

Hosting Moodle

A Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is considered a ‘critical’ service for most institutions and decisions around hosting should reflect this. There are many lessons learnt from unfortunates who have 'tripped up' by making wrong decisions; some of which can result in serious drawbacks (including loss of data, lack of access, etc.). On reflection, we are all wiser. We thought it would be helpful to point out some of the more common misconceptions you’ll likely to hear so you don't make the same mistakes...

Moodle is Free!

Whilst Moodle is often considered ‘free’ as anyone can download and use the software and does not have associated license costs, there are many underlying (if not hidden) costs that have to be factored into any equation before a decision is arrived at: hardware, software, technical and user support, development and maintenance will all contribute to the cost. User expectations mean that the service is required to be available outside normal working hours and be able to offer equivalent performance levels to modern websites.

“The Network Team can look after it”

Staff

Providing the levels of support required to run Moodle can put considerable pressure on the skill sets and time available to staff, especially when they are also responsible for other critical services within the institution. Teams responsible for delivering the service should be comfortable with the workload and environment and users should feel confident in the support they will receive.

Hosting Environment

Servers should be hosted in a secure, stable and monitored physical environment with measures taken to reduce the risk of unscheduled loss of service from events such as fires and local power failure.

Data needs to be stored securely with regular backups taken and clearly outlined procedures for recovery in case of system failure. Operating software should be optimised to deliver reliable performance, requiring consistent monitoring and maintenance of patches.

Related hardware and network solutions should be able to provide sufficient and consistent access for the number of users accessing the system, even as these systems get older and may need replacing.

Support

Moodle is an Open Source platform meaning the software developers do not provide warranted support. Technical support will require extensive knowledge of the server environment, particularly PHP and your chosen database, while end-user support will be reliant on a familiarity with the pedagogical applications of Moodle technologies.

“It works now – everything will be alright”

Investment in a VLE is a long-term commitment in a market where technologies are changing fast. You should be ensuring that your solution will be suitable for the next five years and beyond and not just the short term.

This needs to consider how you will respond to required upgrades, staff turnover, maintenance of customised code, integration with other systems and maybe even switching solutions as your needs alter. A dependency on one person or one system may prove inflexible as your situation changes.

Choosing an Open Source solution also places your institution in a position to get involved and contribute to a wider community sharing development and expertise, however this needs managing to avoid working in isolation.

"Can I get help?"

If you'd like to talk about options, please contact us at the University of London Computer Centre (ULCC). We provide complete solutions and can advise on options available to best suit your organisational needs.

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