Using Forums in the VLE

GUIDE
v3.1
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

A. Forums .................................................................................................................. 1
B. Types of Forums .................................................................................................... 1
C. Creating Forums .................................................................................................... 2
D. Accessing Forums ................................................................................................. 4
E. Adding a new discussion topic within a Forum ..................................................... 5
F. Reading Forum discussions ................................................................................... 8
G. Replying to Forum posts ......................................................................................... 10
H. Using Groups in Forums ......................................................................................... 11
   Forums and Groups ................................................................................................. 11
   Setting Group mode in Forums ............................................................................... 11
   Viewing and participating in Forums with Group mode .......................................... 12
I. Using Groupings in Forums .................................................................................... 13
   Forums and Groupings ............................................................................................ 13
   Setting Forums to be accessible to Groupings ....................................................... 14
J. Forum Subscriptions .............................................................................................. 15
   Subscribing to Forums ............................................................................................ 15
   Enabling email digests ......................................................................................... 16
K. Forum Tracking ...................................................................................................... 17
   Enabling Forum tracking ...................................................................................... 19
A. Forums

The Forum Activity within the VLE is a powerful communication and discussion tool. Tutors and students are provided with an area where they can post messages and reply to each other at any time. Since this process does not require tutors and students to be signed in at the same time (synchronously), this method of communication is referred to as asynchronous communication.

Both synchronous and asynchronous communication methods have their advantages and disadvantages. **Synchronous communication** (such as chat rooms, instant messaging or face-to-face conversations) allows for an immediate response, but may cause some students to not participate because they are afraid of embarrassing themselves by making a mistake. **Asynchronous communication** (such as forums) allows these students to take their time to compose replies. They can draft and rewrite until they are satisfied with their reply instead of feeling under pressure to respond immediately. By utilising a variety of synchronous and asynchronous tools for communication, tutors will allow students with different learning requirements to participate in discussions.

A forum can be compared to a room at a party: there’s a living room, a kitchen, a dining room etc. In each room there are groups of people having different discussions. Each discussion has a thread with everyone replying to each other about the topic. Whilst being able to contribute to his group’s discussion, one is also able to follow other discussions being developed within the same room. Without people having discussions, a forum is an empty, quiet space. Each forum can contain one or more discussions, each comprised of a message post and a number of reply posts.

Tutors may opt to create various forums within a VLE area, each of which is used for different purposes. Apart from the Announcements forum (refer to Section B), which is used for announcements, and the discussion forums, which are used to discuss VLE area related topics, one might consider providing students with a Student Café, which allows students to acquaint themselves with the use of online forums through informal and optional discussions.

B. Types of Forums

An **Announcements** forum is automatically created in every VLE area, to which all participants (students and tutors) are automatically subscribed (refer to Section J for information about subscriptions). The Announcements forum is a simple one-way communication tool used by tutors to make any type of announcement relevant to the VLE area. The Announcements forum does not allow students to post messages or reply to announcements made by their tutors.

Tutors can create other forums where students can post messages. There are five types of Forums that a tutor can create:

- **A single simple discussion** – The tutor can create only one discussion in this forum. This is useful for short discussions, and will keep the conversation focused on one particular topic.

- **Each person posts one discussion** – Each student can start only one new discussion topic (though everyone can reply to each other’s). This is useful when you want each student to start a discussion about, say, their reflections on the week's topic and everyone else responds to these.

- **Q and A forum** – The Q & A forum requires students to post their perspectives to a discussion before viewing other students' postings for the same discussion. After the initial posting, students can view and respond to others’ postings. This feature allows equal initial posting opportunity among all students, thus encouraging original and independent thinking.

- **Standard forum for general use** – This is an open forum where anyone can start a new topic at any time. This is the best general-purpose forum.
Using Forums in the VLE

- **Standard forum displayed in a blog-like format** – This is similar to the *standard forum for general use*, but the first post of each discussion is displayed as in a blog. Users can read the post and then choose to respond by clicking the **Discuss this topic** link bottom right of the post.

C. Creating Forums

To create a forum:

1. Click the **Turn editing on** button located at the top-right of the page. This will display a new array of options. Note that the **Turn editing on** button changes to the **Turn editing off** button.

2. In the section where you want to create the forum, click the arrow adjacent to **Add an activity**... drop-down menu.
3. Select **Forum**. The screen below is displayed.

![Add a new Forum](image)

4. In the **Forum name** field, type a short name for the forum e.g. *First Impressions on Evidence Based Practice*. This will be displayed in the VLE area main page.

5. In the **Description** field, type in a description or introductory text for the discussion. It is good practice to include precise instructions for students regarding the subject of the forum and any possible assessment criteria that might be used in this forum.

   *e.g. Please share your first impressions of the concept of evidence-based practice. Kindly write a short paragraph explaining whether your understanding of the term evidence has changed.*

6. Tick **Display description on course page** if you want the description to be displayed in the VLE area homepage just below the link to the forum.

7. From the **Forum type** drop-down menu, choose the preferred forum type. Refer to **Section B** for more information about forum types. Expand the **Subscription and tracking**, **Discussion locking**, **Post threshold for blocking**, **Grade**, **Ratings**, **Common module settings**, **Restrict access**, and **Activity completion** sections. Adjust the following settings according to your preference:

   a. **Subscription mode**: Refer to **Section J** for more information about subscriptions.

   b. **Discussion locking**: Forum threads may be automatically locked after a defined period of inactivity. The default is set to never lock discussions, allowing students to contribute at any time. If you’d like to lock discussion threads, a period from a day to a
year may be selected. Tutors have the capability to override locked discussions by simply posting a reply.

c. **Post threshold for blocking**: This is used to limit the number of posts any one student can make in a given period of time. When the student approaches that number, they will be warned that they are approaching the threshold.

   i. **Time period for blocking**: The time period during which a student is limited to make a number of posts.

   ii. **Post threshold for blocking**: The maximum number of posts a student can make during the above established period. Entering ‘0’ (zero) will disable blocking. If blocking is disabled, warnings will automatically be disabled.

   iii. **Post threshold for warning**: The number of posts a student can make during the above established period, after which s/he is warned that he is approaching the maximum number of posts. Entering ‘0’ (zero) will disable warnings.

d. **Availability**: Determine whether you want to make the forum visible to the students immediately, or whether you want to make it visible at a later stage.

e. **Group mode**: Refer to Section H for more information about groups.

8. Click the **Save and return to course** button.

D. Accessing Forums

You can access a forum you want to participate in by clicking its title in the contents section of the VLE area. Forums are denoted by this icon . You can also find a list of all the forums by clicking the **Forums** link in the **Activities** block in the VLE area homepage.
The Forums page shows a list of available forums in the VLE area, and information related to the forums, such as the title, description and number of discussions. You are also given the option to manage Forum subscriptions. Refer to Section J for more information about subscriptions.

E. Adding a new discussion topic within a Forum

Every Forum type (except for A single simple discussion, refer to Section B for more information about Forum types) is made up of a number of discussion topics.

To add a new topic within a forum:

1. Access the forum, as indicated in Section D.
2. Click the Add a new discussion topic button.

The screen shown overleaf will be displayed.
3. Type a short descriptive title for your topic in the Subject field.

4. Type in the content of your post in the Message HTML editor.

5. Tick the Discussion subscription checkbox if you would like to be subscribed to the discussion within the forum thread. If subscribed, you will receive an email copy of every message posted to the discussion. Refer to Section J for more information about subscriptions.

6. If you want to add files to your post, upload them through one of two options (Method i – Traditional Upload, or Method ii - Drag and Drop).

**Method i – Traditional Upload**

a. Click the Add... button. The File picker dialog box is displayed.

b. In the Upload a file option, click the Choose File button.
Using Forums in the VLE

Method ii – Drag and Drop

Under the Content section of the ‘Attachment’ screen is an area with a blue arrow that allows drag and drop uploading.

a. Locate the file to upload.
b. Drag the file to the drag-and-drop area.

Note that files will also be added as attachments and can be accessed within the email notifications sent to students.

7. By default, forum posts are sent as an email after 30 minutes. Tick the Send forum post notifications with no editing-time delay check box if you want users subscribed to the forum to receive the email notification immediately.

8. Click the Post to forum button.

Note that:

- Students have a 30 minute time window to edit or delete message posts they made to a forum. On the other hand, tutors do not have such restrictions as they can edit or delete any message posts (including students’) made to a forum. You will notice that the links to edit or delete message posts are added to the bottom of each post.

- When you copy text from MS Word (or any other word processor) and paste this to the HTML editor, it is recommended that you then press the Clear formatting tool to remove unnecessary HTML tags. If not removed, these tags might appear as extra text in line with your message post.

Another way to prevent the unnecessary tags from showing is to:

1. Open a simple text editor, such as Notepad.
2. From MS Word (or the word processor you are using), copy the text that you wrote.
3. Paste the copied text into Notepad.
4. Copy the text again, this time from Notepad.
5. Paste the text into the discussion forum.

Note:

- If a forum, including the Announcements forum, is set as hidden (i.e. not visible to students), the email containing the post is only sent to participants who can access the hidden forum, namely Tutors and Guest Tutors.

- Thus, a forum post is sent via email to those participants who are subscribed to the forum, and have access to the particular forum activity.

- The above-mentioned behavior does not apply to a visible forum within a hidden VLE area. In this case both tutors and students who are subscribed to the forum will receive the email.
F. Reading Forum discussions

Every discussion topic is made up of a message post (created when adding a new topic, refer to Section E) and a number of reply posts. To read the discussion posts:

1. Access the forum, as indicated in Section D.

You are shown a list of discussion topics in the selected forum. For each discussion topic, the page shows the author who started the topic, the amount of reply posts within that topic, along with information related to the most recent message (author’s name and date).

2. Click the title of the discussion topic you want to read. You will now see a list of all posts in that discussion.

3. A discussion may be displayed in four ways. Click the drop-down menu at the top of the discussion page to select a display type.

   - **Display replies flat, with oldest first** - The reply posts will be displayed without indentation and ordered chronologically from the oldest to the latest.

   ![Display options]

Note:

- With replies displayed flat, the discussion’s starting message post is always displayed at the top page, and is followed by replies sorted chronologically (oldest/latest).
- **Display replies flat, with newest first** - The reply posts will be displayed without indentation and ordered chronologically from the latest to the oldest.

- **Display replies in threaded form** - Only one post is displayed (by default being the one starting the discussion). Replies are reduced to the headlines (including author and date) and indented to the right. Any replies to the same post are indented in-line with each other.

- **Display replies in nested form** - All posts are displayed in full format. Replies are indented to the right so that only replies to the same post are in-line with each other.
G. Replying to Forum posts

To reply to a forum post:

1. In the discussion page, click the Reply link allocated at the bottom-right of the message post you want to reply to.

2. Edit the Subject field if required, although this is not recommended.

3. Type in the content of your reply in the Message HTML editor.

4. Tick the Discussion subscription checkbox if you would like to be subscribed to the discussion within the forum. If subscribed, you will receive an email copy of every message posted to the discussion. Refer to Section J for more information about subscriptions.

5. If required, attach a file (e.g. MS Word document or PDF) to your reply using one of two options (Method i – Traditional Upload, or Method ii - Drag and Drop) explained in detail in Section E above.

6. Click the Post to forum button.

Note that:

- After posting your message, you are given a 30 minute time window to edit or delete your post. This is very helpful if you hit the Post to forum button too soon, or spot a mistake after posting. You will notice that the links to edit or delete your post are added to the bottom of your post during this 30 minute period.

- When you copy text from MS Word (or any other word processor) and paste this to the HTML editor, it is recommended that you then press the Clear formatting tool to remove unnecessary HTML tags. If not removed, these tags might appear as extra text in line with your message post.
Another way to prevent the unnecessary tags from showing is to:

1. Open a simple text editor, such as Notepad.
2. From MS Word (or the word processor you are using), copy the text that you wrote.
3. Paste the copied text into Notepad.
4. Copy the text again, this time from Notepad.
5. Paste the text into the discussion forum.

H. Using Groups in Forums

The Groups feature allows tutors to divide participants (students and tutors) within their VLE area into groups. Students can then undertake VLE activities within these groups, allowing them to work more closely together, and encouraging more collaboration from each member than they might get in a whole-class exercise.

Refer to the Using Groups & Groupings in the VLE – Tutors’ Guide for more information about setting up groups.

Forums and Groups

If you wish to have your students discussing the same concepts in different groups, thus expanding the same topic into multiple branches, you only need to create a single forum, rather than one for each group. For example, if you are organising an online discussion and decide to divide 40 participants into 4 groups of 10, the Groups feature allows you to set up a single discussion forum, rather than 4 separate ones. A unique area within the forum will be created for each group.

Setting Group mode in Forums

Group settings are located in the Common module settings section when setting up a new forum (refer to steps 1-6 of Section C for more information about creating forums).

From the Group mode drop-down menu, select one of the following:

- **No Groups**: All students can view and participate to the same discussions.
- **Separate Groups**: Students can view and participate in discussions within their own group. They cannot view or participate in other groups' discussions.
- **Visible Groups**: Students can view and participate in discussions within their own group. They can also view other groups' discussions but not participate in them.
Viewing and participating in Forums with Group mode

A forum set with Group mode (Separate Groups or Visible Groups, see above) is recognised accordingly from the top-left corner of the forum’s page.

To view discussion topics of a particular group, select the group from the Separate Groups/Visible Groups drop-down menu (top-left corner of the page).

You can also create a discussion topic to that particular group by clicking the Add a new discussion topic button. Remember to select the group from the Separate Groups/Visible Groups drop-down menu. Refer to steps 3–7 of Section E for more information about adding discussion topics.

You can also send the same message to all Separate Groups/Visible Groups simultaneously, by checking the option Post a copy to all groups option.
I. Using Groupings in Forums

The Groupings feature allows tutors to organise groups into groupings. A grouping is a collection of one or more groups. Tutors can make an activity (or resource) specifically available to groups (within a grouping), whilst hiding it from those groups not assigned to the activity.

Refer to the Using Groups & Groupings in the VLE – Tutors’ Guide for more information about setting up groups and groupings.

Forums and Groupings

Tutors who need to create a forum activity targeted to one or more particular group can use the Groupings feature. By assigning a grouping to a forum, the tutor can channel specific instructions to the relevant groups (within the grouping) without making the information available to groups not involved in the discussion.

In the above example, 3 groups have been created and assigned to 4 groupings:

- Grouping 1 (Group A)
- Grouping 2 (Group B)
- Grouping 3 (Group C)
- Grouping 4 (Group A and Group B)

The first three groupings are made up of one group each. Thus, forums set for each of these groupings are hidden from all but that group.

However, the last grouping has two groups. When a forum is set for this grouping, a tutor has several options. Apart from hiding the forum from Group C, the tutor can use different Group mode settings to:

- let Group A and Group B work together
- let Group A and Group B work in visible groups
- let Group A and Group B work in separate groups.
Setting Forums to be accessible to Groupings

To make a Forum accessible to a particular grouping:

1. When setting up a new Forum (refer to steps 1-6 of Section C), scroll down to the Common module settings section.

2. From the Group mode drop-down menu, select how you prefer the forum to operate. Refer to Section H for definitions of the different options.

3. From the Grouping drop-down menu, select which grouping you want to assign to the forum.

   The name of the chosen grouping will eventually be displayed adjacent to the Forum link in the VLE area main page. This is applicable to tutors only, as students will only see the Forum link that they have access to.

4. If you want to make the Forum link unavailable to students who are not part of these groups, click the Add group/grouping access restriction button, within the Common module settings section.

5. Click the Save and return to course button. The forum activity is displayed in the VLE area as shown below.
J. Forum Subscriptions

When subscribed to a forum, users will receive an email message in their University / JC mailbox each time somebody posts a message or a reply. This makes it easy to keep track of what’s happening in the forums without constantly logging in. By default, such email messages are sent 30 minutes after the post is made in a forum.

Subscribing to Forums

There are several ways to subscribe to a forum:

- **At the time of posting / replying:** Tick the Discussion subscription checkbox if you would like to be subscribed to the discussion within the forum thread. Refer to Section E and Section G.

- **Within a forum:** When you access a forum, if you are not already subscribed to that particular forum, click the gear icon in the upper corner of the forum section and select **Subscribe to this forum**.

Otherwise, if you’re already subscribed to a particular forum and you wish to unsubscribe, click the gear icon in the upper corner of the forum section and select **Unsubscribe from this forum**.
Using Forums in the VLE

- In the **Forums** page (available when clicking the Forums link in the Activities block, refer to **Section D**), the button in the **Subscribed** column in line with the forum identifies if you are subscribed to the forum. Click the "No" button (which will then change to "Yes") to subscribe to the forum.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forum</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Discussions</th>
<th>Unread posts</th>
<th>Track</th>
<th>Subscribed</th>
<th>Email digest type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Announcements</strong></td>
<td>This forum is used by the facilitators to communicate important information about the course. All participants will also receive a copy of this information in their University mailbox. This is a one-way forum which means that participants are not able to respond to posts in this forum.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Default (No digest)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q&amp;A Forum</strong></td>
<td>This is the place where we can post questions about the course and technology. If you see a question that you can answer, please go ahead and reply. We need to ensure that no question or request for help goes unanswered.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Default (No digest)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Learning forums**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Forum</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Discussions</th>
<th>Unread posts</th>
<th>Track</th>
<th>Subscribed</th>
<th>Email digest type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topic 6 - OUTCOMES &amp; EVALUATION</td>
<td>Discussion: Outcomes &amp; Evaluation</td>
<td>Post your study-unit evaluation plan in your group discussion – Discussion: Outcomes &amp; Evaluation - to receive feedback from your colleagues (due by Saturday 7th July). Review your colleagues’ evaluation plans. Provide constructive feedback to 1 of your colleague’s evaluation plans posts by ...</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Default (No digest)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Subscribe to individual discussions**

In a forum with **Optional or Auto subscription**, you can choose which discussions to subscribe to. It is not necessary to receive emails for all distinct threads within a particular forum. To subscribe to a particular discussion, click the 'open envelope' icon to the right of the discussion. A 'closed envelope' icon indicates that you are already subscribed. To unsubscribe from a particular discussion, click the 'closed envelope' icon.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discussion</th>
<th>Started by</th>
<th>Replies</th>
<th>Unread</th>
<th>Last post</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interesting stuff</td>
<td>Dummy Tutor</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Fri, 17 Aug 2018, 9:43 AM&lt;br&gt;You are not subscribed to this discussion. Click to subscribe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events at UM</td>
<td>Dummy Tutor</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Fri, 17 Aug 2018, 9:42 AM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome</td>
<td>Dummy Tutor</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Fri, 17 Aug 2018, 9:41 AM</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Enabling email digests**

By default, the VLE will send an email message for every forum post. Although preferred by some users, others might get overwhelmed by all the messages cluttering their mailbox, especially if subscribed to multiple forums.

For this reason, you may set up message filtering in your email client (i.e. Gmail, Mozilla Thunderbird, MS Outlook, etc) to sort your incoming email into separate folders according to their content.
You may also enable email digests for your profile, so that the VLE only sends one email a day. This email, which is typically received after 2000hrs (Central European Time), will include all the new posts made throughout the past 24hrs in forums you are subscribed to in all your VLE areas.

To enable/change the email digests:

1. Click your User menu (top-right corner).
2. Select Preferences. The Preferences page will be displayed.
3. Click the Forum preferences link.
4. From the Email digest type, select your preferred option.
5. Click the Save changes button.

K. Forum Tracking

Forum tracking helps you to identify any forum message posts that you have not viewed. These posts are marked as unread.

Such notifications are made in the following manner:

- In the Dashboard page, a notification is listed under a VLE area if it contains any forum with unread posts.

- In the homepage of your VLE area, any forums containing unread posts are identified by the label ‘X unread posts’ beneath the forum title.
• In the **Forums page** (which is accessed from the **Activities** block), the amount of unread posts in a forum are identified in the **Unread posts** column:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forum</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Discussions</th>
<th>Unread posts</th>
<th>Track</th>
<th>Subscribed</th>
<th>Email digest type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Announcements</td>
<td>Tutors use this forum to communicate important information about the VLE area. Students will also receive a copy of this information in their University mailbox. This is a one-way forum which means that students are not able to respond to posts in this forum.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Default (No digest)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Cafe</td>
<td>This is a social forum open for discussions about anything you want to discuss, where you can relax over a virtual cup of coffee :)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Default (No digest)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• In a **forum**, the amount of unread posts in a discussion are identified in the **Unread** column:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discussion</th>
<th>Started by</th>
<th>Replies</th>
<th>Unread</th>
<th>Last post</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interesting stuff</td>
<td>Dummy Tutor</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Dummy Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events at UM</td>
<td>Dummy Tutor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Dummy Student 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome</td>
<td>Dummy Tutor</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Dummy Student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• In a **discussion**, an unread message post is identified by a highlight surrounding the message heading:

**The Café**  
**Events at UM**

- **Interesting stuff**

**Events at UM**  
*by Dummy Tutor - Friday, 17 August 2018, 9:42 AM*

Dear Students, Note that the University organises several interesting events throughout the year, some of which related to our field of study. Please access the following link for a list of events.  
https://www.um.edu.mt/newspoint/events/calendar/forthcoming. It would be nice to see some of you there. Dummy Tutor

Rec **Events at UM**  
*by Dummy Student 5 - Friday, 17 August 2018, 12:02 PM*

Thank you for the link. DSS

**Note:**  
• The VLE cannot identify whether you have gone through the text. Thus, a message post is considered as read after it has been accessed.
Enabling Forum tracking

To enable/disable forum tracking to notify you of any unread forum message posts:

1. Click your User menu (top-right corner).
2. Select Preferences. The Preferences page will be displayed.
3. Click the Forum preferences link.
4. From the Forum tracking setting, select your preferred option.

5. Click the Save changes button.

Note that:

- You can turn on/off forum tracking for individual forums. In the Forums page (available when clicking the Forums link in the Activities block, refer to Section D), the button in the Track column in line with the forum identifies if tracking is activated. Click the "Yes" button (which will then change to "No") to stop tracking the forum.