Elearning in the University of Queensland

Simon Collyer Bio
Simon Collyer manages Central eLearning Systems and Support at The University of Queensland. Simon also conducts research into management for dynamic environments and presents at conferences on topics relating to technology adoption and strategies for managing rapid technology change. He is the author of Managing Amidst Rapid Change - Management Approaches for Dynamic Environments.

Tell us about your experience of Blackboard at The University of Queensland. What are your tips for facilitating eLearning system adoption?

The University of Queensland adopted the Blackboard Learning Management System (LMS) in 2004. Because we have had an LMS for more than a decade now we have achieved relatively broad adoption, but there is more to go. We teach about 1,650 courses each semester and every course has a presence in the LMS. We also have 250 rooms with automatic lecture recording equipment so students can revise the lectures online through Blackboard. Assignments are submitted online, and more than 60% are also marked online by the instructor.

My first tip is to decide and share a clear teaching 'vision' that explains what type of university you will be and the general teaching style. The vision is important because it informs all other decisions about teaching from assessment types to room layouts and teacher training.

The vision should for instance explain which part of Blooms taxonomy you will emphasise. For instance, some education systems may be happy with raw accumulation of knowledge (rote learning), while others may spend a little more time helping students practice applying knowledge to make them more ready for employment. A research focused University may spend more time helping students acquire the skills required to generate new knowledge, so their students can solve problems for their employers in a changing world. Other tips include:
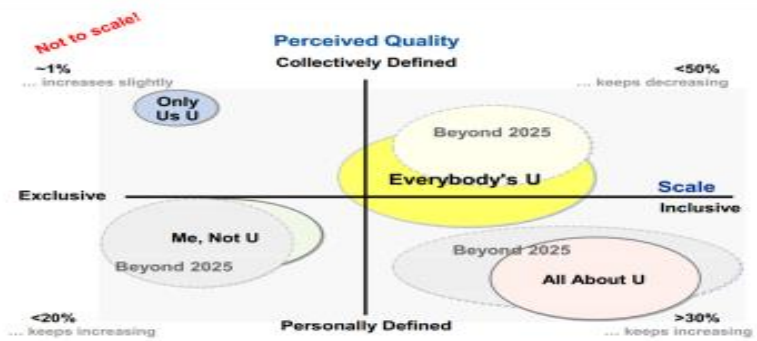
·   Understand motivation. Spend some time talking to faculty staff who did adopt a technology. Ask them why they did it, and then use that motivation to encourage other staff to adopt technology. Also think about what time pressures your staff have and whether there are enough factors that motivate them to adopt eLearning practices?

·   Establish a minimum course design policy (e.g. 'Every course much have a presence in Blackboard by yday one of semester, including announcements, and learning materials, and lecture recordings etc.);

·   Run an active awareness building campaign to make sure your faculty know what is possible and what eLearning tools available. We had assumed our initial adoption problem was because the academics did not like the tools, but then discovered that busy academics were simply unaware of the tools, and when they tried them they liked them. We started visiting all the school meetings to talk about the most useful capabilities. We focused on tools that other schools had adopted with proven success. Apart from the very small minimum presence policy we try not to tell instructors what they should use, but we do spend a lot of time telling them what they can use, and what has worked for other instructors. We let them use their professional judgement but if the technology saves them time, or improves learning outcomes, they are usually keen to adopt the technology. Recently we have built 'recommended' course design practices to help

instructors that want a quick guide on what to do. This also gives the University a kind of steering wheel to use when required to meet the expectations of students, or to meet quality requirements, or just impact the flavour of teaching at UQ. Occasionally at school or faculty level they also make executive decisions to adopt technologies e.g. all assignments will be submitted online, or marked online.

·   Document case studies of where eLearning technology has been used and been successful. Lecturers will often not take advice from a technology vendor, or an IT person, but they will listen to a teaching 'peer' that has used a tool with successes. We call this peer referencing and we do everything we can to help this happen. We do video interviews with academics on their experience using tools, and then share these interviews widely and frequently.

·   Newsletters – talking about the technologies

Jan-Martin Lowendahl at Gartner wrote an excellent paper explaining the different types of University and their futures. See Lowendahl, J.-M. and M. Harris (2009). "Four 'Business Model' Scenarios for Higher Education: An Introduction to Strategic Planning Through Storytelling." Gartner (G00167364).

Different Technology for Different Models

Not to scale!

Perceived Quality
Collectively Defined

~1%
... increases slightly

<50%
... keeps decreasing

Only Us U

Beyond 2025

Everybody's U

Exclusive

Scale
Inclusive

Me, Not U
Beyond 2025

Beyond 2025
All About U

<20%
... keeps increasing

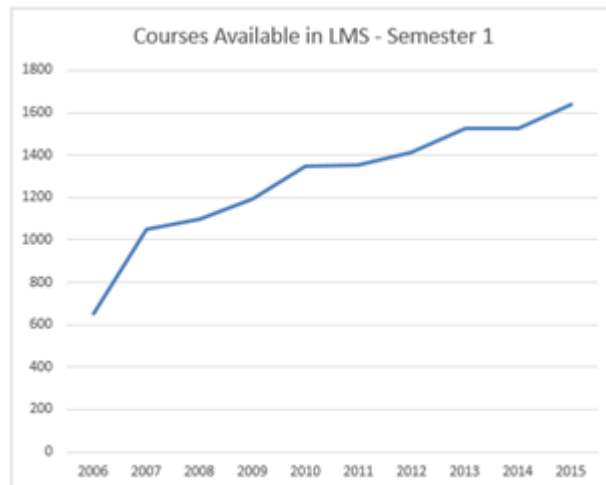Personally Defined

>30%
... keeps increasing

Source: Gartner (April 2014)

Lowendahl, J.-M. (2014).
Predictions for the Higher Education 'Business Model' Landscape in 2025 and Beyond Will Help CIOs Plan Now.
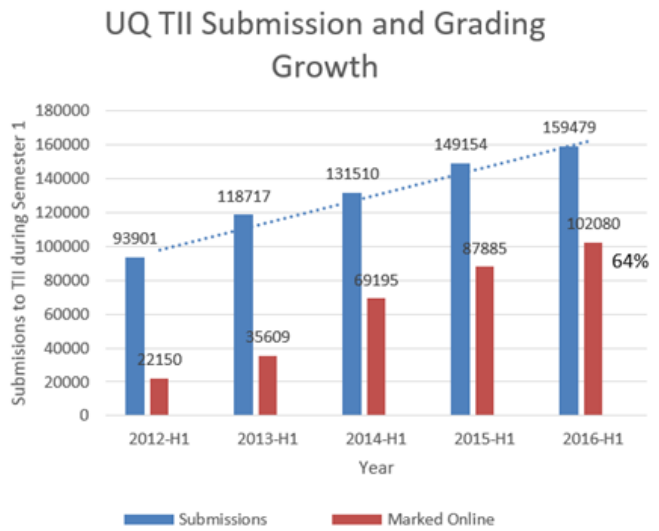Gartner Research (G00262153).
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THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND
AUSTRALIA
Create change
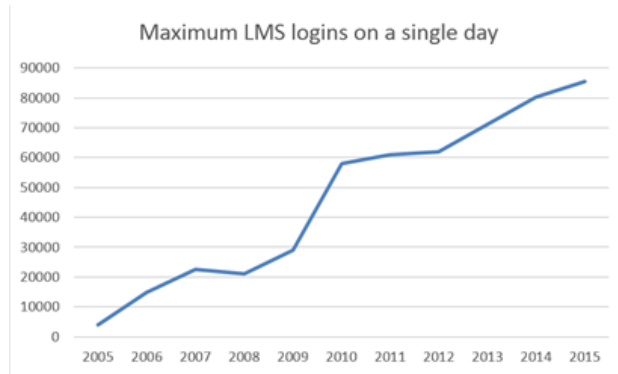
Yearly growth in daily student logins to the UQ LMS

Yearly growth in first semester courses available in the UQ LMS

Yearly growth in online assignment submission and online marking at UQ
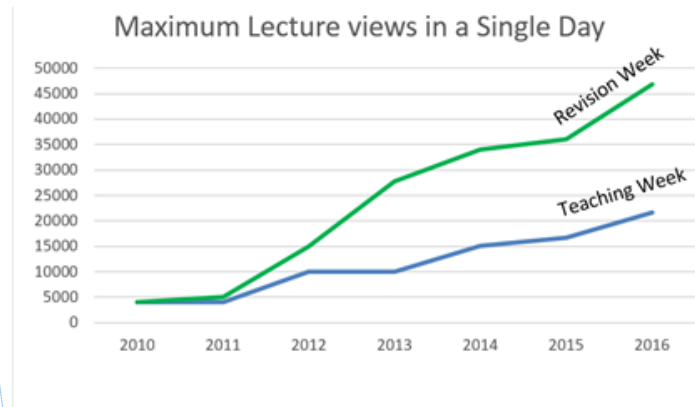
Figure - Yearly growth in student views of recorded lectures at UQ

How long have you used BB?
We adopted Blackboard in 2004.

Is there a gathering or group of universities or university education institutions in Australia channel to adopt a unified LMS or solve their issues?
There isn't really a push for a unified LMS in Australia, unless you count our participation in edX. The LMS market is changing rapidly and new vendors are emerging regularly with new and powerful learning technologies. Many of these technologies can be plugged into an LMS using the LTI standard. Our focus is not so much about choosing the "right" LMS because all LMS's are turning into what I would call a portal to external tools that connect using the LTI standard (Learning Tools Interoperability).

In Australia Universities are free to adopt any LMS that suites their needs. Early adopters mostly chose to use Blackboard and then there was a period of Moodle adoption and more recently a few have gone Canvas. I think Blackboard and Moodle account for roughly 80% of the market in higher education.

In terms of collaboration though, we have many groups including ABUG (Australian Blackboard user group) ACODE (The Australian Council of Distance Education) and ASCILITE (Computer Assisted Learning in Tertiary Education) and EDUCAUSE.

After this experience; what the best manner to engage (faculties member, schools and students) to build great eLearning environment?
Decide on a single LMS do students get a consistent experience and so your support units can be more efficient (supporting a single LMS). This allows you to have much better training and support and a much better student experience. Start with an Off the Shelf (COTS) LMS rather than a custom building a "bespoke" LMS. In COTS tools have much better economies of scale allowing them to deliver more functionality faster and cheaper than other models. Consider a cloud hosted LMS like Blackboard SaaS. For adoption – use the techniques above under 'core tips' above.

How does UQ address faculty members that may not have good digital literacy skills.
·   We provide digital literacy courses.
·   Advertise and offer a private (in office) tuition on use of the LMS. Respected older professors often have poor digital literacy skills and a simply embarrassed or nervous about technology and that is sometimes expressed as opposition to eLearning. These professors will be reluctant to expose themselves in face to face eLearning training in a large class. Offer a service where your staff will come to their office and help them set up key eLearning tools for their course.
·   Have a team of learning designers that help them do the basics;
·   Establish a 'minimum presence' policy that requires certain basic tools be used, and make sure the head of school polices this.
·   Survey the students on what they find useful and use the results to drive the policy.
In Australia students are extremely keen for Universities to use eLearning tools as they help with revision and flexible learning.
·   Write case studies showing their peers (colleagues) having great success using eLearning tools, because lecturers will not trust a vendor or an IT people or even the university's central administration, but they will trust their friend down the hallway that

talks about how great it has been to use eLearning. We do video interviews and email them to all staff.

· Reassure everyone through the vision that the face to face experience is still important not going to be replaced, and that by putting some things online you can have: a) better face to face experiences, and 2) more time to spend with the students and on research.

What challenges do you encounter running the LMS at UQ?

· The number one challenge is helping everyone understand that implementing an LMS represents a 'once in a generation' change that won't happen by itself. The university needs to provide support services and motivation to help instructors get through that change.

· Another challenge is the realisation that learning is now a global market. This means there are very large numbers of new eLearning technologies raining down. Universities have to get busy evaluating and implementing these technologies or they will fall behind. The other impact of globalisation is that learning content will be cheaper and better to buy than to build. This means we have to train our professors how to scan for and use and in many cases buy eLearning content. In the past students were told to buy a book, but in the future the school will negotiate with the publisher to provide a customised electronic version of the book to students, along with other publisher learning tools like adaptive quizzes and lab simulations.

· The last challenge is the number of competing pure online degrees available to students. Students have the option to study a degree at a foreign university, sometimes with very good reputations. Local universities need to consider how they will compete with this. They can for instance provide physical value in the form of face-to-face teaching, with cultural experienced, social experiences, sports, and a pleasant study environment.

Who pays for eLearning at UQ (fees – backers –government)?

At UQ we get some money from the government per student and some money from the students. The university then makes its own decision about what to spend that on. There are federal government standards but they are very high level (e.g. 'the student should have a suitable online learning environment').

Does UQ use eLearning analytics to inform decision and improve learning outcomes?

At UQ we collect very large amounts of student activity data and experimenting with different ways to use that to inform decisions and improve learning outcomes, and improve student retention. For instance, one system shows the student how they are progressing through the course, and how they compare to other students.

How does instructional design work at UQ and what the most significant challenges?

UQ uses a set process to design new courses and this includes eLearning considerations. The most significant challenge is that eLearning technology changes much faster than the frequency of courses re-design.

Do you plan to use cloud services?

Our Turnitin assignment management and marking system is already in the cloud. We also have a timeline to move the remaining services to the cloud over the next two years. We believe the vendor should be able to keep pace with functionality developments better in the cloud if they are not wasting time supporting thousands of on-premise clients.

How to you ensure quality in your eLearning Systems?

The main tool is the SECAT (Student Evaluation of Course and Teacher). For every course every student is surveyed at the end of the course to find out what they thought. The results

are available to the instructor, the head of school and support units. Support teams monitor the quality of eLearning services and publish system performance for everyone to see. We are transparent about how many requests we get, our response time, and system availability.

How do you assist logistically faculty's member, schools and students to solve their difficulties and problems?

We do surveys and ask them specifically what are their biggest teaching problems, and we also ask the students what they want, and finally we think about what is good for the university and its strategy and its remit. We use the results to decide on a set list of scalable "solutions" we provide. We do not try to solve every little problem or idea that faculty members have. We only focus on solutions that will have the biggest broadest impact.

We have a well staffed support desk that faculty can contact, along with hundreds of online guides, and we run regular face to face training sessions, and offer custom training sessions with the schools on demand.

How can you deal with technical problems encountered on Blackboard.

Of course we warn the staff and the vendor, and try to find what we call 'work-arounds'. We push the idea that while Blackboard does have some limitations, there are many ways it can be used very successfully. I myself completed a very effective 100% online degree with a very old version of Blackboard, so when people say the more modern version of Blackboard can't be used I know they are completely wrong. There are universities all over the world winning awards for teaching using very standard old versions of Blackboard so we work around the technical problems and focus on pushing broad adoption. Sometimes people will make a noise about how we need to invest a lot of time and money to fix a small technical problem before we move forward, but we say investing time and money in supporting academics broadly learn about and adopt the eLearning tools is far more important. The tools work well enough. If they are not being used then communication is your biggest problem.

Are there clear policies at the university including a vision and mission?

Yes we recently established a [Student Strategy](#) that talks about active learning and giving students knowledge building skills.

What is the eLearning governance structure.

The Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) is ultimately in charge of eLearning. They have a Pro Vice Chancellor (Teaching and Learning) that runs the [Institute for Teaching and Learning Innovation](#) that provides pedagogical support. The PVC's budget includes money to pay IT services to run the Blackboard system and provide staff training and support. The Library provides support for students. There is an eLearning Designers Forum, an eLearning Operational Forum (to coordinator the support groups) and an eLearning strategy committee.

In Australia which LMS the most popular in higher educational institutions

Early adopters generally have Blackboard (40%) with late adopters more often going Moodle (40%) – I think because of political decisions and perceptions of cost, and more recently a few have adopted CANVAS (5%) or other systems.

What your opinion of Blackboard?

I think Blackboard is good enough that there are much more important things to worry about like improving the digital literacy skills of the faculty staff, and providing services that help them deal with all the new eLearning technology. I don't think there is really any LMS that's more than 5% better than any other. The important thing is the LMS supports LTI so you can plug in the extra functionality you need (which Blackboard does). When Blackboard goes

SaaS and delivers more functionality, I think we will see it regrow market share, but soon the LMS is going to be just a portal to external LTI tools, so it's a big waste of time and productivity to worry about which LMS you have.

Is there any tendency to adopt open source systems like Canvas and edX in Australia.
Yes Moodle and Canvas might account for more than 50% of the market here. My own University is a member of EdX and we have been running courses on it for a few years. While my university supports open source and open access to research and learning, its not always useful to have strict rules about always using open source or not. Commercial vendors can offer value for money that is not available through bespoke development.

- https://www.elearning.uq.edu.au/