URL Standard for public

Externally published content and services

This standard governs the allocation and appropriate usage for all published content and services

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URL standards for Open University websites

1. Overview
The Open University (OU) domain, its subdomains and the URLs on which content and services are published are ways to communicate the University’s corporate identity and reputation. The format and structure of the URLs used are extremely important for both our website users and search engines, therefore Open University URLs should be naturally user and search engine friendly, and follow a consistent, predictable, format.

1.1. This standard primarily applies to the open.ac.uk, openuniversity.edu and open.edu domains, subdomains and their subdirectories, but should be considered best practice for any OU owned domain.

1.2. This standard sets out how URLs should be constructed, and our approach to setting up additional URLs, e.g. for marketing purposes.

1.3. A consistent approach to the structuring and wording of URLs brings a number of benefits to the University website:
- Improving website visitor orientation within the site; URL structure and wording helps provide context for the page being viewed
- Supporting website visitor navigation; trimming URLs is a means for website visitors to navigate ‘up’ through the site
- Enhancing web page performance in search engines; poor URL structures can impact of a search engines ability to crawl your pages (ref: Keep a simple URL structure, Google Search Console Help)

1.4. Any URLs generated by our URL shortening service are also expected to conform to this standard. To be confirmed, contact Digital Services for more information.

2. Formats
2.1. URLs must be clear, unambiguous, easy to read, easy to type and easy to share.
2.2. URLs must clearly indicate where a page sits within the overall site architecture.
2.3. URLs should indicate the subject of the page as accurately and succinctly as possible.
2.4. URLs are lower case by default. If there is strong evidence of a need for an upper-case short URL (for example, it will be read aloud and refers to a commonly-capitalised phrase) this will be considered.
2.5. URLs should contain only standard ASCII alphanumeric characters A to Z; numerals 0 to 9 and/or hyphens (not underscores)
2.6. Hyphens should be used to separate words within URLs where a logical space occurs so they are easy to read. For example www.open.ac.uk/web-standards
2.7. **Use of query string parameters should be avoided where possible**

2.8. Articles (a, an, the) and other superfluous words should not be used, (e.g. /contact rather than /how-to-contact-us).

2.9. URLs should use the verb infinitive, where possible, (e.g. /apply instead of /applying).

2.10. URLs should be based on what makes sense to a user rather than internal project or process names/acronyms, which might change, (e.g. /apply rather than /application-procedure).

2.11. You should be aware of the need to avoid infringing existing trademarks, trade names and third party business names when considering URLs. Apart from giving unnecessary publicity, there is a risk of it being illegal. Where a trade name, trademark or business name is to be used then written proof of your authority to use the name or mark must be submitted to [Digital Services](mailto:).

### 3. Using abbreviations or acronyms

3.1. To the broad majority of users acronyms are meaningless. A user-centred approach should be taken and acronyms expanded where possible.

3.2. Abbreviations or acronyms should only be used if:
   - The abbreviation is understood within the HE sector and by the wider public (e.g. STEM)
   - There is no reasonable and meaningful alternative.
   - Using the full title would make the URL too long and complex or exceed character lengths (staying under 2000 characters is best practice).

### 4. Canonical URLs

Where the same content can be accessed through multiple URLs we recommend you define a canonical URL for the content, or equivalent content. (A canonical URL allows you to tell search engines that certain similar URLs are actually one and the same ref: [Use canonical URLs, Google Search Console Help](https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/74853).

### 5. Audiences

5.1. Content intended for an internal audience must not be hosted on an external URL (e.g. www.open.ac.uk) as this could:
   - Cause confusion especially if staff have to log in
   - Mislead staff into thinking the site is an external resource which is open to all.

5.2. Additionally, content hosted on external URLs will not be indexed in Intranet search, meaning staff may have difficulty locating the site.
6. Publicity URLs
6.1. Trailing slashes should not be used when sharing or printing URLs, or for providing third parties with links to Open University content. (e.g. www.open.ac.uk/courses rather than www.open.ac.uk/courses/)
6.2. The Open University uses campaign landing pages1 to provide supporting digital content for campaign and promotional activity. These URLs need to be aligned with the title of the campaign or promotion and be as short as possible. They should contain only lowercase a-z characters.
6.3. For promotional activity where a campaign landing page does not exist and a short URL is required there are two options
   • URL shortening service, contact Digital Services for advice
   • Top level redirect (see 7.5)

7. Redirects
7.1. Redirects from open.ac.uk, openuniversity.edu and open.edu domains, subdomains and their subdirectories must not be used to directly promote any content or service that is not available on the Open University platform or be used to redirect a user to a non-Open University URL. This should be considered best practice for any OU owned domain.
7.2. A redirect must always be set up as a 301 redirect, indicating to both browsers and search engines that a page has moved permanently.
7.3. When possible redirects should be implemented on a 1-to-1 basis, mapping the old page to the new page.
7.4. A redirect should point at its final destination rather than another redirected location.
7.5. Due to the large amount of content that already exists at the top level of open.ac.uk, openuniversity.edu and open.edu subdomains, (e.g. www.open.ac.uk) only a limited number of redirects will be allowed here. Requests will be considered by the Head of Digital Services on a case-by-case basis and will only be granted if the following conditions are satisfied:
   • The URL conforms to all other requirements of the Open University URL policy
   • The content being promoted originates from, or is significantly relevant to, more than one organisation
   • The URL needs to be specific to the content and make sense forever (e.g. include a year when using a re-direct for one-off promotion of an annual event)
   • The URL will be used for significant, high-value marketing and promotion

1 This service is managed by Marketing
8. URL management

8.1. Digital Services are responsible for managing the allocation of URLs on a business as usual basis.

8.2. The Domain Working Group are responsible for managing the allocation of URL on open.ac.uk, openuniversity.edu or open.edu. The Domain Working Group has representation from Digital Engagement, LTI and Information Technology. The decisions that are made by this working group are based on their awareness of University-wide plans.

8.3. The Senior Responsible Officer at the University for the allocation of URLs is Director External Engagement, Vice-Chancellor’s Office the authority for decision making is delegated to the Chief Architect, IT and Head of Digital Services, Communications.

8.4. Digital Services maintain a list (internal link) of all current subdomains and URL stems in use across the University website in support of the Working Group and audit requirements.

9. URL and redirect requests

9.1. Any department, faculty, unit, institute or other grouping within the University that wishes to request

- a new URL stem for website content, should do so through the website request process, or via contacting Digital Services if there are any queries.
- a URL for a top-level redirect, please use the top-level redirect request form.

9.2. When making a request for a top-level redirect, be sure to indicate the rationale for the top-level redirect requested and where the redirect should resolve to.

9.3. The requests must be submitted by a member of Open University staff.

9.4. Requests will be considered on a case-by-case basis according to the following general criteria:

- Impact on integrity of overall University information architecture and technical infrastructure.
- Size and composition of target audience
- Media to be used to promote URL
- Timescales

9.5. Units wishing to use particularly generic terms in their URL must submit their requests with a clear explanation and justification no less than 2 weeks in advance of any scheduled publication date.

9.6. If the requested name is a particularly generic term or phrase or not directly associated to a unit’s name (such as for cross-unit projects), the final decision may be deferred to the Domain Working Group for sign off.
9.7. Any appeals against decisions made regarding URL requests by the Digital Services or the Domain Working Group should be addressed to the Digital Engagement mailbox, who, in turn, will forward the appeal to the Chief Architect, IT and Head of Digital Services, Communications for their consideration.

10. Considering a URL requests

10.1. If the requested name is a particularly generic term or phrase or not directly associated to a unit’s name (such as for cross-unit projects), the final decision will be deferred to the Network and Server Governance Group for sign off.

10.2. Any appeals against decisions made by the Domain Working Group should be addressed to the Digital Engagement mailbox, who, in turn, will forward the appeal to the Chief Architect, IT and Head of Digital Services, Communications for their consideration.

11. Withdrawing a URL

The following summarises conditions that may result in withdrawal of an .open.ac.uk URL stem.

11.1. Not following the above rules and conditions.

11.2. Not using the URL for the intended purpose for which it was granted.

11.3. Failure to maintain an accessible and functional website (e.g. obsolete and de-commissioned URLs where a code 404 page is consistently appearing).

11.4. Failing to ensure the website remains resistant to existing and emerging security compromises: if an .open.ac.uk website is found to be compromised by third parties, the relevant DNS administrator will be instructed to point the URL stem in question to a safe landing page while the security issues are addressed.

11.5. Failing to comply with University Digital Standards, including accessibility.

11.6. Changing the status of the organisation or project that the URL stem represents.

12. Document History

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<td>19 Sept 2016</td>
<td>Viki Keogh</td>
<td>Initial draft</td>
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<td>19 Oct 2016</td>
<td>Nicky Waters</td>
<td>Review and changes to reflect Intranet environment</td>
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<td>Caroline Jeffrey</td>
<td>Amended to reflect new intranet url standard, reflect some changes</td>
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