



# Heriot-Watt VLE baseline

## **Accessibility**

If you require this VLE baseline in an alternative format please contact the Global Digital Pedagogies Hub via [LTAcademy@hw.ac.uk](mailto:LTAcademy@hw.ac.uk).

## Heriot-Watt VLE baseline

Students appreciate, and increasingly expect, consistent and well considered use of online learning platforms. The HW VLE baseline sets out the minimum expectations, or 'baseline', for the use of our VLE, Canvas. Course teams may go beyond these standards if they choose. Further VLE benchmarks to extend the use of Canvas will be provided in the near future.

Every taught programme and course (campus-based, blended and wholly online) at Heriot-Watt should meet this baseline in order to provide an effective, consistent and equitable learning experience for students.

### The benefits of the VLE baseline

The baseline supports the [Globally Connected Learning](#) model used at Heriot-Watt, which is enabled by Canvas and other technology. The baseline offers several benefits:

- Ensures consistency and quality across courses when used at departmental, faculty or school level.
- Assists course teams and departments to review and quality assure their use of Canvas in a systematic way and identify gaps in provision.
- Saves staff time and effort in navigating and developing Canvas sites.
- Provides a framework to monitor progress over time.

### How to use the baseline

It is recommended you read the baseline as you develop your Canvas course sites. You can also use it as a final checklist to ensure you have not missed out any crucial elements. Programme and course teams can request guidance and support in meeting the baseline from the [Learning and Teaching Academy](#) and [Learner and Academic Services](#).

### Note: Avoiding duplication

To avoid duplication of information across courses, it is recommended that common information is provided through school and/or programme level spaces linked to from each course site. Course-specific information can be linked to existing online information in course handbooks and/or on school websites.

## The HW VLE baseline

The core principles of the baseline are that each course site:

- will be welcoming, engaging and support active learning for students,
- will be accessible, consistent and easy to navigate, and
- content will be structured in a clear and meaningful way.

When designing course sites staff are encouraged to use these principles along with the full baseline to guide their design.

Area of course site (Explanation of required activity)	Baseline
<p><b>Structure &amp; navigation</b></p> <p>Structure your course clearly to help students navigate quickly, understand the sequence of activities, access information and easily understand the layout of unfamiliar courses.</p>	<p>All courses should:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Use the HW standard navigation as provided on the course shell and should not amend this.</li><li>2. Use one of the HW Approved Course templates, available in <a href="#">HW Approved Course templates in Canvas Commons</a> to provide the core structure of the course, unless there is a strong pedagogic reason for using a different structure.</li><li>3. Ensure that:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Content is structured in a clear and meaningful way which is easy for students and staff to navigate.</li><li>• Modules, pages and resources are labelled with descriptive text relating to content and use e.g. 'Week 1 Topic 1 – Nuclear Reactors', 'Week 9 – How does the internet work?'</li><li>• Key information is easily identified and accessed e.g. learning resources, help, assessment details and course information.</li><li>• Cognitive load is minimised – avoid overloading pages by grouping and / or splitting up content in a logical way and by hiding or deleting unused items.</li></ul></li></ol>

Area of course site (Explanation of required activity)	Baseline
<p><b>Home</b></p> <p>Support students to feel welcome and engaged in the course.</p>	<p>All Canvas course sites include on the home page:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A welcome message from Course Leader / Team.</li> <li>• Signposting to key information e.g. name of course, link to the course team page, key contact email.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Announcements</b></p> <p>Ensure students are aware of key information in a timely manner.</p>	<p>All Canvas course sites should provide the following announcements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welcome announcement.</li> <li>• Assignment and exams reminder announcements (if not including in weekly announcements).</li> <li>• 'Marked assignment feedback available' announcement.</li> <li>• Course feedback survey link announcement.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Course team page / module</b></p> <p>Help students to contact and get to know the course team.</p>	<p>All Canvas course sites should provide information on how to contact the course team members for questions, information or support.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For example, this could include for all members of course team: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ name,</li> <li>○ contact details (email, phone etc),</li> <li>○ campus location,</li> <li>○ office hours, and</li> <li>○ working hours.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Area of course site (Explanation of required activity)	Baseline
<p><b>Course induction module or page</b></p> <p>Help students orientate themselves, especially outlining how they are expected to learn and engage and how they may contact key staff members to get help when they need it.</p>	<p>All Canvas course sites should provide a clear course induction module or page.</p> <p><u>Examples</u> of content for the induction module or page:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Links to guidance on '<a href="#">How to use Canvas</a>',</li> <li>• Link to the '<a href="#">HW netiquette guide</a>',</li> <li>• Link to the course handbook and course descriptor (if available),</li> <li>• A clear explanation to students about how and when the course team will communicate with them e.g. discussion boards, announcements, email in Canvas, email via Outlook etc. This must be in keeping with the <a href="#">HW policy on Use of Approved Channels when Communicating with Students</a>.</li> <li>• Details of key assessment dates,</li> <li>• Any relevant campus-specific information.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Using Canvas and other tools</b> (e.g. quizzes, discussions, polling etc)</p> <p>Engage students with their learning.</p>	<p>If a Canvas course site makes use of a Canvas tool and / or other digital tools, the course site should provide:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a clear explanation of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• how to use the tool,</li> <li>• how and when students should engage</li> <li>• why this will support their learning.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Clear signposting to support for using the tool e.g. to guidance from the provider or from Information Services.</li> </ul>

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<p><b>Course materials</b></p> <p>Provide well labelled learning resources, using internal and external sources to support student learning.</p>	<p>All Canvas course sites should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide all notes, handouts, tutorials, labs, solutions, reading lists etc. in a logical place on the course site e.g. in the module for the week they are to be studied, in a module labelled 'resources', 'handouts', 'tutorials' etc.</li> <li>• Provide these course materials on the Canvas course site at least 7 working days in advance of them being required (except for answers / solutions which may be provided later).</li> <li>• Delete or unpublish any old or outdated materials.</li> </ul> <p>The course materials should be provided on the Canvas site even if they are made available to students in other ways as well e.g. handed out on campus.</p>
<p><b>Live sessions</b></p> <p>Engage students with their learning.</p>	<p>All Canvas course sites should ensure that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Live session times and locations are clear (e.g. Canvas calendar, a list of sessions, signpost to online timetable).</li> <li>• Where and how to sign-up for live sessions (if required) is clear.</li> <li>• Links to any recorded sessions are stored in a consistent location which all students can easily find e.g. in the relevant week / topic or in a specific recordings folder.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Discussions</b></p> <p>Engage students with their learning.</p>	<p>All Canvas course sites should include the following discussion thread(s):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welcome and introductions / socialisation thread (may include warm-up activities).</li> <li>• Ask me anything academic / Q&amp;A thread.</li> <li>• Q&amp;A about assignments thread(s).</li> </ul> <p>When using discussions all Canvas course sites should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain how students should use the discussion forums e.g. signpost to the <a href="#">Canvas student guides on Discussion</a>, explain how and when students will be expected to engage in the discussion.</li> <li>• State the expectations for Course Team engagement in discussion forums e.g. timescales for responses, when and how the course team will engage.</li> <li>• The Course Team should encourage and facilitate discussion through use of clear prompts and instructions for participation in the discussion.</li> </ul>

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<p><b>Assessments (Canvas assignments or Gradescope as appropriate)</b></p> <p>Clearly outline assessment requirements, submission methods and link to tools and information to help promote good academic conduct and avoid plagiarism.</p>	<p>All Canvas course sites should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assignment information in a consistent manner and location.</li> <li>• Clearly defined assignment components including assignment questions, instructions, deadlines, percentage of overall grade.</li> <li>• Clear assessment criteria / rubric available to students.</li> <li>• How students should submit their assignments. This should be via one of the HW approved assessment platforms.</li> <li>• How and where students can find their feedback and grades, and how to engage with and make use of the feedback.</li> <li>• Marking and feedback completed in the assessment platform (e.g. Speedgrader or Gradescope) unless there is a strong pedagogic reason for not doing this.</li> <li>• Turnitin (or alternative) enabled in keeping with University and School requirements.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Media</b></p> <p>Use media to support learning in an effective and accessible manner.</p>	<p>All Canvas course sites should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All video has automated captions and transcripts, and all audio has transcripts in keeping with HW policy on Use of Recording for Learning and Teaching Purposes.</li> <li>• Any video is streamed rather than hosted on Canvas.</li> <li>• All images have clear and meaningful alt-text / long descriptions (except decorative images).</li> <li>• Files are in a format which students will be able to access e.g. if specialist software is used on the course, it is ensured that students have access to it and know how to use it.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Legal</b></p> <p>Model good copyright, data protection practices &amp; legal compliance.</p>	<p>All Canvas course sites should ensure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All external resources are cleared for copyright or are openly licensed; and are hyperlinked where appropriate.</li> </ul>

Area of course site (Explanation of required activity)	Baseline
<b>Accessibility</b>  Provide accessible resources and meet individual student and staff accessibility needs.	All Canvas courses should ensure: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Each page / item has been checked using the <a href="#">Canvas accessibility checker</a> and appropriate actions taken to address any issues identified.</li> <li>• Automated captions &amp; transcripts provided for all media.</li> </ul>
<b>Student feedback</b>  Enable staff and students to evaluate learning and teaching provision, so they can help to improve it year on year.	All Canvas course sites should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide a link to complete the relevant UG Course Experience Survey / PGT experience survey (PTES) e.g. via announcement.</li> </ul>
<b>University resources</b>  Signpost students to relevant university resources to support their studies.	All Canvas course sites should use the HW University resources template provided in the course shell.
<b>Rubrics</b> <b>Quizzes</b> <b>Grades</b> <b>Office 365</b> <b>Collaborations</b> <b>Syllabus</b> <b>Files</b>	These Canvas tools are not part of the baseline but will be included in the extended VLE benchmarks.