

Transforming Teaching, Learning, and Collaboration Using Blackboard at University of the West of England Bristol

As part of the university's digital transformation, UWE Bristol executed a thoughtful and meticulous rollout of Blackboard.



The University of the West of England Bristol (known as UWE Bristol) is a modern research institution, focused on preparing learners to solve the global problems of the future. The university awards a wide range of both undergraduate and graduate degrees across its three colleges: the College of Arts, Technology, and Environment; the College of Health, Science, and Society; and the College of Business and Law.

INSTITUTION TYPE:

FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC

LOCATION:

BRISTOL, UNITED KINGDOM

POPULATION:

36,000+

ANTHOLOGY SOLUTIONS:

BLACKBOARD
ANTHOLOGY ALLY
ANTHOLOGY IMPLEMENTATION
ADOPTION SERVICES



The Challenge

Meeting the Future Demands of Teaching and Learning

Like many universities, in an age where the student experience is key, UWE Bristol knew that it needed to undergo a digital learning transformation to prepare the institution for the future.

The decision was informed by a combination of technological necessity, user feedback, and a strategic vision for a more modern, consistent, and collaborative learning environment. The move also aligned with broader institutional goals around digital transformation and data-informed decision-making.

And, of course, providing students with an improved and innovative virtual learning environment (VLE) was paramount for the team.

“The importance for us is around the student experience,” said Sam Crowley, digital capability and future skills lead at UWE. “It’s not just about implementing a new system but making things better...it’s an improvement for [students].” As a result, the decision was made to transition from the original to Ultra instance of Blackboard®.

“All institutions have an overarching commitment to create spaces that are engaging, accessible, and future ready. But there exists also a layer of ensuring that what we provide within our digital spaces isn’t fragmented, is consistent, of a high level, and that learning design has been properly thought about.”



Clay Johnson

Digital Learning Manager, College of Business and Law,
University of the West of England Bristol



The Solution

Strategic Communication and Building Buy In

The team was tasked with executing the transition to Blackboard Ultra and started by identifying a handful of programs that could become “early adopters” of Blackboard. This allowed the team to ensure they were meeting the needs of both students and faculty, in addition to identifying any potential issues that arose before rolling it out to the whole university.

This strategy also galvanized other programs and colleges to want to jump right in. “Our new online offering provided the perfect opportunity to take that Ultra offering and get it going, and that built the momentum for the rest of the university, really,” said Kevin Lowman, head of development for learning and research at UWE Bristol.

The UWE Bristol team knew that communication was the absolute key to the transition. “I challenge anyone who says they didn’t hear about Blackboard Ultra, because they did,” Crowley said, laughing. Training sessions and retreats were offered to faculty to empower them to set up their courses in the new instance of Blackboard and ensure they were comfortable using it, which were very well attended. “If you look at the amount of engagement at all of the sessions that we provided over the year, the feedback that we’ve been getting from the staff is absolutely an endorsement of the fact that we went down the right path in terms of communication,” said Clay Johnson, digital learning manager for the College of Business and Law.

Another important and effective strategy that the team used was to engage students in multiple ways throughout the transition process to ensure that the VLE was optimized for the needs of UWE Bristol’s learners. One was to survey a group of students to better understand





what they wanted and needed out of their VLE. But they also involved students in the process by giving them the opportunity to train faculty directly and give them feedback on their courses. These “student navigators” can be booked by faculty members for a 30-minute session in which they can get insights on the design of their course modules directly from a student’s perspective, to ensure they are providing the best learning experience possible. The students also helped by developing an asynchronous course, short video, and step-by-step guides.

“It’s a group of students that Sam manages, and they’re paid,” Johnson said. “There’s now buy in to the validity and importance of engaging students, not just in terms of their own development and employability skills, but that our students now are in charge of peer-to-peer learning...and also students are involved with coaching and training for our academic staff.”

“We had the students developing the student [training] materials as well,” Crowley added. “They scripted a video and recorded that video. So the video is for students, by students.”

UWE Bristol also cited their partnership with [Anthology’s Implementation and Adoption Services](#) as crucial to the success of their VLE migration. “It really was getting us started, getting us pointed in the right direction,”

Lowman said. “What to worry about, and what not to worry about, because we can get caught up in all these different things...I think that’s where [Anthology Services] helped us confirm our thinking.”

“There was clearly a demonstration and a deep insight shown into both the technical and the pedagogical aspects of the platform and what it was going to provide,” Johnson added of working with implementation services. “The importance of being able to listen, to help us adapt and to help us co-create; and all of that was grounded in experience from within the sector and other institutions’ experiences.”

“This didn’t feel like a consultancy...it felt more like a partnership.”



Clay Johnson

*Digital Learning Manager, College of Business and Law,
University of the West of England Bristol*



**Insights
Delivered**

Not Just a New VLE, But a New Approach to Pedagogy

UWE Bristol’s goal was to have Blackboard rolled out for the whole institution by September 2025, and the team was able to meet that goal. But not only has the migration been completed successfully, the innovative tools and user experience in Blackboard have allowed faculty to reimagine and improve their courses and teaching. “A lot of the things we’ve put in place have inspired [faculty] to not just take their materials and swap them over, but to actually consider their learning experience for their students,” Crowley said. “And that’s what the focus of this has been. I think it’s not a movement to a different piece of software, it’s how can we improve what you’re giving the students.”

UWE Bristol is also looking to make more use of **Anthology® Ally** moving forward and advance the culture of accessibility at the institution. “Every training session we’ve done where we’ve talked about Blackboard Ultra, we’ve been able to say, do you know about Ally, have you seen it?” Crowley said. “I think we’ve still got a way to go, so we’re taking part in the **Anthology Fix Your Content Day**...we hope that as a result of that, we’ll see even more uptake.”

And the Digital Learning Team's work has not only been noticed and appreciated by university leadership, but the team have been nominated for eight staff awards this year. This really demonstrates that the project supported the needs of the staff and students and will allow the team to continue to influence the digital learning experience at UWE Bristol.

"We are busy now working on principles around learning design and how that plugs into our deployment of digital tools within the organization," said Johnson.

Anthology was proud to recognize the UWE Bristol team with an award in the category of Leading Change at the 2025 **Catalyst Awards**. This award recognizes institutions at the forefront of educational innovation, those who have used Anthology solutions to implement transformational initiatives that generate change on campus and in their academic ecosystems, with measurable results. "Just to be recognized on that level is phenomenal," Johnson said. "It gave us validation. It gave us a sense of endorsement. It gave us an opportunity to be galvanized."

"Once [faculty] saw the opportunities in Blackboard Ultra, they then started to get quite energized and excited about it and realized they could do things differently."



Sam Crowley

Digital Capability and Future Skills Lead, University of the West of England Bristol

 **Epilogue**

We are so thankful to Sam Crowley, Clay Johnson, and Kevin Lowman for taking the time to speak with us about UWE Bristol's incredible digital transformation, and to the entire Digital Learning Team for the wonderful work they are doing on behalf of students, faculty, and staff. We can't wait to see how they continue to innovate in teaching and learning!



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Product highlighted in this customer case study:

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