prefer to have a WebLearn area in which to pose questions and answers about tutorials, essays and practicals. It can prove to be a more efficient way than email for tutors and lecturers to respond to student questions about assignments.

"…might prefer to use forums instead of Facebook e.g. for more directed conversations about the essays, essays titles" – US13 and US14

"On Facebook you can't speak to any lecturers or tutors, so if we have a practical to write up, and we're all stuck on the same question, and we'll all go on Facebook and say 'What did you write? I don't know what to do.' If we had a forum in WebLearn, maybe with a tutor or a lecturer who also has access to the page, if they could possibly give us a little bit of help outside the lectures or the practicals, that would be really, really good" – UM6

⇨	**REC 1.3a**	Consider using a discussion forum as a place to hold conversations with students or present FAQs about the subject matter, assignments and practicals.
⇨	**REC 1.3b**	Inform students about the existence of the Forums tool and encourage them to use it in a self-directed way, even if there is no intention for it to be facilitated by the tutor or lecturer. This can be done by creating a separate topic within a Forum, e.g. 'Student café', or 'Student lounge'.

Students would like to be able to upload and share learning materials between themselves in WebLearn's "Resources" area. The current practice is that students often turn to external tools (mainly Dropbox or Facebook), due to the fact that most tutors are unaware that they can provide student access to a shared resources folder in WebLearn.

"I haven't been able to upload files, and I would want to" – PS10

"I didn't realise you had a chat room … and the shared resources. I didn't even know you can do student upload, I always thought it was tutor to upload, so we used Dropbox a lot for that reason" – PS11

⇨	**REC 1.4**	Provide students with access to a shared folder in the Resources area, and grant them permission to 'create new resources' [see REC 6.3]. Alternatively, a student-driven discussion forum could be set up [see REC 1.3b], as it also provides an easy way of sharing learning resources in the form of attachments.

Organisational use

Besides obtaining information from WebLearn, students in the sample use it for organisational purposes. The calendar and tutorial sign-up tools were named as particularly useful in this respect. Students mentioned that staff sometimes upload a schedule as a pdf document, whereas the dynamic features of the WebLearn Schedule (Calendar) tool might be more useful. Furthermore, unless the Calendar tool is emphasised by tutors, it often does not draw student attention, as the link displayed alongside other tools in the left-hand menu bar tends to be 'ignored' by some students.

> *"I actually use the calendar in My Workspace and sync to my calendar at home; it is so useful, incredible. I found the calendar tool (in My Workspace) is so useful because I know what I am doing on what day. I wouldn't know if I had practicals if I did not have that calendar"* – UM7

⇨ **REC 1.5**   Consider making consistent use of the WebLearn Schedule (Calendar) and tutorial Sign-up tools to support organisational aspects of student learning; advertise these tools to the students at the beginning of the term.

2. STUDENT INDUCTION AND TRAINING IN USING WEBLEARN

Students are often unaware of various WebLearn functionalities that would be of use to them. They are usually introduced to WebLearn at the beginning of the year in an overall induction session, alongside various other university systems. The introduction to WebLearn is limited to showing students how to log in and access their course materials. As a result, their use of WebLearn is rather strategic and limited to what they were introduced to; we have very little evidence of self-driven exploration of WebLearn by students. In the project workshop, "Better departmental WebLearn training" was voted for by the majority of participants.

> *"We had training and an introduction to it but, I think because you have so many introductions at the start … I'm pretty sure they mention some of these things but not to a great degree"* – PS9

After we introduced some of the tools available in WebLearn to students, they expressed surprise and showed strong interest in using some of them, in particular: aggregated calendar, the possibility of uploading files into 'My Workspace', and the possibility of hiding irrelevant sites from the 'My Active Sites' area:

> *"There are lots of things that WebLearn does that we just don't know about, that we could find really really useful. For example: forums, submitted work, the announcements, chat room, a 'dropbox' kind of space, so basically all of these things we'd like to use them, but we didn't know about them"* – PS11

> *"Many features, we just don't know they exist. It may be a good idea for departments to have a focus group and inform students what is available in WebLearn. Then students can comment on the usefulness of each tool, which then may help the course designers to develop the courses"* – PS4

⇨ **REC 2.1a** **Departmental induction sessions** at the beginning of term should briefly inform students about the existence of the array of tools in WebLearn that might be of use to them and, subsequently direct students to a WebLearn follow-up session for more detailed information.

⇨ **REC 2.1b** Liaise with the central WebLearn team to offer support in developing a **WebLearn follow-up session** to be offered later in the term. Such a WebLearn follow-up session should be short (30-45 min) and tailored to the courses offered in the department or faculty.

⇨ **REC 2.1c** Use WebLearn follow-up sessions as an evaluation opportunity to **collect any feedback, comments or issues raised by students** with regards to course sites and tools, and to inform future design and redesign of course sites by staff members [see REC 6.4].

3. USABILITY OF WEBLEARN COURSE SITES

Students highlighted the importance of clear structure in how course sites are set up. Students usually prefer to have lectures displayed by weeks, with clear and consistent layout and structure of learning materials.

"The lecture materials are laid out chronologically, which is good. I like all the readings here as well" – UM2

"The way WebLearn is set up lends itself nicely – an easy to follow structure, but I guess you could really, as an individual, set it up really badly" – PS9

⇨ **REC 3.1** Make use of the templates developed and provided by the central WebLearn team for various purposes, e.g. for tutorials, a lecture series, to provide content, or to focus on assessment.

The templates make it easy for staff members to design a course site quickly, with a clear and consistent structure. Examples of the templates can be seen at https://weblearn.ox.ac.uk/info > Showcase >Template sites.

Students are often confused by the extent of sites listed under 'My Active Sites', which are those that they have been subscribed to by tutors or administrators. Some of these sites are of no direct relevance to students. Being subscribed to a large number of 'Active Sites' not only inhibits easy access to actual course sites, but also implies that students may receive a number of irrelevant 'Announcements' or other notifications via email.

"There seems to be a number of initial worksites that are not highly relevant - it would be great if we could be provided with a list of worksites to choose from at the beginning" – sticky note at the project workshop

⇨ **REC 3.2** Subscribe students only to those 'Active sites' which are of direct relevance to them.

…/contd: Findings for the WebLearn team

FINDINGS FOR THE WEBLEARN TEAM

Our preparation for the data gathering activities exposed three particular features of WebLearn to investigate from the technical point of view, in order to make recommendations to the central WebLearn team. We directed specific questions to the student participants on each of these aspects:

- The WebLearn **Welcome page** (starting page: https://weblearn.ox.ac.uk);
- The **My Workspace** area of WebLearn (private space for each individual WebLearn user);
- Discipline-specific course sites in WebLearn.

Recommendations are provided below on each of these features, based on student suggestions and consultation with the WebLearn team.

4. WEBLEARN WELCOME PAGE

The current WebLearn Welcome page provides help, guidance, video tutorials, information on courses about WebLearn, and other useful resources. The majority of 'boxes' are intended for staff who are designing and building sites in WebLearn, and only a few resources are relevant to students. Students find the amount of information available on the Welcome page overwhelming and irrelevant to them, with the result that they seldom look at the details provided.

"[Information on the welcome page is] not that clear though, what is meant for them [staff], what is meant for me" – UM3

> **REC 4.1**　　Divide the Welcome page into two separate areas: one for staff and one for students.

Welcome page for students before logging in:

"How to access the main things they want: course materials, past exam papers, but there is too much stuff on this page that you need to look through before you know what you are doing. The "Getting started" box (for students) should be more prominent" – UM5

> **REC 4.2a**　Make 'Getting started' the main part of the student Welcome page. The content should be tailor-made for students, e.g. finding my course material; communicating with others; sharing resources; FAQs for students, etc.
>
> **REC 4.2b**　Produce a series of 2-minute student help video demos, and feature a different one on a regular basis in a prominent place.

Welcome page for students after logging in:

"How the website works as a student – things I like to have here – like when we had to find past papers for exams, we looked through exams, but took us through WebLearn; having them more accessible on here would be good" – UM2

"Hide sub-links in each block using drop-down menu; make 'my active site' and 'my workspace' bigger. Make the courses in My Active Sites displayed on the page without clicking on it. I think it'd be better to combine 'My Workspace' and 'My Active Sites". 'My Active Sites' can be in 'My Workspace'" – UM5

"If the Home page had some bits from your workspace on it… Separate out what's intended for staff and what's intended for students. Plus have your profile and announcements on the Home page (i.e. rather than hidden behind the tabs)" – UM6

⇒ **REC 4.3a** Make most important links and tools easily accessible (e.g. one-click away) from the Welcome page. These include: list of 'Active sites', past exam papers, 'my resources folder', profile and calendar. One suggestion was to combine 'My Workspace' and 'My Active Sites' into one page: e.g. name it 'My WebLearn'.

⇒ **REC 4.3b** Improve navigation on the post-login Welcome page, e.g. bookmarking favourite WebLearn pages, links or files, customising layout etc.

"I would like to have an area where I can manage and personalise, e.g. add my favourite links to" – PS4

A possible solution to address REC 4.3a and REC 4.3b is to investigate ideas from iGoogle and My Yahoo.

"The problem is that we're registered to so many sites, that I have no real idea of why I am registered to them and I am getting these announcements about some really weird conferences, so we're like: 'why on earth'" – PS9

⇒ **REC 4.4** Enable students to have more control over notifications from sites which are not directly relevant to them.

5. MY WORKSPACE

Each individual WebLearn user has a private area for their own use, called 'My Workspace'. This area contains useful tools, such as a Resources file storage area, a Profile tool (upload a photo, insert contact details and areas of interest, etc.). One can make connections with other WebLearn users and communicate with them, and also set preferences for receiving notifications or privacy options.

"If all of us were introduced to the features at the beginning of the courses, we could make use them much more effectively" – PS4

"We have remote access to the Zoology server but it's complicated and slow. The induction didn't tell us about My Workspace, just about where we could find our lectures and timetable" – UM6

"I was completely unaware of the file storage capacities of WL (on 'My Workspace" it says that 100 MB are available) This is brilliant - I wish it was more visibly publicised" – sticky note at the project workshop

⇒ **REC 5.1a** Highlight useful tools that students can access from the 'My Workspace' area, e.g. uploading resources, setting up a profile, connecting with others, accessing aggregated announcements and schedules. [See suggestion below.]

⇒ **REC 5.1b** Supply update prompts if a student has not carried out the set-up activities after a certain period of time, e.g. "We notice you haven't uploaded your photo into your profile. This would be really helpful so that your photo is displayed in forum posts and in the site members tool [this is how to do it…]"

The WebLearn team suggests that for new student accounts, the student can be prompted to carry out 'sensible' set-up activities to get started, with help on how to do it, e.g. Have you done these three things: 1. Upload your photo to your Profile; 2. Set your Preferences for receiving notifications; 3. Subscribe to your global My Workspace calendar.]

"It would be nice to click on a name in 'Users Present' and see their profiles before adding them as a connection. Not easy at present to see someone's profile, other than via My Workspace" – UM1

> ⇨ **REC 5.2**   Enable students to click on a name listed in the 'Users present' area to see a person's profile or instigate a chat session with them.

6. COURSE SITES

The central WebLearn team provides consultation, support, training and help materials for staff members who are designing and developing WebLearn sites. Student feedback indicates that some of the features and tools available to staff should be publicised more widely.

> ⇨ **REC 6.1**   Publicise existing templates for setting up course sites to departments and academic staff [see REC 3.1].

> ⇨ **REC 6.2**   Improve the usability of some WebLearn tools, in particular the Forums tool.

> ⇨ **REC 6.3**   Build more structure into all the templates, e.g. Forums tool, more folder structure in Resources, student shared folder in Resources.

> ⇨ **REC 6.4**   Provide tools to enable easy feedback from students about their course sites, e.g. similar to the 'Contact us' link at the foot of every site.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the evidence gathered from students, this report has made some suggestions for the WebLearn staff user community and the central WebLearn team to consider. After discussion with the WebLearn team, further suggestions were made. All the recommendations are summarised in this section.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE WEBLEARN STAFF USER COMMUNITY

REC 1.1 Where feasible and relevant, consider uploading lecture slides, notes and images[9] into WebLearn **regularly and consistently** (preferably in advance of a lecture), for students to access at their convenience.

REC 1.2 Lecturers are encouraged to make recorded lectures available in WebLearn. This can be done using various tools and techniques such as WebEx, audio commentaries on Powerpoint slideshows, students making audio recordings of lectures (with permission), sourcing existing relevant podcasts etc. Contact the IT Services podcasting or WebLearn teams to find out more.

REC 1.3a Consider using a discussion forum as a place to hold conversations with students or present FAQs about the subject matter, assignments and practicals.

REC 1.3b Inform students about the existence of the Forums tool and encourage them to use it in a self-directed way, even if there is no intention for it to be facilitated by the tutor or lecturer. This can be done by creating a separate topic within a Forum, e.g. 'Student café', or 'Student lounge'.

REC 1.4 Provide students with access to a shared folder in the resources area, with the required permission to 'create new resources' [see REC 6.3]. Alternatively, a student-driven discussion forum could be set up [see REC 1.3b], as it also provides an easy way of sharing learning resources in the form of attachments.

REC 1.5 Consider making consistent use of the WebLearn Schedule (Calendar) and tutorial Sign-up tools to support organisational aspects of student learning; advertise these tools to the students at the beginning of the term.

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REC 2.1b Liaise with the central WebLearn team to offer support in developing a **WebLearn follow-up session** to be offered later in the term. Such a WebLearn follow-up session should be short (30-45 min) and tailored to the courses offered in the department or faculty.

<p align="center">**REC 2.1c** Use WebLearn follow-up sessions as an evaluation opportunity to **collect any feedback, comments or issues raised by students** with regards to course sites and tools, and to inform future design and redesign of course sites by staff members [see REC 6.4].</p>

<p align="center">---oo0oo---</p>

REC 3.1 Make use of the templates developed and provided by the central WebLearn team for various purposes, e.g. for tutorials, a lecture series, to provide content, or to focus on assessment.

REC 3.2 Subscribe students only to those 'Active sites' which are of direct relevance to them.

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[9] Consult your library specialist about copyright implications.

Welcome page

REC 4.1   Divide the Welcome page into two separate areas: one for staff and one for students .

REC 4.2a   Make 'Getting started' the main part of the student Welcome page. The content should be tailor-made for students, e.g. finding my course material; communicating with others; sharing resources; FAQs for students, etc.

REC 4.2b   Produce a series of 2-minute student help video demos, and feature a different one on a regular basis in a prominent place.

[10]**REC 4.3a**   Make most important links and tools easily accessible (e.g. one click away) from the Welcome page. These include: list of 'Active sites', past exam papers, 'my resources folder', profile and calendar.

REC 4.3b   Improve navigation on the post-login WebLearn page, e.g. bookmarking favourite WebLearn pages, links or files, customising layout etc.

REC 4.4   Enable students to have more control over notifications from sites which are not directly relevant to them.

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My Workspace

REC 5.1a   Highlight useful tools that students can access from the 'My Workspace' area, e.g. uploading resources, setting up a profile, connecting with others, accessing aggregated announcements and schedules.

[Suggestion from WebLearn team: for new student accounts, prompt them to carry out 'sensible' set-up activities to get them started, with help on how to do it, e.g. Have you done these three things: 1. Upload your photo to your Profile; 2. Set your Preferences for receiving notifications; 3. Subscribe to your global My Workspace calendar.]

REC 5.1b   Supply update prompts if an active student has not carried out the set-up activities, e.g. We notice you haven't uploaded your photo into your profile. This would be really helpful so that your photo is displayed in forum posts and in the site members tool [this is how to do it…]

REC 5.2   Enable students to click on a name listed in the 'Users present' area to see a person's profile or instigate a chat session with them.

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Course sites

REC 6.1   Publicise existing templates for setting up course sites to departments and academic staff [see REC 3.1], in order to encourage consistency in site design and structure.

REC 6.2   Improve the usability of some WebLearn tools, in particular the Forums tool.

REC 6.3   Build more structure into all the templates, e.g. Forums tool, more folder structure in Resources [e.g. work done for the Blavatnik School of Government], student shared folder in Resources.

REC 6.4   Provide tools to enable easy feedback from students about their course sites, e.g. similar to the 'Contact us' link at the foot of every site.

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[10] Recommendations 4.3a and 4.3b are pending, to be reconsidered in the light of the improved user interface that will be part of Sakai 2.9 (perhaps late 2014) and the Sakai Open Academic Environment (OAE) (in the future).

CONCLUSION

This project was a requirements gathering exercise involving a small number of student volunteers. The authors counsel against drawing any generalisations about the WebLearn behaviour and preferences of the Oxford student population at large.

The exercise has demonstrated the willingness of students to contribute to improving their learning experience by having WebLearn sites designed and managed according to their needs and preferences. In general, the student volunteers were unaware of the range of functionality available in WebLearn, as became evident when they described their particular experience of using the system. They expressed the desire to learn more about the various possibilities in WebLearn for sharing information and communication, and for their departments, lecturers and tutors to make more use of WebLearn functionality.

This project has demonstrated that not only are students very happy to contribute to evaluating WebLearn, but they are keen to use WebLearn and its functionality more actively and more independently. As the service provider, or staff members designing and maintaining WebLearn areas, we should welcome student involvement and encourage student initiative. Collaborative and informal learning are valuable supplements to formal learning. WebLearn can provide students with the permission and space to engage with each other, their tutors and their learning materials in an open and flexible way. Such an approach will optimise student networking and engagement in the digital academic domain within the institutionally provided VLE.

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