

Website URL Redirects - Guidelines and Recommendations

Prepared by the URL working group

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Terms

WCMS – Waterloo Content Management System, the centrally supported website creation and maintenance tool of the University of Waterloo.

Canonical URL – The proper, full URL used to access a website or page.

Purpose and Scope

Creating sites and webpages within the WCMS can result in long canonical URLs. This creates challenges promoting websites in other media. Long URLs in print publications can be hard for print designers to fit properly, are not easy to remember, and can lead to typos. Social media, such as Twitter, impose limits on the size of messages, requiring the use of URL shortener services (such as *bit.ly* and *ow.ly*).

This document outlines guidelines and recommendations for using short URLs for redirecting to websites that exist under the main University of Waterloo domain (*uwaterloo.ca*) and sites within the WCMS. The use of subdomains (*xyz.uwaterloo.ca*), since websites or webservice (e.g. Learn, Quest) can exist under these subdomains and are treated as separate entities.

Two recommendations are proposed:

1. Creating a “short-form” after the *uwaterloo.ca* domain name, which redirects to a website’s canonical URL.
2. Using *uwat.ca* as a URL shortener service for social media.

Recommendations

Short-form URL

If necessary, sites in the WCMS can have a short-form redirect, which follows after the *uwaterloo.ca* domain name. This short-form would be an abbreviation or

acronym that is typically associated with that particular organizational unit. Any additional paths that come after the short-form will also be included in the redirect.

Example

Short-form URL (in bold)	Redirects to
<i>uwaterloo.ca/ahs</i>	<i>uwaterloo.ca/applied-health-sciences</i>
Short-form URL with path	Redirects to
<i>uwaterloo.ca/ahs/fun-run</i>	<i>uwaterloo.ca/applied-health-sciences/fun-run</i>

Obtaining short-form URLs

A short-form URL is obtained by request only, since it falls under the *uwaterloo.ca* domain name. Setup is done by IST and Digital Initiatives, which will provide oversight and consulting on the use of short-form URLs. This is to avoid conflicts and keep short-form URLs meaningful, relevant, and within the best interests of the University as a whole.

Typically, only one short-form URL should be used. However, exceptions can be made depending on website needs. Note that a website's former subdomain can also be a deciding factor in determining a relevant short-form URL, and attempts will be made to be as flexible and accommodating as possible.

The [Domain Name Conflict Resolution](#)¹ process can be used if short-form URL conflicts arise.

Since any additional paths **after** the short-form URL are included in the redirect, these can be setup and controlled by the site manager, and no longer requires involvement from IST or Digital Initiatives.

Using short-form URLs

Short-form URLs should be used whenever a canonical URL is too long or does not make sense, such as providing short, easy-to-remember URLs in print publications, text-only emails and radio campaigns.

Short-form URLs should only redirect to websites within *uwaterloo.ca*. **Short-form URLs should never redirect to external websites.** If a link to an external website needs to be provided, then provide the direct link to that website instead, or create a placeholder page which then links out to the external website. This ensures consistency and trust: anyone accessing a *uwaterloo.ca* URL will always go to a *uwaterloo.ca* website.

¹ Located at <https://uwaterloo.ca/web-advisory-committee/node/182>

uwat.ca URL

The University of Waterloo has acquired *uwat.ca* specifically for use within social media. Functionality is similar to other URL shorteners such as *bit.ly* and *ow.ly*, but with the benefit of using a closer identity to the University of Waterloo.

Obtaining a uwat.ca URL

The plan is to allow any University of Waterloo staff member to request a *uwat.ca* URL, done through a web service provided by IST. However, initial access will be limited to a smaller group of authorized staff for testing and feedback purposes.

A *uwat.ca* URL is affixed with a random set of characters (e.g. *uwat.ca/c3p0*), and can be obtained instantaneously by filling out a form at the available web service.

Using uwat.ca URLs

A *uwat.ca* URL should only be used for social media such as Twitter or Facebook.

Do not use a *uwat.ca* URL for any other purpose other than social media. If a shorter URL is required outside of social media, a short-form URL should be used (as outlined above). In print media, it is very easy to confuse similar looking characters, such as zero “0” and capital letter “O”, one “1”, small case “l” and upper case “I”, which can lead to types and users being unable to access the requested page.

Since social media may require links to point to many different sites, some external to the University of Waterloo, *uwat.ca* URLs can redirect to external sites as needed.

Summary

	Short-form URL	uwat.ca URL
Example	uwaterloo.ca/ahs (Set path, relevant to the organizational unit)	uwat.ca/c3p0 (Random path)
Obtaining a URL	By request only Must be approved and setup by Digital Initiatives and IST	University of Waterloo staff ² No approval necessary
Uses	When a canonical URL is too long. Use in print publications, text-only emails, radio etc...	Social media only
Can redirect to external sites	No	Yes

² Initial rollout will limit access to a small group of staff for testing and feedback