

Guidelines to choose a platform for the virtual exchange of courses

Plan of action for the EFESE project

1. Introduction

This document lays down the action plan for the choice of a platform which will be used to facilitate the virtual exchange of courses. It does so by addressing two questions: (1) what is the difference between a learning platform and an exchange platform? And (2) what are the technical specifications pertaining to an exchange platform in the light of the project initiative?

This blueprint must be read in context with earlier research which has been carried out into the pedagogical and technical format of the courses, as well as the issue of copyrights. The choice for platform should as much as possible resonate with the established needs of the project and, more specifically, address two central matters: the quality control of the submitted courses and the conduction of license agreements with regard to copyright protected material.

2. The differences between a learning platform and an exchange platform

To avoid confusion, it is important in the first place to draw the lines of distinction between a learning platform and a course exchange platform, as both are relevant for the purposes of the project.

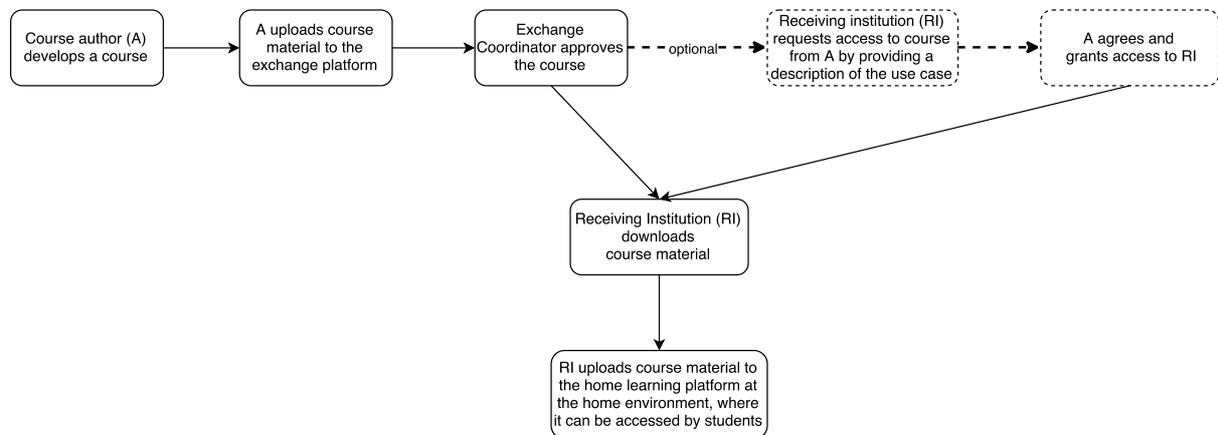
A learning platform (e.g. Blackboard, Sofia learn) is an online platform which is used by academic institutions in order to share course material *with students*. Typically, students receive accounts that are linked to their email addresses, which allows them to login and view courses that they are enrolled for. Besides making primary material accessible, such as academic literature and presentation slides, learning platforms often allow rich features such as tools for the online viewing of lecture videos and the conduction of assessment tests.

A course exchange platform, on the other hand, is a far simpler tool that is used by academic institutions to exchange course material *between each other*. Institutions participating in the exchange initiative are presented a catalogue of courses from which they can choose. The courses are created by their respective authors according to a unified format, which improves the uniformity of the offered courses and safeguards their academic quality. Receiving institutions can view the general course information, as well as a list of corresponding course documents.

While there are strong arguments for the use of a learning platform for sharing content with students, exchange platforms are a much more appropriate tool for the higher level content exchange, the one between institutions. The user base of an exchange platform can be limited to a closed pool of academic institutions, with regulated and monitored access. The creation of such a 'secure' environment enhances the trust of authors in the platform. Furthermore, having a limited pool of users allows the pursuit of a sound copyright policy: the actors participating in the primary exchange can at all times be identified, and the 'rules of the game' can be set and passed on via license agreements.

The relationship between an exchange platform and a learning platform is not an exclusive one, the two can complement each other. An exchange platform can be used to exchange courses between (academic) institutions, which, on their turn, make use of their own learning platforms to share the course material with students. This approach, which is depicted in the diagram below, avoids unnecessary complications pertaining to sharing of access with larger, not clearly defined groups of

users. It also gives receiving institutions the flexibility to incorporate the course in their home curriculum and home learning environment, which students are already accustomed to.



3. Technical specifications of the exchange platform

The chosen platform for course exchange should:

- a. Facilitate the uploading of course material by the author in an easy, user-friendly manner:
 - i. Provide a clear overview of the steps that need to be taken to submit a course;
 - ii. Offer an easy to use, cross-browser compatible system for uploading course documents;
 - iii. Allow multiple documents to be uploaded at once, not: on a file-by-file basis;
 - iv. Allow authors to resume interrupted uploads, as some course documents may be of considerable size, meaning that uploads can have a long duration, which increases the risk of connection failures.
- b. Address issues of quality and uniformity control:
 - i. Provide access to authors (and other users) only following an explicit invitation by the exchange coordinator;
 - ii. Allow the exchange coordinator to review and approve courses submitted by authors, in order to make sure that they comply with the established formats.
- c. Address issues of copyrights:
 - i. Limit access to a pool of registered users. Access is only granted by the exchange coordinator and is further monitored;
 - ii. Facilitate the conducting of license agreements, to the extent that this is needed for realisation of the chosen copyright policy;
 - iii. Allow to monitor the download activity of receiving institutions and make this information available to the course author;
 - iv. Allow, as an opt-in option, the possibility to authors to restrict access to a course only to institutions that have requested and obtained a prior permission for use. The request must include a detailed description of the particular use-case in the home environment of the receiving institution. Access to the course materials is granted only after the course owner has explicitly approved the use case in question.