



University of Oxford Online Environment

WebLearn and Nexus – which tool for which activity?

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I. Introduction

The online environment in the University of Oxford is being transformed. A new Groupware service is being deployed¹, the virtual learning environment is being upgraded², the University's student system is being developed³, and the glue that holds this all together – identity and access management – is continuing to be built. It is essential that the various systems interoperate effectively and produce a coherent environment for the user.

This paper considers two of the services, Groupware/Nexus and the virtual learning environment WebLearn, and addresses the oft asked question what is the appropriate use of each?

II. Groupware/Nexus and WebLearn

A. Groupware/Nexus

The Groupware Project was launched on 15 October 2008 at an event attended by the Vice-Chancellor and Gordon Frazer, MD Microsoft UK. A 'Letter of Understanding' was signed by both parties marking a new degree of collaboration. The new service has been named Nexus⁴, which emphasises its communication and group working aspects, and is based on Microsoft Exchange 2007 and Microsoft Office SharePoint Server⁵ (MOSS). It includes⁶ a service which is available to all staff and students offering: email, shared contact list, shared calendaring system, task listing, document sharing, document management, workflow and more.

The current Groupware project is the first phase of long term development in Groupware. Migration of Herald users will occur during September and October 2009. The project will complete by the end of March 2010 resulting in the Nexus service. It is intended to build on the foundation laid down with the MOSS software, in particular, through a series of future projects. One possibility being considered, for example, is the building of a virtual research environment using SharePoint as the foundation⁷.

B. WebLearn

The University has had a centrally-provided virtual learning environment since January 2003⁸. It is a collection of online tools brought together for learners and teachers to use in creative ways to engage with academic practice and undergraduate and postgraduate study, and is widely used.

Over the last year the virtual learning environment has been radically overhauled. Although it still has the same name, the underlying software has changed, and it is now based on Sakai⁹. The Sakai Project began as a \$6.8 million community source software development project founded by the University of Michigan, Indiana University, MIT, Stanford, the uPortal Consortium, and the Open Knowledge Initiative¹⁰.

The new WebLearn service had a pilot phase lasting a year and was launched on 30 June 2009. In addition to organising course materials, handouts, activities and projects it enables online assessments to be made and facilitates student support and management.

III. Which Tool for Which Activity?

Members of the Nexus and WebLearn teams are often asked which tools should be used for which activity. Other universities have faced the same issue. An extract from a University of Amsterdam blog¹¹ states: *"My basic statement is that the conceptual design behind SharePoint is completely different compared to Sakai. SharePoint originates from a business approach, Sakai was developed in an educational environment."* Another blog¹² states: *"Sakai doesn't cover the*

¹ <http://www.ict.ox.ac.uk/odit/projects/groupware/project/>

² <https://beta.weblearn.ox.ac.uk/portal/page/fb472d3b-0cec-4117-00e4-c28184e3008b>

³ <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/studentssystem/>

⁴ <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/nexus/>

⁵ <http://office.microsoft.com/en-gb/sharepointserver/default.aspx>

⁶ <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/groupware/>

⁷ See information about the Research Information Centre: <http://research.microsoft.com/en-us/projects/ric/>

⁸ <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ltg/vle/index.xml.ID=intro>

⁹ <http://sakaiproject.org/portal>

¹⁰ <https://www.indiana.edu/~sakaikb/display.cgi?docid=algr>

¹¹ <http://sakai-nl.blogspot.com/2007/04/sakai-andor-sharepoint.html>

¹² <http://stanleyportier.blogspot.com/2007/04/sakai-andor-sharepoint-sequel.html>

needs of good content management and basically lacks the work flow possibilities. SharePoint on the other hand has no built in tools that focus on specific educational areas.”

Although there are areas of overlap between Sakai and SharePoint, these two quotes highlight the differences. Sakai is designed for the educational environment, and in Oxford we have used this as our tool for learning and teaching. MOSS has been designed for supporting workflows within collaborative research and committee management.

Both Nexus and WebLearn are still under development in Oxford, and preferences may evolve with use, but in answer to the question of what each should be used for is, our recommendation is:

A. Primary role for WebLearn:

WebLearn is the service of choice to support teaching and learning, and offers:

- Course sites and course events
- Lecture notes and Handbooks
- Teaching presentations
- Reading lists and bibliographic tools
- Online assessments
- Plagiarism detection
- Student feedback surveys
- Course announcements
- Learning related discussion forums and chat areas
- Learning wikis and blogs
- Tutorial bookings
- Student support and management (complementing the Student System)

B. Primary role for Nexus:

Nexus is the service of choice to support online communication, document sharing, research groups, and administration, and offers:

- Email, with a rich set of features
- University-wide calendars
- Global address book and shareable contact lists¹³ and address books
- Workflow for processes¹⁴
- Resource booking
- Personal profiles/websites
- Committee administration (web pages¹⁵, document management, wikis, calendars etc)
- Research group administration (web pages, document management, wikis, calendars etc)
- Club administration (web pages, document management, wikis, calendars, handbooks)

There are points of interface which require further development. Both WebLearn and Nexus have, and need, calendars (termed a scheduler for the former). It will be essential that these interoperate dynamically. It will also be necessary for both services to interoperate with other applications, both within and beyond the University; and both will need to interoperate with a diverse range of platforms, including mobile devices. Both services will interoperate with the OUCS OAK read/write group store later this year. This will mean, for example, that distribution lists created in Exchange could be used in WebLearn, and an ad hoc group made in WebLearn could be used in Nexus.

C. Conclusions:

The University does not mandate one or the other system for any specific activity. Users should choose the service which best meets their needs and is easiest to use. However, both services have been designed to help facilitate specific processes in the University, and OUCS is funded to provide user support and service development within the agreed scope of each service. WebLearn has been designed to support teaching and learning, and its focus is to meet the needs of teachers and to offer a first class environment for students. Nexus is a new service which is designed to offer a shared online environment for staff and students across the collegiate University, and the SharePoint component of MOSS focuses, in particular, on document sharing and workflow support for researches and administrators.

¹³ .. and directory of groups (for example, members of a particular unit)

¹⁴ This will be offered in later phases of the Groupware programme.

¹⁵ Similarly, web pages will be offered in later phases of the Groupware programme.