

CHOOSING A SUITABLE ONLINE EDUCATION PLATFORM

by **Lianne van Elk** (SURFnet)

Increasingly, education institutions are having to determine which platform they should use to make their online educational resources available. Should they connect to major platforms such as FutureLearn, Coursera or Edx, or should they use a platform within their own institution? What variables influence the decision and what options are available to choose from? SURF has inventoried a number of platforms and collected a range of user experiences from within research universities and universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands.

Optimal support

Many research universities and universities of applied sciences are currently examining how they can optimally support their lecturers and students. They are looking both for learning platforms that support fully online education and learning platforms that support blended learning, either as a replacement for their current learning management system (LMS) or otherwise.

Overview table with 20 variables

SURF's overview is intended to support institutions when choosing a learning platform. Learning platforms currently in use within Dutch higher education institutions are described based on 20 different variables. It examines factors such as the specific form of education for which the learning platform is suited, the functionalities it offers and the way in which standards are used.

The user experiences show that institutions mainly based their choice of learning platform on functionalities offered, reliability and user-friendliness. The experiences of Wageningen UR, Delft University of Technology and Leiden University indicate that institutions that are looking for a learning platform for online education also take international visibility and the network created by use of the platform into consideration.

User-friendliness and functionalities

For all institutions, it is important that the learning platform provides effective support to the learning process. Many of the learning platforms on offer provide a huge range of functionalities. When starting with a new platform, it is extremely useful to carefully consider a user-friendly and clear structure, according to UMC Utrecht and Utrecht University's experiences with Elevate.

Avans University of Applied Sciences also carefully considered the way they put Blackboard into use. The institutions said that the most important factor is that you must first work out exactly what you want from a platform.

Users increasingly consider functionalities for collaboration and interaction to be the most important. Furthermore, many institutions value an integrated educational resources databank – including for open educational resources – as well as an integrated tool for learning analytics.

Buy it or make it yourself?

Another question is how actively you wish to be involved in the development of the learning platform. For open source learning platforms, you can influence the development via the community and you are often expected to contribute. If – like Utrecht University of Applied Sciences and the Open University of the Netherlands – you wish to develop the learning platform yourself, then you can design it entirely in accordance with your own preferences. However, this does carry the risk that the costs of development are not as well-defined. Purchasing a learning platform from a supplier means reduced flexibility, but it does give you a clearer picture of the costs.

Trend: cloud and mobile

One important trend that was identified is that learning platforms are being increasingly offered as cloud services and mobile services. For many institutions, it is important that learning platforms facilitate the integration of external tools and the exchange of content and educational data. In this regard, the use of common standards and conceptual frameworks is vital.