Fast-Tracking the Transition to Online Courses

Blackboard and University of Westminster:
A sprint to prepare online courses for virtual learning

Background

University of Westminster, with 19,000 students across four campuses, is among the most highly regarded higher education institutions in the United Kingdom. Already a pioneer for innovative online learning, University of Westminster is a longtime Blackboard partner. When Blackboard announced the launch of its enhanced Learning Management System, Blackboard Learn™ with the Ultra experience (Learn Ultra), University of Westminster was an early and eager adopter to transition its existing course content to the new SaaS solution.

The Challenge

Learn Ultra's continuous release delivery model allows educators to transition online course content, with limited disruption, to students and instructors. That timetable for transition was accelerated, however, when the University was forced to make swift shifts to widespread virtual learning prior to the fall 2020 semester. As educators scrambled with the implications of a COVID-19 school year, Blackboard took on an advisory role with University leaders to guide the transition and position Westminster students and instructors for success.

> *"Westminster made a strategic decision to move all (approximately 2500) Blackboard courses to the new Learn Ultra interface, which required lecturers to create fresh content in Learn Ultra, rather than simply rolling it over,"*
>
> Gunter Saunders, Associate Director Digital Engagement at University of Westminster.

> *"We wanted to ensure all the courses were ready, in the Learn Ultra format, when students logged on the first day of school. We knew the students would love the new interface but the requirement to set up the courses came at the end of the COVID summer."*

The Solution

Due to the extraordinary circumstances that the pandemic placed on higher education institutions, a two-pronged approach to streamlining Westminster's semester readiness was required. Through the union of Blackboard's nimble solutions and tailored, hands-on consulting from the company's suite of experts, University of Westminster was able to:

* Focus on the crucial teaching and learning facets of the online course transition, instead of the technical aspects.

* Identify and prioritize immediate to-dos to prepare for a virtual school year on the new Learn Ultra platform.

* Communicate more effectively with educators across its four campuses by providing them with tailored action plans.

As Westminster educators worked to move their online content to Learn Ultra, the University needed succinct data to identify which courses were still mid-transition and allocate resources to ensure those transitions were complete before students began the school year.

"Like many institutions, we don't always have enough data experts to apply everywhere, but we urgently needed to know which courses had been set up and which were still on the 'to-do' list," continues Professor Saunders. "That's when I decided to speak to our Blackboard account manager and see if we could provide some institution-wide reporting, without involving the data team."

After consultation with the Blackboard Analytics team, Professor Saunders decided to use one of Blackboard's "Data User Story" workshops to help identify the people who needed the data, what they would want to see, and what they would do next.

The solution that seemed to most fit the requirements at Westminster was a package of consulting and customised reports, that use data from the Blackboard Data Platform, called "Rapid Online Analytics Reporting" (ROAR).

Through the ROAR engagement, the University received feedback that helped to paint a clearerpicture on how to move forward and the tools they would require to deploy those actions rapidly.

As Professor Saunders puts it, "The Blackboard consultant worked through our questions and gave us clever tricks to enable us to break down what was needed for each college." With the tailored reports in hand, Westminster was able to have more informed conversations with senior staff and course teams and better identify which Learn Ultra courses still needed attention.

The streamlined process helped not only university leadership, but instructors as well. By the end of the enhanced engagement with Blackboard, Westminster was able to start utilising some of the data within the Ultra system to drive support interventions and provide Colleges with some relevant information about the migration of content to Ultra.

"With so much going on at the start of the academic year – especially this year – the directors were pleased to obtain clear data that helped them have the right communications and target resources," says Professor Saunders.

What's Next for Blackboard and University of Westminster

As online learning evolves throughout the pandemic, Westminster plans to continue acquiring enhanced reporting from Blackboard to apply to teaching and learning best practices. For example, Professor Saunders adds, "Blackboard Collaborate has been incredible for helping us quickly move lectures and seminars into an interactive, but virtual, mode. We want to support colleagues by better understanding which online activities they will continue to use, once they are able to go back to a blended mix of online and face to face teaching."

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