Lessons learnt from a university LMS transformation: the good, the bad and the ugly

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In a changing Higher Education landscape, universities are increasingly under pressure to implement transformative learning experiences, leveraging advances in technology and increasing flexibility in the curriculum. This paper discusses the process by which our University transitioned from one Learning Management System to another, and the impact of this transformation. This impact is viewed across the College of Science, Engineering & Health learning and teaching strategies and the student experience, our planning and staff capability development. The complexities and lessons learnt from this process are identified in an attempt to reflect on the LMS transformation as a broader catalyst for change.

The Higher Education landscape is undergoing dramatic changes in recent decades. In an increasingly competitive market, there is a greater need to deliver high quality learning experiences, which are cognizant of the various demands on students. Online and blended learning have become popular modes to fulfil the need to deliver flexible learning experiences. When considering these modes, the experiences of students in various learning spaces becomes a focus of study. Amongst the many learning spaces, in face to face and online contexts, our focus for this paper is on the Learning Management System as the key driver for content design, development and delivery to 21st century learners. In particular, this paper discusses our University's replacement and transition of our existing Learning Management System (LMS) with a new LMS, Canvas.

Aligned with RMIT University's Strategic Plan, the implementation of Canvas provided opportunities to create student centric learning and teaching experiences. It also created the need for extensive training and a deep dive into institutional strategies for staff capability development. The complexities that arose from this transition are discussed here, with a view to understanding the lessons learnt and reflecting on the process as a catalyst for broader change across our College (Science, Engineering & Health) and university.

LMS transition

Preliminary work for the LMS transfer began in 2017, with the target of all existing courses transferred to Canvas in time for appropriate delivery in Semester 1 2018. Details of the number of courses involved in the rollout, early adopters and semester live courses breakdowns are provided in Figure 1.

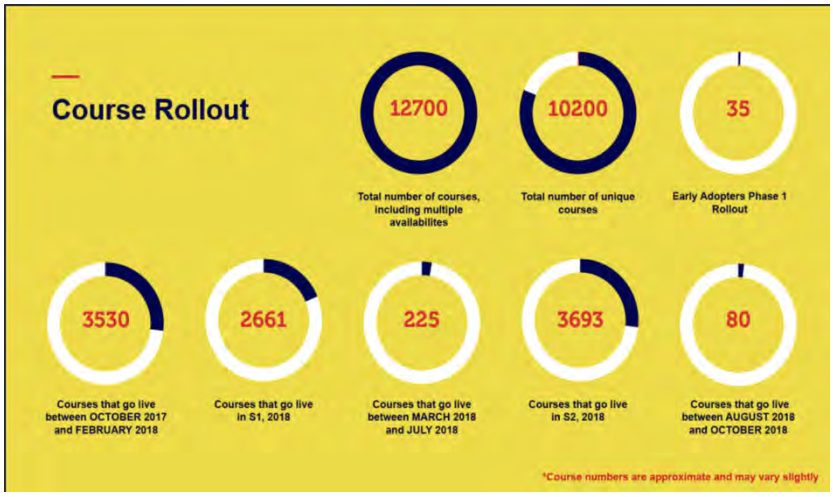


Figure 1: Course rollout across the university.

Key stages and tasks were identified from the central Project team in the early stages, to ensure a smooth transition across the Colleges in the university. In our College, this process began with the identification of all courses being delivered in 2018, both onshore and offshore. 4 LMS Project Officers were allocated and inducted into each School (Science, Engineering, Health and Vocational Education) in the College to monitor staff engagement, apply templates and setups for staff to commence work on the quality assurance requirements.

Quality assurance

All courses in Canvas were required to meet the quality assurance standards before going live. These "14 Elements to Canvas Success" were built using components of the Digital Learning and Teaching Framework Threshold Standards (2017) that are based on the principles of connected, clear, aligned, inclusive, and consistent learning experiences in our courses. These Standards were translated into the "look and feel" in Canvas, which allowed the LMS Project Officers, course coordinators and lecturers to create courses that met the university aspirations. These Elements included: providing consistent information and banners, introductory course announcements and welcome messages (video), teaching team details, Canvas functionality and identifying the course as fully online, blended or largely face to face, course schedule, navigation panes, copyright and active links, assessment information and submission requirements and finally, university branding. This use of consistent formatting, banners, naming conventions and placeholders ensures that students are encased in a "web of consistency" (Biggs, 1999).

Capability development

An essential aspect of this LMS transition was to identify, plan and deliver professional development workshops along with online resources to build staff capability, an essential aspect in the development of skills and confidence. An allocation of hours in work plans for teaching staff to meet the 14 Elements was provided. The central Project team training was supplemented by the work of our College Learning Enhancement team, who designed and facilitated Canvas self-help resources and workshops, designed College templates and banners, Program shells and provided video assistance for recording welcome videos. The Professional Development Plan provided by the central Project team to support staff in meeting the 14 Elements included:

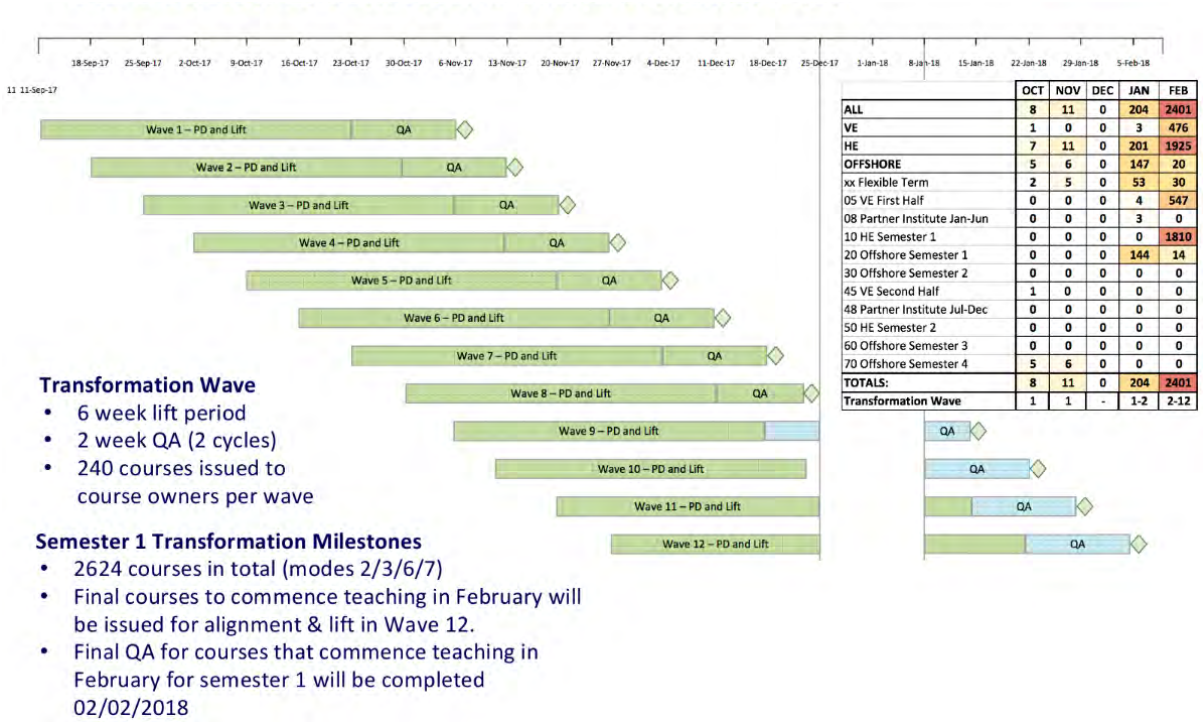
- F2F workshops for course coordinators (Canvas for Course Coordinators)
- F2F workshops for all teaching staff (Canvas Essentials)
- Drop In Support - at elbow support to answer queries and solve issues.

Critical to this work was the support provided to the course coordinators for courses that the central Project team identified as not meeting the 14 Elements to ensure courses go live for semester delivery.

Complexities and lesson learnt

The initial aspiration of the university central Project team was not to just "move and dump" content from the old LMS into Canvas. The aim was to align courses to the university Digital Learning and Teaching Framework, with academics working closely with the LMS Project Officers to ensure their courses aligned with the Framework. A pilot of early adopters trialled this model for delivery of their courses in Semester 2 2017. The detailed alignment to the Framework proved very time consuming and it became evident that it would be difficult to deliver all courses via this model in the scope of a 12-month project. The central Project team then focussed on the 14 Elements which aimed for a consistent student experience across all Canvas sites.

The LMS Project Officers initially moved the content from the old LMS to Canvas for staff and applied the template to their courses. This also proved extremely time consuming for the volume of work required in a short period of time. This process was eventually outsourced to an overseas third-party provider. The central Project team then developed a staged process of "waves". Staff were randomly allocated to a wave, unless a request was made for early access to a course (Figure 2).



	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB
ALL	8	11	0	204	2401
VE	1	0	0	3	476
HE	7	11	0	201	1925
OFFSHORE	5	6	0	147	20
xx Flexible Term	2	5	0	53	30
05 VE First Half	0	0	0	4	547
08 Partner Institute Jan-Jun	0	0	0	3	0
10 HE Semester 1	0	0	0	0	1810
20 Offshore Semester 1	0	0	0	144	14
30 Offshore Semester 2	0	0	0	0	0
45 VE Second Half	1	0	0	0	0
48 Partner Institute Jul-Dec	0	0	0	0	0
50 HE Semester 2	0	0	0	0	0
60 Offshore Semester 3	0	0	0	0	0
70 Offshore Semester 4	5	6	0	0	0
TOTALS:	8	11	0	204	2401
Transformation Wave	1	1	-	1-2	2-12

Figure 2: Semester 1 Transformation Plan - 12 transformation waves

Once a course was released to a staff member they were allocated six weeks to work on the course and meet the 14 Elements, the course would then be QA'd by an LMS Project Officer and the course coordinator would be notified whether it passed or not. This allocation of courses to waves did not take into account staff on leave, staffing changes (including change of course coordinator), busy academic periods such as assessments and exams. In addition, a high proportion of sessional teachers were course coordinators and their contracts finished at the end of their teaching period, thereby not being available until the week prior to the start of semester to work on their course sites. These compounding issues eventually led to little or no staff engagement with the "wave" process. In our College there was mounting concern that we would not have any courses ready for Semester 1 to pass QA and go live. To counter this our Learning Enhancement team ran a number of workshops and drop-in sessions at our Schools to support staff through the QA process. These ran in conjunction with the central Project team Professional Development and QA sessions.

30 drop-in sessions were held across the two College campuses (City campus and Bundoora campus) in January and February 2018 to ensure 1200+ courses were ready for delivery by Semester 1. For staff unable to attend a drop-in session, a Google form was created enabling staff to complete a self-check, with links to quick guides to assist staff in meeting the 14 elements, and then submit for QA offline. Over 350 QAs were achieved during these sessions and by the use of the self-check form. This validated the role of local educational developers as vital to the uptake and creative use of educational technologies in multiple learning contexts (Oliver, 2005; Woodley, Funk & Curran, 2013).

The College Learning Enhancement team also developed and delivered workshops that focussed on the pedagogical use of Canvas. The College of Science, Engineering & Health instructional site for teaching and educational resources (our blog) provided staff with resources for this. Monthly updates were provided to each School (within our College) Learning & Teaching committee. However due to the tight timeframes and deadlines, this work became secondary to the completion of course transfer in time for semester delivery. However, in conversations with staff, we found that their main focus was their content, rather than the Project requirement of meeting the 14 Elements. This tension often points to a conflation between the pedagogical use of technology (Willis & Bowles 2009) and the use of technology for technology's sake, an "upside-down" (Gibbs & Gosper, 2006) approach, with the tools rather than curriculum innovation driving change. Upon reflection, this tension can be eased with staff development on the potential for enhanced learning and teaching (Mishra & Koehler 2006), away from traditional transmission models (Toohey 1999) by creating targeted activities, focused on blending face to face teaching and learning with one or more types of technology.

Garrison and Vaughan (2008) refer to this combination as a "thoughtful infusion", and Torrisi-Steele (2011) calls it "harmonious integration". Perhaps this thoughtful infusion can occur once the initial process of content transfer takes place and staff can begin the work of quality uplift of resources created in Canvas. Certainly, there is much more work to be completed in this area, a consideration that has been taken into account by the release of the University's next "6 Elements" of Canvas Uplift which focus on quality uplift of resources.

On a positive note, the use of LMS Project officers embedded in the Schools has largely proved to be advantageous in alleviating staff anxiety around the transition and encouraging engagement thorough localised support. This support, supplemented by our Learning Enhancement team, has provided dual levels of access to training and resources. This has ranged from support provided for the creation of welcome videos to accessing new LTIs for Canvas and building engagement with third-party web tools to enhance interactivity. Driving this change and support at the localised and diverse context of our College, has allowed the central Project work to be contextualised.

An interesting consequence of this LMS transition has been the creation of communities of practice (Wenger, 1999) to share resources and collaborate on problem solving and improving the current state of our online environments. Supporting this articulation of pedagogical strategies and providing avenues for meaningful connections became part of our work in the College. For example, specialised staff in one of our Schools formed their own community of practice, supporting and assisting each other to solve issues in Canvas and write backend code and scripts to extend functionality. Staff then share this with our College Learning Enhancement team who in turn publish on our Learning & Teaching blog. "Spotlight on Canvas" workshop sessions were also held, which provided staff with an opportunity to view peer examples and exemplars of practice. This driving of continuous improvements from the staff has provided us with insights into the transformation process itself.

Ultimately, the success of any such large-scale transformation process depends on the institution's appetite for change. In the case of our university, the bold LMS transition has provided us with opportunities to shift embedded practice, address staff capacity and reflect on the overall cultural shift that such a process can begin. Only time will tell how this change is sustained and transformative.

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