



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH



# The Learn Ultra Upgrade Project Evaluation Report



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# Executive Summary

## Overview

- The University of Edinburgh's Learn Ultra upgrade aimed to enhance the virtual learning environment (VLE) to better support the diverse student body and align with other strategic initiatives and objectives.
- The Learn platform hosts over 6,000 courses with an average of 39,000 daily logins from students engaged in on-campus, online, and hybrid studies.
- The Learn Ultra upgrade project oversaw the successful upgrade of the University's VLE from Learn Original to Learn Ultra. It focused on improving usability and accessibility based on feedback from students and faculty, aiming to create a more user-friendly and inclusive learning environment.
- This report presents an evaluation of the key decisions made by the central Project Team that have led to the successful delivery of the upgrade project.
- The evaluation combines qualitative and quantitative data sources to provide a comprehensive analysis of the delivery of the Learn Ultra upgrade project:
  1. A campus-wide student survey that gathered responses from 391 undergraduate students on their experiences with Learn Ultra.
  2. Semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including senior stakeholders, learning technologists, teaching office staff, academic colleagues, and relationship managers.
  3. Focus groups with the project's implementation and user groups.
  4. Profession-specific focus groups with learning technologists, teaching office staff, and academic colleagues.
  5. Secondary analysis of existing data sources, including user experience (UX) data, Early Adopter feedback, training feedback, and internal project reports.
- The evaluation identifies eight key overarching decisions made by the Project Team that have led to the success delivery:
  1. Upgrading the existing VLE, rather than procuring a new provider.
  2. Treating the upgrade as a Change project.
  3. Implementing a pluralistic governance framework.
  4. Extensive multimodal communications and engagement.
  5. Establishing the Early Adopter Programme.
  6. Creating an extensive training programme.
  7. Focusing on a user-centred upgrade approach.
  8. Enhanced focus on accessibility.
- Additionally, the evaluation identifies three themes that were found to be important to successful local upgrades:



1. Pro-active local Change approaches and project ownership.
2. Effective relationship-building and collaboration.
3. Tailored local training and ongoing support.

#### Attention to recommendations for large change projects

In the time that this evaluation has been written, the university has received other external reviews of large change projects.

The Information Services Group (ISG) was keen to build on recommendations produced by the People and Money (P&M) evaluation<sup>1</sup>; while P&M and the Learn Ultra upgrade differed greatly in their topics and scope, the P&M evaluation produced important recommendations for all University Change projects, including:

- *Building trust and collaboration*: Build trust with Colleges, Schools, Directorates, and other staff groups to foster a more collaborative environment.
- *Enhancing Change Management*: Continue and enhance focus on Change management, rather than approach projects as mere system implementations.
- *Effective Engagement*: Develop an approach for effective engagement with users, utilising representatives from various staff groups.
- *Sufficient Training*: Develop intuitive and informative training materials, and deliver training through dedicated sessions.
- *Reciprocal Communication*: Implement a communications plan for regular and effective stakeholder communication. Additionally, adopt a "you said, we did" approach to address feedback and demonstrate responsiveness, and regularly communicate progress and plans transparently.
- *Developing a Unified Roadmap*: Consolidate all plans (e.g., short-term, medium-term, long-term), into a single integrated roadmap, ensuring the roadmap provides clear milestones and deliverable dates to instil confidence in leadership, governance groups, and the wider organisation.
- *Quick Wins for Building Confidence*: Identify areas where substantial improvements can be made quickly to demonstrate progress and build confidence in the change process.
- *Defined Governance Structure*: Clearly outline the overall governance structure, specifying where decisions are made and how they are communicated.

#### Upgrading the existing VLE, rather than procuring a new provider.

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<sup>1</sup> [External Post Implementation Review of the People and Money Programme](#)



- The upgrade was aligned with Strategy 2030, supporting the University's strategic goal of enhancing the student experience, placing student needs and expectations at the forefront of educational technology development.
- Upgrading from Learn Original to Learn Ultra was necessary to maintain secure and robust integrations with existing online systems.
- A focussed market analysis concluded that there was no alternative VLE that could better meet the University's needs within the required timeframe. The merger between Blackboard and Anthology also promised an improved EdTech ecosystem.
- Upgrading to Learn Ultra minimised business continuity risks and avoided the significant costs and disruptions associated with switching to a new provider.
- The established working relationship with Blackboard also facilitated a smoother transition.

#### Approaching the upgrade as a Change project.

The Project Team approached the Learn Ultra upgrade as a Change project, emphasising stakeholder buy-in and enhanced change management:

- The project was guided by established change theory, specifically John Kotter's eight-step model for organisational transformation, which includes: creating urgency, forming a guiding coalition, developing a vision, communicating the vision, empowering action, generating short-term wins, consolidating gains, and anchoring new approaches in the culture.
- A Change approach focuses on managing resistance, engaging stakeholders, ensuring effective communication, aligning with broader goals, and promoting continuous improvement rather than seeing the project as a one-time upgrade.
- This approach encouraged involvement from colleagues from across the University, fostering buy-in and addressing concerns more effectively, ensuring a smoother transition.
- Robust communication strategies were employed to address concerns and facilitate a smoother transition, ensuring stakeholders were well-informed and engaged throughout the process.

#### Implementing a pluralistic governance framework.

- The project benefitted from a *Defined Governance Structure*: A Project Board was established to make key strategic decisions and supervise the overall progress of the upgrade.
- The Learning and Teaching Implementation Group (LTIG) provided guidance on issues relating to learning and teaching, representing learning technologists. Some academic colleagues were also members.
- The Technical Implementation Group (TIG) ensured all integrations worked well and liaised with Blackboard on software developments.



- The Academic User Group (AUG) represented the views of academic colleagues.
- The Professional Services User Group (PSUG) represented professional services stakeholders' interests during the project.
- Focus groups conducted with the implementation and user groups identified the key reasons that members thought their groups contributed to the project's overall success:
  1. Group meetings were good networking opportunities and allowed for information flow to colleagues across the University.
  2. Members could share good practices from their Schools and Colleges.
  3. Members gained valuable insights into software changes.
  4. Groups had diverse representation and voices, providing a comprehensive view of the upgrade's progress across different areas.

*Extensive multimodal communications and engagement.*

- The Project Team dedicated significant time and resource to developing effective communication and engagement strategies during the course of the upgrade.
- There was an extensive project of engagement with key stakeholders throughout the upgrade:
  1. *Round One*: Raising awareness of the project.
  2. *Round Two*: Gathering requirements from key stakeholders.
  3. *Round Three*: Embedding change in the University.
- In between the rounds of engagements, the Project Team also met informally with School and College stakeholders, and attended various School and College committees to continue to raise awareness and provide project updates.
- The Project Team continually updated the University committees: the Information Technology Committee<sup>2</sup>, the Knowledge Strategy Committee<sup>3</sup> and the Senate Education Committee.<sup>4</sup>
- Communication methods ranged from blog posts and website articles to conference presentations and posters.
- Regular updates were provided to stakeholders to ensure transparency and strategic buy-in from senior leaders and key stakeholders.
- Early adopters played a crucial role as ambassadors, disseminating information and driving enthusiasm within their respective Schools.

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<sup>2</sup> [Information Technology Committee](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Knowledge Strategy Committee](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Education Committee](#)



### Establishing the Early Adopter Programme.

- The project benefitted from building trust and collaboration from the start. The Early Adopter Programme (EAP) was implemented to transition courses to Learn Ultra ahead of the full upgrade, engaging over 160 courses, representing all three Colleges, to gather insights for a smoother rollout.
- Good Practice Guidance provided comprehensive resources, streamlining course builds and encouraging meaningful discussions.
- Comprehensive training sessions and a flexible approach ensured relevance and responsiveness to feedback and updates.
- A Microsoft Teams channel facilitated collaborative learning and community building among colleagues.
- Involvement of diverse support teams within Information Services Group enhanced problem-solving and support provision.
- Positive feedback on course builds and ease of use of Learn Ultra reflected the Project Team's commitment to user input and improvement.
- Robust partnerships and relationship-building efforts with learning technologists and academic teams improved trust and facilitated collaboration.
- Cohesive teamwork among various support roles was instrumental in the programme's success, showcasing effective support throughout the upgrade.
- Learnings from the EAP informed the University-wide rollout in 2023/24.

### Creating an extensive training programme.

- The Training and Support workstream focused on delivering a comprehensive training programme to Early Adopters prior to the full upgrade.
- The '10 Things to get Started in Learn Ultra' training programme for the full University rollout was designed to familiarise staff with the upgrade, with sessions running from March 2023 to January 2024.
- Maintaining a two-hour training course length was crucial: it was long enough to cover the most important features of Learn Ultra, and short enough for time-strapped colleagues to attend.
- The training schedule was crucial in three key ways:
  1. There was a high frequency of sessions, with sessions available weekly and during the summer.
  2. Courses were available both online and in-person across all locations on campus.
  3. Courses always ran regardless of attendance numbers and cancellations.
- Bespoke sessions were also offered as part of the training programme for any Schools who wished to have more tailored experiences.



- Training was shaped by user feedback and tailored to meet the needs of staff and students, with proactive recruitment techniques employed to promote uptake.
- A survey of 306 training participants showed overwhelmingly positive satisfaction levels, with high ratings for course duration, structure, coverage of essential areas, and increased confidence in creating accessible courses and improving the student and staff experience with Learn Ultra.

### *A user-centred upgrade approach*

- The Project Team included user experience (UX) experts who conducted user research with staff and students prior to the University-wide upgrade to ensure a user-centred approach in implementing Learn Ultra.
- Usability testing with staff that focused on commonly performed tasks – which were identified through a 'top tasks' survey conducted during the Learn Foundations project<sup>5</sup> - returned encouraging usability scores and positive feedback on the platform's shallower folder structure.
- A similar research blueprint was applied to a group of students, with most reporting positive experiences and ease of completing top tasks on Learn Ultra.
- Student feedback highlighted preferences for consistent terminology and comprehensive scheduling information within the platform.
- The Project Team responded accordingly by:
  1. Confirming course templates based on staff feedback and research insight
  2. Adjusting content styling for accessibility and providing guidance on content structure.
  3. Developing training and guidance for discussion boards, groups, activity stream, and calendar features.

### *Enhanced focus on accessibility.*

- The Learn Ultra Project Team focused on enhancing accessibility through the upgrade, making key decisions to support this goal.
- Implementing the 'Ally' accessibility tool in Learn Ultra allowed for greater accessibility support, including alternative format downloads and suggestions for course improvements.
- Existing accessibility resources and initiatives - such as accessibility training sessions, guidance on creating accessible materials, and a student-led annual accessibility checklist and review process – were given more prominence during the project.
- Annual accessibility reviews, conducted through the Learn Foundations Internship programme, assessed courses against WCAG 2.1 guidelines and provided holistic and individual reports to participating Schools and Deaneries.

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<sup>5</sup> [Learn Foundations](#)





- Accessibility became a central theme in communications to senior staff and committee meetings, with discussions on Learn Ultra's accessibility features and the decision to embed mandatory accessibility reviews for all Schools following the March 2024 SEC meeting.<sup>6</sup>
- Learn Ultra's features, such as pronoun and name pronunciation options, improved navigation, universal design principles, responsive interface, and file transformation capabilities, were highlighted for their contribution to accessibility and inclusion.

### Insights from interviews

- The analysis of stakeholder interviews revealed three key themes contributing to the positive local implementation of the project: proactive Change approaches, effective relationship building with key colleagues, and tailored local support and training.
- Local stakeholders approached the upgrade as a Change project, emphasising the importance of local ownership alongside central guidance.
- Successful initiatives included proactive identification of heavily impacted courses and addressing change resistance through relationship building.
- Challenges included academic scepticism and change fatigue, necessitating trust-building efforts and personalised approaches to gain buy-in.
- Good communication and collaboration across professions were vital for success, with relationships deepened through effective dissemination of project information.
- Relationship building with the central Project Team facilitated efficient information flow and allowed for timely responses to academic queries.
- User and implementation groups played a key role in disseminating project news and fostering collaboration within local areas.
- Schools provided tailored support and training to address diverse academic needs, ensuring smooth transition to Learn Ultra.
- Proactive approaches to training and support, including frequent notifications and personalised sessions, were linked to positive project experiences.
- Adaptation of local approaches based on specific academic needs further enhanced support and facilitated successful implementation.

### Insights from student survey

- The student survey findings provide valuable insights into the usability and satisfaction levels with Learn Ultra among undergraduate students.
- Students expressed high levels of satisfaction with Learn Ultra's usability.
- Among students who have no experience with the previous Learn Original VLE, the majority found accessing their courses on Learn Ultra easy.
- Students with experience in both Original and Ultra generally found Ultra easier to use.

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<sup>6</sup> [Senate Education Committee, minutes of meeting on 7 March 2024](#)



## Recommendations

The project's learnings have identified a number of general recommendations for project teams and groups, and colleagues across professions who will be engaging in similar upcoming projects:

### *ISG and other professional services*

- *Learn lessons from other Change projects:* Reflect on the recommendations of previous strategic Change projects and how they feed into your own ongoing or upcoming projects.
- *Embed a 'Change' mentality in all projects:* Design and manage systems implementations and technical change projects as Change projects with a focus on people and culture as well as technology, .

### *Project Teams*

- *Effective Communication Strategies:* Establish an explicit communication strategy to facilitate transparent and timely communication with stakeholders. Use a combination of communication channels such as regular meetings, email updates, and Teams groups to ensure everyone is informed and aligned.
- *Stakeholder Engagement and Management:* Develop a stakeholder engagement and management plan to build relationships with key stakeholders throughout the project. Identify stakeholders, assess their interests and concerns, communicate regularly with them, and involve them in decision-making processes to ensure their buy-in and support.
- *A Clear Governance Structure:* Establish appropriate governance groups with defined terms of reference, with representation coming from across the University.
- *Local Representation in Governance Structure:* Foster a partnership approach by including local representatives in governance and implementation groups, and have them be responsible for dissemination of information in their local areas.
- *Continuous Improvement and Reflection:* Foster a culture of continuous improvement and reflection within the project team and with stakeholders by regularly evaluating progress, identifying lessons learned, and implementing process improvements where appropriate.
- *Ensure Senior Committees Understand the Project's Strategy:* Ensure that committee members have a clear understanding of how the project aligns with the university's strategic goals, mission, and values. Provide regular updates on how the project contributes to overarching objectives such as enhancing the student experience, supporting digital learning initiatives, and achieving institutional excellence.
- *Update Committees Regularly:* Provide committee members with timely and relevant information to support informed decision-making.
- *Collect Training Data:* If training is to be provided to stakeholders as part of the project, ensure sufficient data is collected to track progress (e.g. attendance rates, completions across Schools/Colleges, etc).



### *Academic colleagues*

- *Early Engagement and Training:* It is beneficial to engage with Change projects at the earliest possible stage, by participating in training sessions and informational workshops.
- *Faculty Champions:* Identify and appoint faculty champions within your School who are enthusiastic about the upcoming change and willing to advocate for it. These faculty champions can serve as mentors to their peers, share best practices, and provide support during the transition process.

### *Teaching Office colleagues*

- *Specialised Internal Support Teams:* Establish specialised support teams within teaching offices, dedicated to providing project support. Assign appropriate colleagues with relevant experience to ensure internal project coverage.
- *Clear Communication Channels:* Implement clear and accessible communication channels for School/College staff to receive updates, announcements, and guidance related to the project.

### *Learning Technologists*

- *Pro-active Engagement with Project Team:* Engage early and effectively with the Project Team to ensure good communication practices are established. Communicate local progress to the Project Team regularly and identify areas where support is needed.
- *Pedagogical Support:* Provide appropriate pedagogical support to academic colleagues if the project requires it. If time and resource allow, offer assistance such as instructional design guides, training workshops, examples of good practice and tailored support.

### *Governance and Implementation Group colleagues*

- *Clearly defined Terms of Reference:* Before assembling and convening groups, the Project Team should define the group's terms of reference, outlining the group's scope and objectives, to ensure members understand their roles and responsibilities.
- *Ensure information dissemination to Schools/Colleges:* The Project Team should ensure that group members understand their responsibility to inform their Schools/Colleges of key group developments and updates.
- *Encourage proactive involvement from members:* Ask members to bring local issues to the group for wider discussion.



## Evaluation Approach

The University of Edinburgh's Learn Ultra upgrade<sup>7</sup> was a successful large-scale, institution-wide Change project that has enhanced the institution's virtual learning environment (VLE) to better serve its diverse student body and support its teaching and learning objectives.

Learn, the University's primary VLE, hosts over 6000 courses, materials, and resources, with an average of 39,000 daily log-ins from students engaging in various modes of study—on-campus, hybrid, and online. Recognising the pivotal role of the VLE in modern education, the University embarked on the Learn Ultra upgrade as part of its broader VLE Excellence programme, aligning with strategic initiatives such as the 2030 Strategy<sup>8</sup>, Digital Strategy<sup>9</sup>, and Curriculum Transformation.<sup>10</sup>

At its core, the Learn Ultra upgrade sought to address key feedback received from students and faculty regarding the usability and accessibility of the existing Learn platform. The upgrade aimed to provide a more user-friendly and inclusive learning environment.

The following evaluation analyses the reasons for the project's success.

It identifies the 'key decisions' that were made during the project that have contributed to the successful VLE upgrade across the University.

These key decisions are:

- Choosing Learn Ultra as the University's VLE
- Approaching the upgrade as a Change project
- A pluralistic governance framework
- Extensive multimodal communications and engagement
- Establishing the Early Adopter Programme
- Creating a broad (and unavoidable) training programme
- A user-centred upgrade
- Enhanced focus on accessibility

Relevant information and data are discussed for each of these key decisions.

Additionally, three key themes emerge as driving successful local implementations:

- Pro-active local Change approaches and project ownership.
- Effective relationship-building and collaboration.
- Tailored local training and ongoing support.

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<sup>7</sup> [Learn Ultra Project Overview](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Strategy 2030 Overview](#)

<sup>9</sup> [The University of Edinburgh Digital Strategy](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Curriculum Transformation Project](#)



The upgrade has also been successful among students as a survey of undergraduates shows high levels of satisfaction with Learn Ultra.

## Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation employs a mixed methods approach, analysing a variety of qualitative and quantitative data sources to give a comprehensive overview of the Learn Ultra upgrade project. Primary data has been collected in a number of ways:

- A campus-wide survey of 391 students on their experiences with Learn Ultra. First year students were asked for their general thoughts on Learn Ultra as a platform, and students in their second year upwards were asked how Learn Ultra compared to the previous platform. A non-probability purposive sampling approach was employed by recruiting undergraduate students through banner alerts on the MyEd portal.
- Semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. We employed a 'snowball' sampling approach by starting interviews with three senior stakeholders, and then requesting they nominate other stakeholders from Schools within their Colleges, covering academic colleagues, teaching office professionals and learning technologists.
- Profession-specific focus groups with academic colleagues teaching office professionals and learning technologists respectively. These groups complemented the semi-structured interviews by allowing for more detailed group discussion on topics raised, while ensuring a greater number of colleagues feed into the evaluation.
- Focus groups with implementation and user groups, which examined how well members thought their respective groups operated during the course of the upgrade project.

Several secondary data sources have also been utilised:

- User Experience (UX) data collected before the full campus-wide upgrade.
- Blogs summarising UX research.
- Data collected from Early Adopters before the full campus-wide upgrade.
- Training feedback data.
- Internal Project Team reports and briefings.

Several analytical techniques have been employed:

- Student survey data was analysed via simple univariate and crosstab analysis to illustrate students' view at a high level.
- Thematic analysis was conducted on data from semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Manual hand-coding was done in the first instance to identify key themes. Data was then subjected to secondary analysis in RStudio to validate the hand coding and reveal further latent themes.
- Meta analyses have been conducted on secondary data sources to summarise research that has been completed earlier in the project.



## Analysis: Key Project Decisions

A number of key decisions have been identified as being crucial to the project's success, which are discussed in turn below.

### Upgrading the existing VLE, rather than procuring a new provider.

Prior to project initiation, the University's business and service owners for Learn conducted a review of VLEs in use by Russell Group Universities, noting prevalence, comparative National Student Survey (NSS) scores (as a proxy for student experience), alongside functionality provided by the most popular alternative VLEs. A report and recommendations were taken to the University's Information Technology Committee,<sup>11</sup> which has the delegated authority of Knowledge Strategy Committee.<sup>12</sup> The case for upgrading, rather than open procurement, was made and approved for a number of key reasons:

- *Alignment with Strategy 2030:*<sup>13</sup> The upgrade supported the University's strategic goals of offering an excellent student experience. The upgrade therefore placed student experience at the centre of educational technology development at the University, ensuring that the digital tools meet the needs and expectations of students. Since many of the Russell Group Universities which achieve higher results than Edinburgh in the NSS also used Learn VLE, There was no obvious correlation between changing VLE platform entirely and improved student experience observed from analysis of Russell Group universities.
- *Technological necessity:* Learn Original was already integrated with the University's core systems and functions, therefore upgrading to the next version of Learn would ensure these integrations remained secure, robust and did not have to be redesigned and redeveloped (also reducing impact on integrations teams in ISG and beyond).
- *Lack of viable alternatives:* The review of functionality available from the top three competitor VLEs did not reveal any significant differentiators that would justify the cost of full procurement and platform change over an upgrade. Additionally, Blackboard had announced a merger with Anthology, promising a more comprehensive and modern EdTech ecosystem. The merger aimed to further enhance the learning experience in Higher Education.
- *Acting on feedback from previous projects:* The Learn Foundations project<sup>14</sup>, which involved extensive user research and collaboration with staff and students, revealed specific needs and improvements that Learn Ultra could address. Feedback from strategic approaches employed in the Learn Foundations project suggested that looking at 'how, why and when' the VLE is used brings more benefit to the student experience than the specifics of technology tools. The University engaged with thousands of students and

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<sup>11</sup> [Information Technology Committee](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Knowledge Strategy Committee](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Strategy 2030 Overview](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Learn Foundations](#)



staff, which provided a detailed picture of the functionalities and improvements they required in Learn.<sup>15</sup>

- *Resource and Risk Management*: Upgrading to Ultra, rather than switching to another provider, minimised overall business continuity risks. Working relationships with Blackboard had also been established, and procurement would mean the University incurring significant costs such as transition expenses, managing and licencing two platforms over the transition period, retraining staff, and potential course disruption.

### *Approaching the upgrade as a Change project*

Once the committees had approved the plan to proceed with an upgrade, LTW made the explicit decision to approach it as a Change project, rather than a technical upgrade. This reflected the team's desire to earn buy-in from stakeholders across and campus. The project was underpinned by John Kotter's Change Model for navigating organisational transformation<sup>16</sup> (see Appendix Table A1).

There are solid theoretical reasons why a Change approach was a crucial part of the project's success:

- It emphasises the importance of people and existing practices, highlighting the need to manage factors such as change resistance.
- It encourages stakeholder engagement from various levels to foster buy-in.
- It relies on robust communication strategies to address any concerns effectively and ensure a smoother transition.
- It aligns the upcoming change with broader organisational goals.
- It promotes an open-ended approach where the change is never entirely 'complete'; rather, it accepts continuous improvement may be required by being responsive to queries about the new system.

A clear and unified roadmap was designed at the beginning of the project, split into three annual phases that defined the project's short-term, medium-term and long-term objectives. This ensured the project had clear milestones and deliverable dates.

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<sup>15</sup> [A service design approach to Learn Foundations](#)

<sup>16</sup> [John Kotter: The 8 Steps for Leading Change](#)

### Implementing a pluralistic governance framework.

The Project Team constructed a governance framework to include stakeholders across professions and the University. The framework comprised of groups with different remits and terms of reference:

- *Project Team*: The Project Team itself was a crucial part of the project's governance structure. It was responsible for the day-to-day management and delivery of the upgrade, making sure to disseminate information to the below groups and act on advice and support provided by them.
- *School-based Learning Technologists*: Learning Technologists from across the University were part of the Project Team, which fostered a strong partnership approach and provided an opportunity for user voices to be heard.
- *Project Board*: The Project Board was responsible for making all strategic decisions as the upgrade progressed.
- *Learning and Teaching Implementation Group (LTIG)*: The LTIG group provided guidance on learning and teaching issues, representing learning technologists and academic colleagues across the University.
- *Technical Implementation Group (TIG)*: The TIG acted to ensure all integrations and connections worked well, and liaised closely Blackboard on ongoing software developments.

Additional user groups supported the delivery of the project by allowing for user voices to be heard regularly:

- *Academic User Group (AUG)*<sup>17</sup>: The AUG represented the views and interests of academic colleagues during the project
- *Professional Services User Group (PSUG)*: The PSUG represented the views and interests of professional services stakeholders during the project.<sup>18</sup>

There were also external colleagues who played a key role in the project's governance: Natalie Lafferty of the University of Dundee, and Pete Quinn, an equality, diversity and inclusion consultant.

As part of the evaluation, the Project Team conducted focus groups with all of the User and Implementation Groups to gauge perceptions of how their groups contributed to the project, and why the upgrade has been successful. A number of key themes emerged across all groups and professions:

- *Good networking opportunities and information flow*: Members across groups were generally felt there was good communication from the Project Team and found it valuable to connect with colleagues across the University, share experiences, and stay updated on software/technical developments related to the upgrade.

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<sup>18</sup> The PSUG was created after the project started, after a knowledge gap was identified.



- *Sharing Good Practices:* Members generally saw their groups as good forums for knowledge exchange. Meetings were opportunities to identify potential issues early on and collectively work towards solutions, enabling members to mitigate risks and address challenges effectively.
- *Important insight into software changes:* Members generally felt they gained valuable insights into software changes brought about by the upgrade, enabling better local planning and implementation strategies.
- *Diverse Representation and Voices:* Members overall enjoyed hearing the perspectives of colleagues (staff and students) across the University and across professions, which provided them with a better picture of how the upgrade was progressing in different areas.

### Extensive multimodal communications and engagement

The Project Team dedicated significant time and resources to communications and engagement during the upgrade. Their approach was guided by the communications strategy drawn up early in the project. The strategy identified several groups of stakeholders to target with effective awareness raising:

- *Senior Leaders and Key Stakeholders:* Early updates were provided to senior leaders, including Vice Principals and academic/professional leaders, to ensure transparency and strategic buy-in. Regular progress updates also followed.
- *University Committees and Forums:* The project was presented at formal university and College/School forums to secure strategic support.
- *Senior Learning Technology Leaders:* These leaders received technical progress updates as and when required.
- *Learning Technologists, and Professional Services and Teaching Office Staff:* It was important to maintain the strong relationships built with School learning technologists during previous projects. As discussed above, School Learning technologists were also included in the Project Team as part of the project's partnership approach.
- *Academic Colleagues:* The Project Team engaged with academic colleagues in a number of ways:
  1. Attending the Director of Teaching Network<sup>19</sup> run by the Institute of Academic Development (IAD)<sup>20</sup>, which provided access to senior academic colleagues collectively.
  2. Convening the Academic User Group (AUG), which updated academic colleagues on project developments.
  3. Offering the opportunity to join the Early Adopter Programme (outlined in more detail below).
- *Students:* Students were updated through various channels and via their representatives, ensuring their voices were included in the implementation process.
- *Early Adopters:* Early Adopters acted as ambassadors and disseminated their learning within their Schools.

The Team communicated project updates in a number of ways, including blog posts, School visits and talks, committee papers, website articles, conference presentations, and posters.

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<sup>19</sup> [Directors of Teaching Network](#)

<sup>20</sup> [Institute for Academic Development](#)

### Establishing the Early Adopter Programme

The project's Early Adopter Programme (EAP) was a significant initiative aimed at transitioning courses to Learn Ultra ahead of the full upgrade. The programme was designed to engage closely with colleagues across various disciplines to better understand the challenges and requirements involved in migrating to Learn Ultra, ultimately paving the way for a smoother campus-wide rollout. Over 160 courses participated in this programme, providing invaluable insights that helped shape the support strategies for the wider implementation.

The EAP had a structured approach:

- *Early adopter recruitment (Dec 2021 – May 2022)*: In the initial phase, engagement sessions were organised to introduce the programme stakeholders across the University. The Project Team identified suitable courses for involvement and agreements were signed by Early Adopters. From there, there were some key project investments:
  1. Participants were provided access to Ultra playground courses to familiarise themselves with the new platform.
  2. Teams were appointed to represent each College, ensuring effective coordination and communication throughout the process between themselves and the Project Team. They were also upskilled to become SMEs (Subject Matter experts) to support with the delivery of the EAP.
  3. Blackboard training was purchased for the Project Team and local School learning technologists were invited to join.
- *Training delivery and course set up (May 2022 – Sep 2022)*: Various training sessions were conducted to equip staff with the necessary skills and knowledge for the transition, including courses to guide staff through the migration process. Early Adopter courses were set up in Learn Ultra and reviewed by Project Teams and learning technologists to ensure their readiness for use. Feedback from Early Adopters was gathered from the Teams representing Early Adopters in relevant project meetings, enabling continuous improvement of the programme and its offerings.
- *Embed and evaluate (Sep 2022 – Feb 2023)*: Monthly College-level meetings with Schools were held to monitor progress and gather feedback, while additional resources were identified and added to support materials. New training sessions and additional resources/guidance were organised to address emerging needs and ensure that staff and students felt adequately prepared for the upcoming semester.

Support teams gathered feedback from Early Adopters and learning technologists at regular meetings during the project, and found a number of key reasons for the EAP's success:

- The creation of Good Practice Guidance<sup>21</sup> was seen as crucial for the Programme, providing a good source of Learn Ultra-related resources. Its accessibility and comprehensiveness streamlined course builds and encouraged meaningful discussions within and between Schools.
- A single, comprehensive training session garnered positive feedback. Additionally, the Project Team's flexible approach to training, responding to feedback and Blackboard's updates, ensured training remained relevant and up to date.
- The establishment of a Microsoft Teams channel facilitated collaborative learning and community building among colleagues.
- The involvement of diverse support teams within Information Services proved advantageous, offering a breadth of expertise during engagements with Colleges. This multidisciplinary approach enhanced problem-solving and support provision.
- Feedback regarding course builds and the ease of use of Learn Ultra was overwhelmingly positive, reflecting the responsiveness of the Project Team to user input. Continuous refinement and adaptation of tools and support mechanisms based on this feedback underscored a commitment to user-centricity and improvement.
- The programme fostered robust partnerships and relationship-building efforts with learning technologists and academic teams. These relationships not only improved trust but also facilitated collaboration and mentorship opportunities, showcasing the value of cross-departmental cooperation.
- Cohesive teamwork among Learning Technology Advisers, Learning Technology Support Officers, and Instructional Designers was noted as instrumental in the programme's success. Their collaborative efforts demonstrated their readiness to support course teams effectively throughout the Learn Ultra transition.

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<sup>21</sup> [Content Building Guidance \(Sharepoint\)](#)

### Creating an extensive training programme

The Training and Support workstream was initiated and delivered to Early Adopters and learning technology teams across the university prior to the full upgrade.

Of crucial importance was the ‘10 Things to get Started in Learn Ultra’ training programme delivered to staff by the Project Team to familiarise them with the upgrade. Several weekly ‘10 Things’ sessions ran from March 2023 to January 2024, including during the summer, to ensure training was always easily available to colleagues. Sessions were available both online and in-person across all locations on campus. In total, 281 sessions were delivered across campus and as webinars, with 1,252 attendees in total.

‘Task-focussed’ training sessions provided in-depth training focused on specific Learn tasks and wider learning technology tools and practices. Sessions ran from March 2023 to January 2024, with 150 sessions delivered and 628 total attendees.

The self-led ‘Getting started with Learn Ultra’ resource also engaged 140 colleagues after being released in August 2023. This was provided as many

Overall, 75 per cent of course organisers and course secretaries have attended training, highlighting the project’s significant reach. The College breakdowns are as follows:

- 87% (1,292) of course organisers and course secretaries in CAHSS have attended training.
- 37% (247) of course organisers and course secretaries in CSE have attended training.
- 94% (361) of course organisers and course secretaries in CMVM have attended training.

A number of key decisions were taken to support the training’s success:

- *User-centred, contextual training:* Training was shaped by the needs of staff and students. The course was initially based on feedback received from user during the previous Learn Foundations project. It was first trialled with Early Adopters, whose feedback in turn shaped the final version delivered for the full roll-out to be tailored to Edinburgh’s specific context.
- *Training always ran:* Events were always run and never cancelled, even if numbers were low. The Project Team wanted to ensure training was always available if anyone wanted it.
- *A ‘goldilocks’ training course length:* The Project Team’s most important decision was to identify a length of time for the training course that would be short enough for time-strapped colleagues, but long enough to cover all essential topics. The Team decided early on proceed with a two-hour training course throughout the project’s duration.

- *Multiple locations:* Training was offered in face-to-face locations on several campuses and at various time of the day.
- *High frequency:* Events ran frequently, with sessions available weekly and during the summer, and both in-person and online.
- *Training for different stakeholder groups:* Training was provided to different groups, such as Learn expert training, training for the project team, and training for trainers.
- *Pro-active monitoring of attendance :* The training team employed a range of data driven techniques to promote take up of training. For example, they created a report that went out to Heads of School every week, which detailed the staff who had taken up training. An overview of training data was regularly given to senior leadership so that it could be discussed in leadership one-to-ones and meetings.
- *Bespoke sessions:* These were also organised if, for example, a teaching office requested a tailored sessions for all of their staff.

The Project Team conducted a survey<sup>22</sup> of 306 '10 things' participants between March 2023 and January 2024 in order to gauge levels of satisfaction with training.

Respondents came from across the University, albeit a majority of respondents (57 per cent) came from the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (see Figure 1).

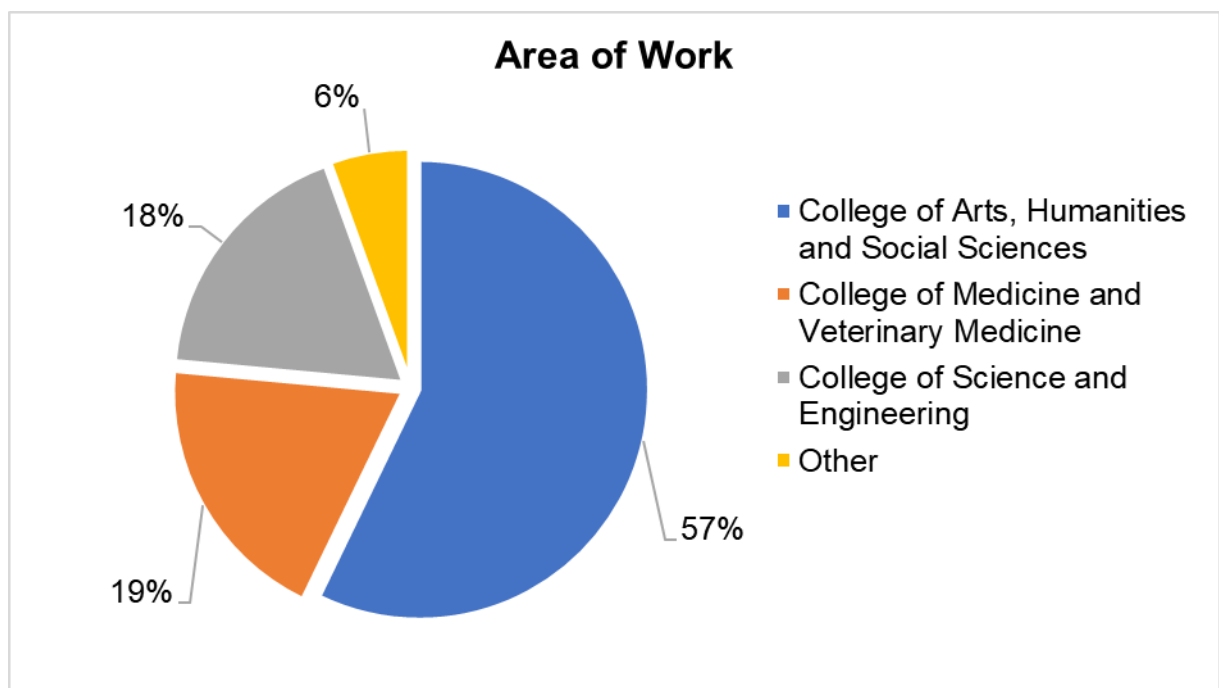


Figure 1: '10 Things' Training feedback survey, respondents by area of work

<sup>22</sup> [Learn Ultra '10 Things' training: participant feedback survey](#)

The majority of respondents (57 per cent) were also academics, with 39 per cent holding professional services or teaching office positions (see Figure 2).

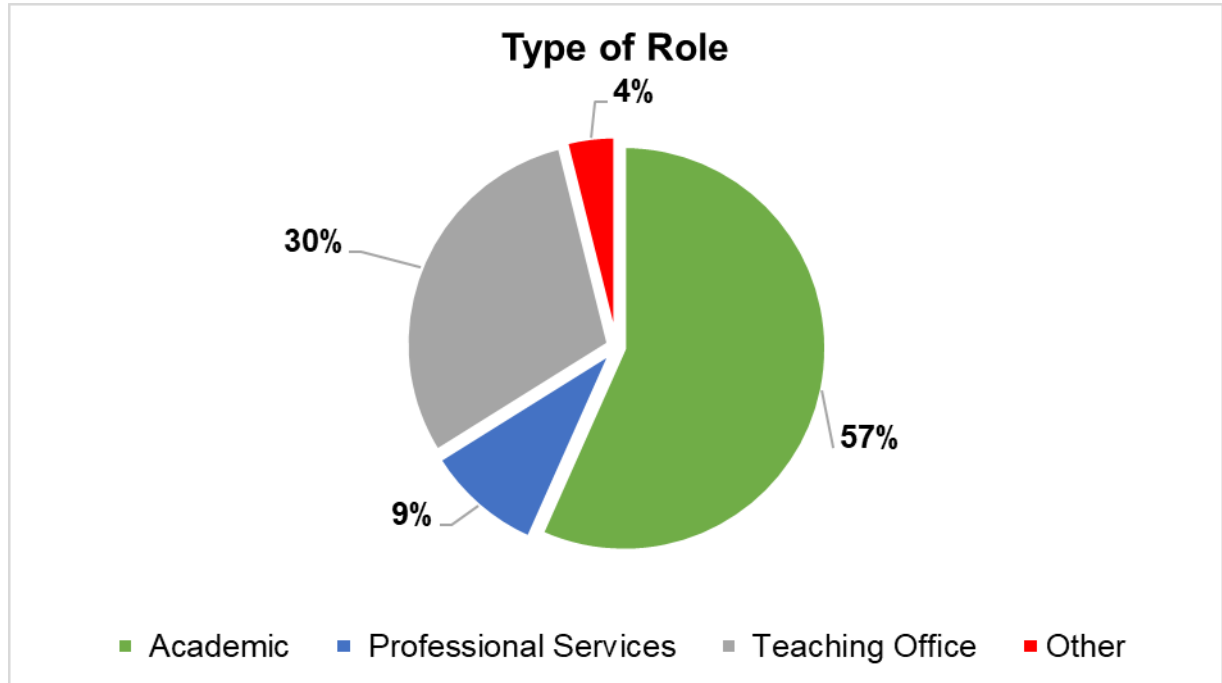


Figure 2: '10 Things' training feedback survey, respondents by type of role

Respondents have a mix of programme responsibilities: 29 per cent taught/ supported undergraduate programme, 21 per cent taught/supported postgraduate programmes, and 42 per cent taught/ supported both (see Figure 3).

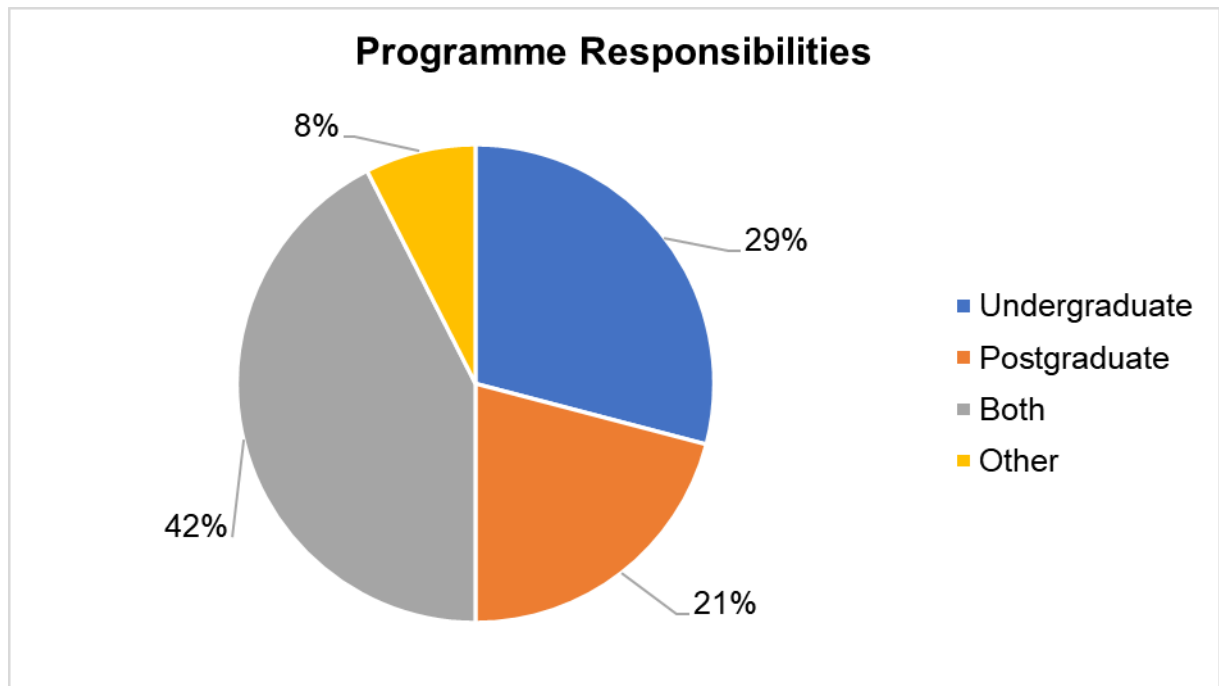


Figure 3: '10 Things' training feedback survey, respondents by programme responsibilities

Respondent feedback was overwhelmingly positive (see Figures 4 and 5):

- 95 per cent found the course duration to be the correct length.
- 96 per cent found the course 'structure and flow' to be either good or excellent.
- 95 per cent believed the course covered most of the areas needed to prepare their courses and teaching.



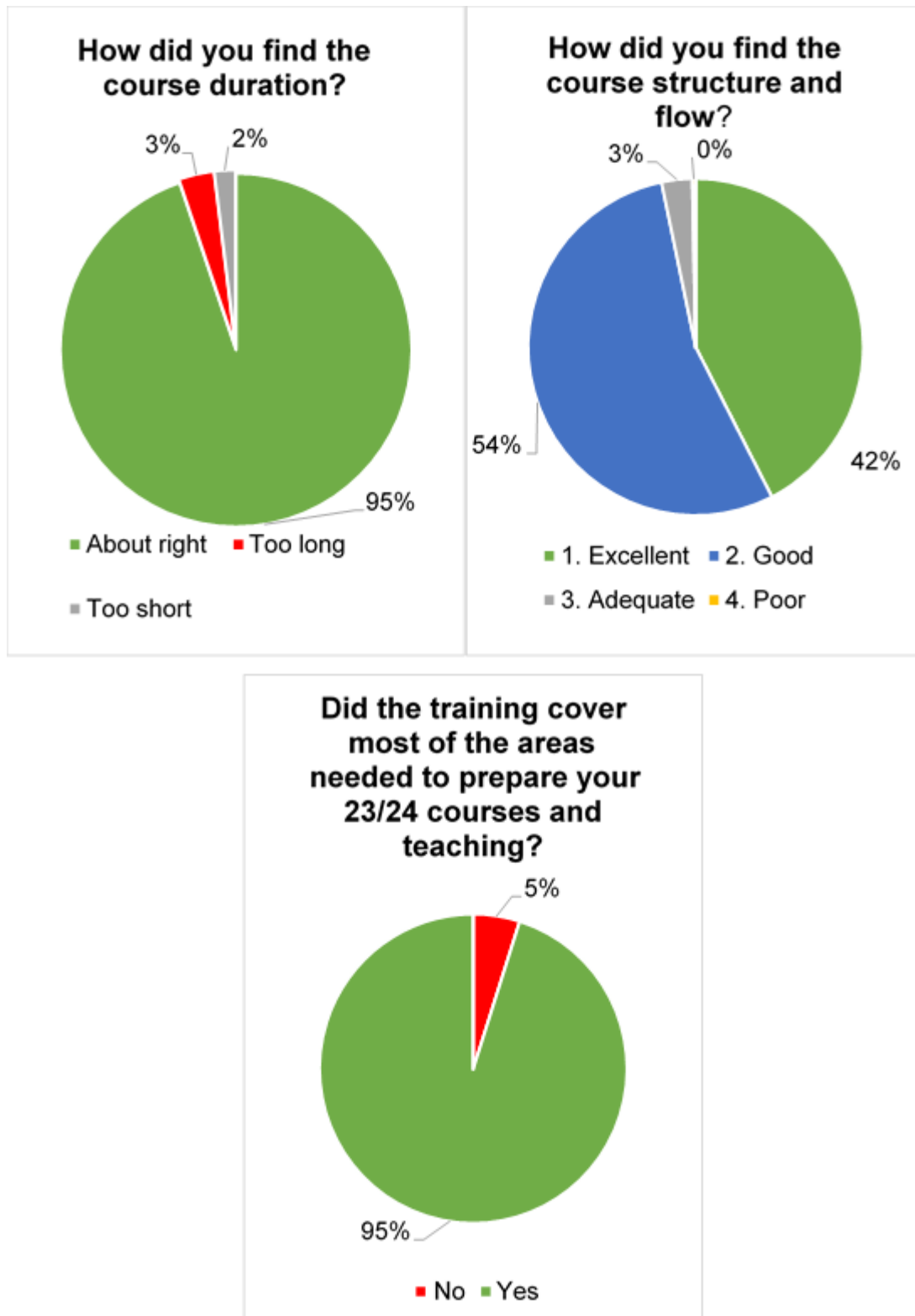


Figure 4: '10 Things' Training feedback survey, general satisfaction levels

### *A user-centred upgrade approach.*

In order to ensure a user-centred approach in implementing Learn Ultra, the Project Team conducted user research with staff and students prior to the University-wide upgrade.

Between May and October 2022, eight Learning Technologists and 11 Academic and Teaching Office staff (across all three Colleges and mostly from the Early Adopter group), were recruited for usability testing and semi-structured interviews. Usability testing allowed the Project Team to identify potential issues for staff when conducting commonly-performed Learn Ultra tasks, while the semi-structured interviews provided finer detail on how staff perceived Learn Ultra.

Staff usability testing was structured around the results of a 'top tasks' prioritisation survey conducted during the previous Learn Foundations project.<sup>23 24 25</sup> Staff respondents to the survey were given a list of tasks that could be completed in Learn (for example, uploading lecture slides, setting assignment deadlines and providing grades) and asked to choose which of them were important to their overall Learn experience. The results of this survey gave a clear indication of the priority tasks which formed the focus of the usability tests.

Usability testing participants were asked to complete the most important tasks previously identified by the survey (either in their own Learn Ultra environments with real course data, or a test environment). Overall, participants were able to complete tasks successfully; in particular, they found it easy to add course details, lecture notes and lecture slides, and advise students that new course material was available.<sup>26</sup>

The semi-structured interviews revealed various perspectives among staff participants. Most staff liked the shallower folder structure as they felt it made content navigation easier.

This research blueprint was replicated on a group of students over the same period. Fifteen students (12 current students, a recent graduate and two interns from Napier University). Most student participants had a positive experience using Learn Ultra. They could complete top tasks with relative ease, rating the platform's usability highly. They also said they appreciated consistent terminology within and between courses. Student participants were also asked follow-up 'structured questions', which provided valuable insights into students' perceptions and expectations regarding specific aspects of Learn Ultra functionality. Students were positive about the Blackboard Learn App: a majority said they would use it for various tasks such as checking marks and feedback, viewing the calendar, and accessing lecture content. Regarding the calendar feature, most students anticipated it to include their full timetable and assignment due dates,

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<sup>23</sup> [Contextual enquiry with members of staff working with course materials digitally](#)

<sup>24</sup> [A service design approach to Learn Foundations](#)

<sup>25</sup> [A top tasks survey has shown what staff and students prioritise in hybrid teaching and learning](#)

<sup>26</sup> [Staff user research has helped shape and steer the Learn Ultra upgrade](#)

indicating their preference for comprehensive scheduling information within the platform.

Overall, the research highlighted areas of strength in Learn Ultra's usability while pinpointing areas for refinement to further enhance staff and student experiences. The Project Team and UX team responded to the research findings in various ways to ensure the upgrade remained as user-centred as possible:

- *Confirming the template for the 2023 to 2024 academic year:* Meetings were held with the Project Team Learning Technologists to discuss and finalise a course template based on staff feedback gathered via the EAP and previous research insights.
- *Adjusting content styling changes while ensuring accessibility:* Changes to content styling were made to enhance accessibility, including developing an Image Bank, updating guidance on media item use, and providing instructional design principles for structuring content.
- *Updating guidance and training for discussion boards, groups, activity stream, and calendar:* Good practice advice, guidance documents, and training sessions were developed to support effective use of these features in Learn Ultra, informed by staff insights and research findings.
- *Influencing Anthology's planned feature iterations:* Feedback from staff about discussion boards, groups, and the activity stream was communicated to Blackboard to feed into future developments of these features.

### Enhanced focus on accessibility

Improving accessibility is fundamental to all LTW projects, and significant time is dedicated to supporting Schools to enhance accessibility on their programme. As a result, the Project Team made a number of key decisions aimed at improving accessibility through the upgrade:

- *Implementing the ‘Ally’ accessibility tool:* Ally<sup>27</sup> provides accessibility support for students and staff when using or uploading learning materials Learn Ultra. It allows students to download alternative formats of course materials, offering them greater choice in their learning. It can also help academic colleagues make their courses more accessible by identifying areas in need of improvement, and offering suggestions on how to make such improvements.

Ally complements other resources available to help with improving accessibility:

1. Accessibility training sessions.<sup>28</sup>
  2. Guidance on creating accessible materials.<sup>29</sup>
  3. Accessibility and learning technology checklist.<sup>30</sup>
  4. Webpages dedicated to accessibility and learning technology.<sup>31</sup>
  5. Good practice guidance for course development.<sup>32</sup>
- *Embedding annual accessibility reviews:* While technology like Ally are useful and vital tools, the Project Team recognised there is intrinsic value in ensuring human interaction remains central to efforts to improve accessibility.

In 2019, LTW established the Learn Foundations Internship, which employed student interns each summer to help with course preparations. As part of their work, interns reviewed the accessibility of a number of courses from Schools and Deaneries who had opted in to an accessibility review.

For example, during the most recent review in 2023, interns reviewed 1,441 pre-selected courses from 21 Schools and Deaneries. This review surveyed a random selection of materials uploaded across these courses, as well as URLs, images and audio files. Interns reviewed these materials against an accessibility matrix based on WCAG 2.1 guidelines. These include criteria such as:

1. Consistency in naming conventions for documents, folders, and links.
2. Accessible formatting in materials, considering font type, use of italic/bold/underlined text, justification, and colour usage.

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<sup>27</sup> [Ally](#)

<sup>28</sup> [An introduction to accessibility in learning technology](#)

<sup>29</sup> [Creating accessible materials](#)

<sup>30</sup> [Blackboard Learn](#)

<sup>31</sup> [Learning Technology and Accessibility](#)

<sup>32</sup> [Course Development \(Sharepoint\)](#)

3. Inclusion of alternative formats and alt text for images.
4. Detection of errors via the Microsoft Office Suite's accessibility tracker.
5. Availability of subtitles or transcripts for video/audio content.

An annual holistic accessibility report was written, as well as individual reports for each participating School, which included:

1. General accessibility levels within the School.
2. Areas of improvement over the previous year.
3. Challenges identified during the review - training and resources specific to these challenges were shared.

Prior to Learn Foundations, accessibility reviews were not a standard service offered by LTW. Since the upgrade project, two key decisions have been made:

1. Reviews will now take place annually as standard practice.
2. Following the March 2024 Senate Education Committee (SEC), it is now mandatory for all Schools to participate in the accessibility review, as opposed to the previous opt-in system.

- *Accessibility front-and-centre in communications:* Improving accessibility was at the heart of all communications at all levels throughout the course of the project.

Accessibility was a key theme of committee meetings during the project, as it was recognised that the upgrade had to support the University's Accessible and Inclusive Learning policy. In particular, the SEC was updated annually on the findings of the accessibility reviews, which led to the decision to embed mandatory reviews (see above).

The suitability of Learn Ultra from an accessibility perspective was also discussed by committees. For example, they noted particular features of Learn Ultra that were thought to enhance accessibility:

1. Users can add pronouns to their profiles.
2. Users can clarify the pronunciation of their name by adding the phonetic spelling and recording name pronunciations direct in the platform.
3. Ultra improves navigation for new course activity, including the ability to access grades, feedback, submission deadlines at programme level without the user needing to access a course.
4. Ultra was built with Universal Design in mind.
5. The interface that works well on all types of device and screen sizes.

## Analysis: Key themes on positive local implementation

The following section details the key findings from the interviews and focus groups conducted with stakeholders across the University, including academics, teaching office professionals and learning technologists. The data shows that, on the whole, participants viewed the project as a success. The analysis that follows identifies three key themes that have been crucial for the project's success at the local level: pro-active Change approaches, effective relationship building with key colleagues, and tailored local support and training.

### An overall positive picture.

Participants generally agreed that the upgrade project has been an overall success, and noted there is a broad sense across the University that it has achieved its goals. The most positive participants believed the project was well-run and delivered what was expected. It was also perceived to have good governance structures that kept Schools and Deaneries informed on developments, and also allowed for their representatives to feed into the project. Participants were also generally positive on the central project team's communication strategy, which kept them informed on key project developments.

*'The communication was brilliant...'* – Interviewee 17

*'I think they did very well and keeping us informed and keeping us updated.'* – Interview 14

Participants whose areas were part of the Early Adopter Programme (EAP) had particularly positive views on the project. They stressed the EAP played a crucial role in testing the new platform, generating crucial learning before the full campus-wide upgrade. They benefitted greatly from the central project team's tailored support, which eased them into the full upgrade.

*'...I think [the Early Adopter Programme] worked quite well and especially the close communication with the central team [allowed us to] smooth out any kinks ... anything that wasn't working well, we could tackle it together because ultimately the platform was new to all of us...'* – Interviewee 9

### *Pro-active local Change approaches and project ownership*

Participants highlighted examples of good local Change approaches, which have been crucial to the project's overall success. Just as the central project team approached the upgrade as a Change, rather than a Technical, project, so too did School stakeholders responsible for implementing the upgrade in their areas.

Furthermore, participants generally believed it was important for the project to be local-led: while central guidance was necessary, local ownership was deemed essential for project success. This allowed for a more flexible approach that ensured the upgrade was

implemented in ways suitable to specific contexts (for example, the needs of particular courses and academics).

*‘What we did [as a local process] is we went through all of our courses and we identified the most heavily impacted courses proactively and we contacted those course organisers...’ - Interviewee 16*

Participants highlighted challenges that had to be overcome as part of their Change approaches. In particular, they faced ‘change resistance’ from colleagues who were sceptical of the upgrade.

*‘There’s some people who are incredibly creative and very receptive, but there also are a number of people who are suspicious of technology and who feel imposed upon by any new change that happens...’ – Interviewee 5*

Academics were noted as particularly hesitant and they were concerned with, among other things, changes to VLE functionality, and a lack of personal capacity to migrate their courses and undergo additional training. However, academic buy-in was seen as particularly important to participants.

*‘...we established relationships with a lot of the course organisers and programme directors and that made it much easier...’ - Interviewee 7*

Some positive academic participants suggested the project succeeded in their areas as academics themselves were the ‘face’ of the upgrade. They argued academic colleagues in their areas were receptive to the project as it was seen to be led by ‘one of their own’. They suggested that participants with negative project experiences may have had low academic involvement in their areas from the start; consequently, academics may have been less likely to buy into the project as it was seen more as a top-down University policy rather than a collaborative project between the centre and individual Schools and Colleges.

Participants also found a general sense of ‘change fatigue’ among colleagues who were continually struggling to manage resources due to the perceived high number of change projects coming from the University centrally.

Some colleagues were explicitly distrustful of the project from the start given poor experiences with previous change projects. As a result, participants found that ‘trust building’ became a key part of their local Change approaches in order to gain crucial local buy-in.

### Effective relationship-building and collaboration

Participants with positive views on the project shared examples of local collaboration that highlighted the importance of good communication and joined-up decision making. They believed the project succeeded in the Schools and Colleges due to colleagues across professions building good work relationships with each other and collaborating well.

*‘I think our relationships with... learning technologists within the School has been deepened and broadened and there are certain pockets that now are accessible which weren't previously ...’ – Interviewee 5*

In order for the project to succeed locally, participants noted their areas had to proactively build good working relationships with the central project team. While they thought the central team had a good communication strategy overall, they believed local areas had the responsibility to maintain a two-way relationship to stay informed on project developments.

*‘...[no matter] how much notice, information and support you give it will be ignored to the last second by some people...’ – Interview 17*

Relationships with the central team were built primarily through the User and Implementation Groups, whose members would then disseminate project news and developments in their own areas. Several participants, who were not the User and Implementation Group members, noted good dissemination in their areas, which kept them up to date with developments. In these instances, there was little need for participants to contact the central team directly about issues as the information was being communicated efficiently in their own areas.

Good working relationships with the project team and efficient information dissemination allowed learning technologists and professional services staff to build good working relationships with academics during the project. As discussed above, participants thought academics were generally hesitant of the project; it was therefore beneficial to have all project information clearly communicated in their areas, which allowed learning technologists to respond to academic queries more efficiently.



### Tailored local training and ongoing support

Effective relationship-building and collaboration between colleagues allowed Schools and Colleges to develop their own training programmes and provide sufficient ongoing support to staff, namely academics. Participants noted that, while the central project team's '10 things' training workshop provided a good software overview, academics had a diverse range of needs that had to be considered when rebuilding courses in Learn Ultra. As a result, learning technologists provided tailored support and training to their academic colleagues. This was provided in several ways, from responding efficiently to ad-hoc queries as and when required, to holding drop-in sessions. Some areas also recruited student interns to assist with the workload.

*'[Academics] were getting the best of both worlds basically: they were getting excellent training, but they were also still having their hands held after they had the training...' – Interviewee 17*

Participants more positive on the project generally came from Schools with a pro-active approach to training and support, informed by the Change approaches in their areas. As well as providing training, frequent notifications on training events were sent to staff as part of local communication strategies. They believed that colleagues who received adequate training and support were more likely to transition smoothly to Learn Ultra than those who did not. They further stressed the importance of good local communication as, when urgent problems did emerge, it was generally the result of non-responsiveness (for example, colleagues not reading email notifications on training and/or not attending training events).

Participants also noted that their areas adapted their local approaches based on the specific needs of their academics. For example, in cases where academics were not able to attend training sessions, alternative methods such as one-to-one sessions were offered. Academic participants generally held more positive views on the project when they reported good local support from learning technologists.

## Analysis: Student Survey findings

The Project Team surveyed undergraduate students for 30 days between March and April 2024, with the purpose of gathering perceptions of Learn Ultra's usability. The questionnaire asked a series of closed questions on key Learn Ultra tasks identified in the previous 'top tasks' survey. The questions relate to:

- Accessing course content (lecture slides, other lecture materials, readings lists, and lecture recordings).
- Accessing assessments and feedback (finding grades, assessments and feedback).
- Navigating folders.

There were 391 responses to the survey and the analysis below splits respondents into two cohorts:

- *Cohort 1*: Respondents who started their current programmes in either 2022/23 or 2023/24. They comprised 43 per cent (167) of the overall sample. For this cohort, the survey aimed to estimate how easy or hard students find carrying out key Learn Ultra tasks.
- *Cohort 2*: Respondents who started their current programmes before 2022/23. They comprised 57 per cent (224) of the overall sample. For this cohort, the survey aimed to estimate whether students find it easier carrying out key tasks in Learn Ultra as opposed to Learn Original.

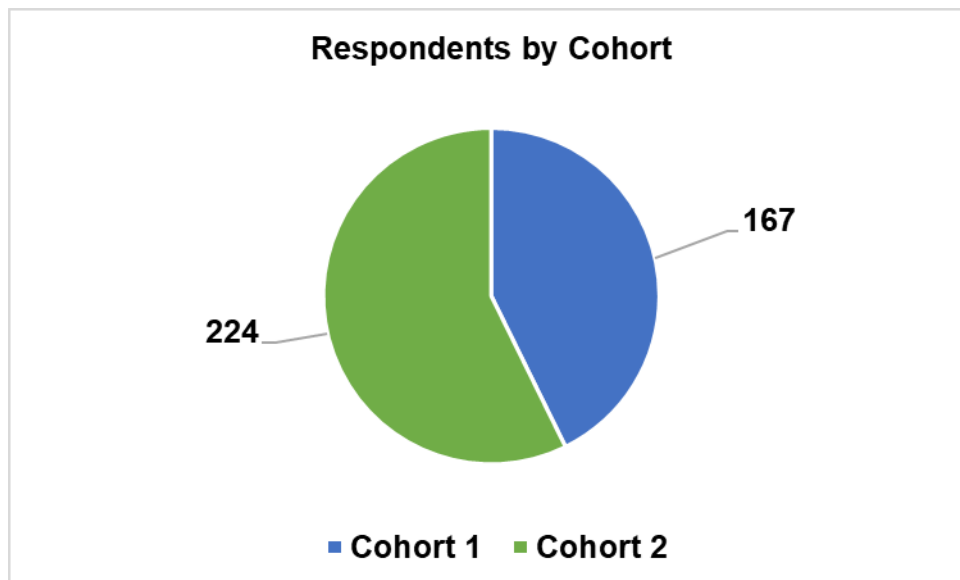


Figure 5: Upgrade to Learn Ultra student survey, respondents by Cohort

Respondents came from across all Colleges but representation was disproportionate: 60 per cent (236) came from Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences (CAHSS), 31 per cent (123) from Science and Engineering (CSE), and only 8 per cent (32) from Medicine & Veterinary Medicine (CMVM).

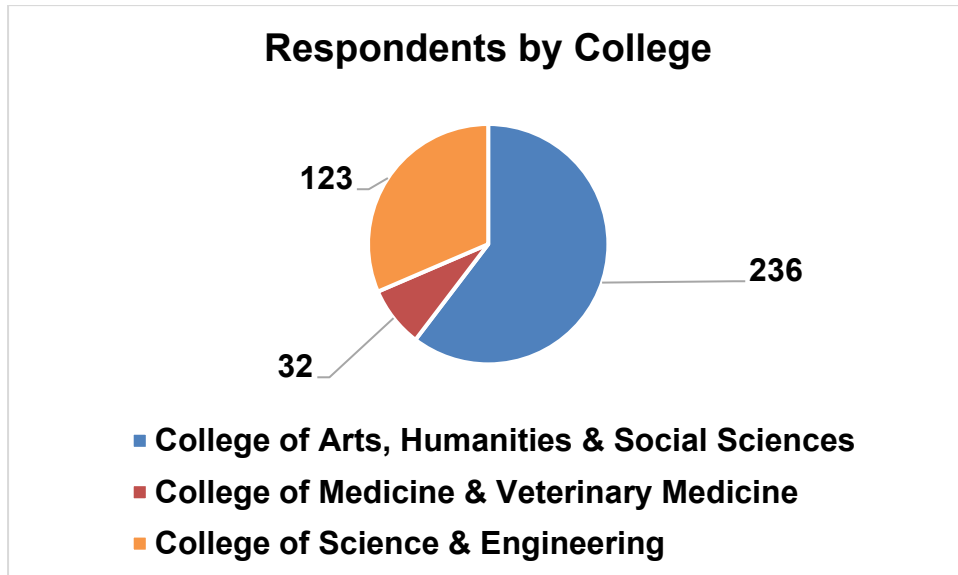


Figure 6: Upgrade to Learn Ultra student survey, respondents by College

In line with the overall figures, the majority of respondents from each College belonged to Cohort 2 (i.e., started their programmes before 2022/23): 54 per cent from (127) CAHSS, 60 per cent (74) from CSE, and 72 per cent (23) from CMVM.

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2
College of Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences	109	127
College of Medicine & Veterinary Medicine	9	23
College of Science & Engineering	49	74

Table 1: Upgrade to Learn Ultra student survey, respondents by College and Cohort

### Overall satisfaction with Learn Ultra

Both cohorts overall expressed high levels of general satisfaction with Learn Ultra's usability.

When asked: 'Generally speaking, how do you find accessing your courses on Learn Ultra?', 70 per cent of Cohort 1 respondents answered 'easy' or 'very easy', compared to only 6 per cent who answered 'hard' or 'very hard'.

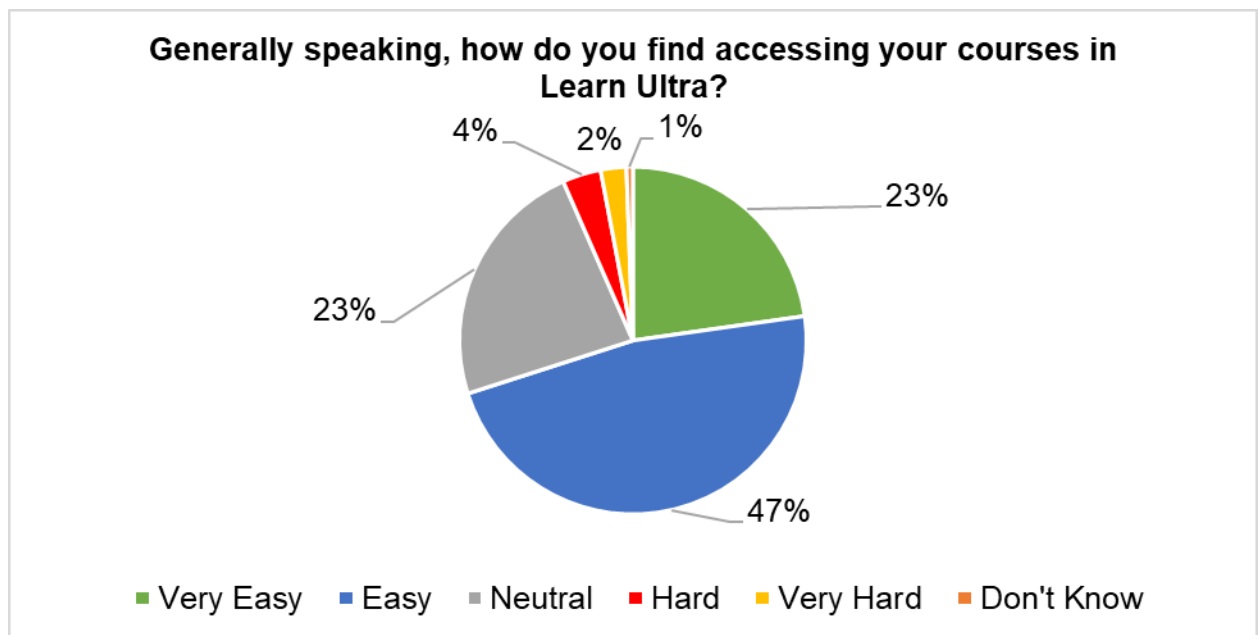


Figure 7: Upgrade to Learn Ultra student survey, general ease of use of Learn Ultra (Cohort 1).

Similarly, when Cohort 2 respondents were asked: 'Generally speaking, since the move to Learn Ultra, to what extent has it become easier or harder to access your courses?', 37 per cent thought it had become 'easier' or 'much easier', compared to 27 per cent who thought it was 'harder' or much 'harder', a 10-percentage point difference. One third of respondents thought the upgrade had no change.

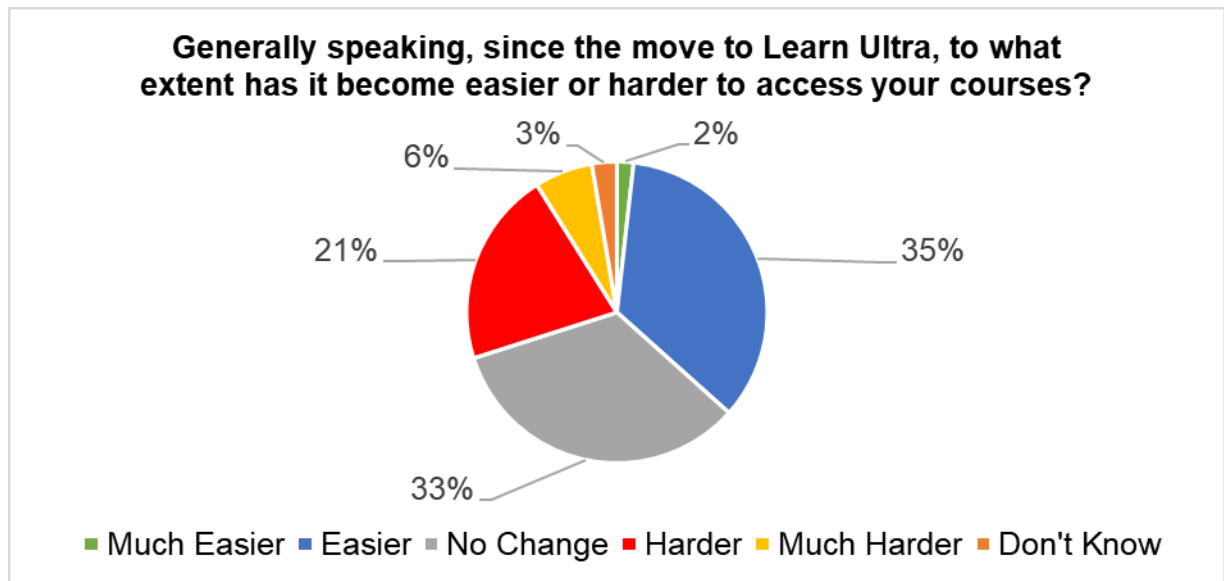


Figure 8: Upgrade to Learn Ultra student survey, general ease of use of Learn Ultra compared to Learn Original (Cohort 2).

### Correlations between positive staff and student experiences within Schools

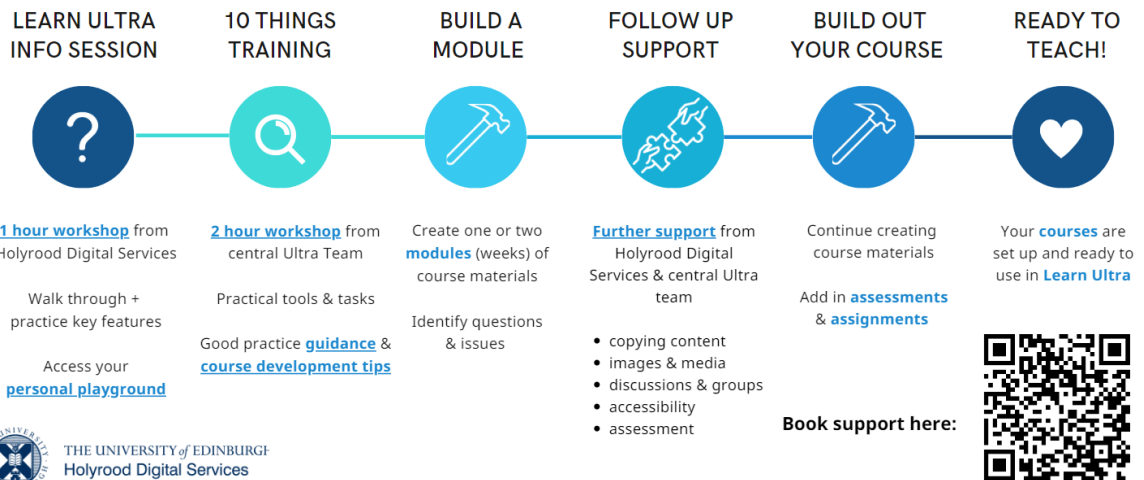
While the survey is limited in scope, it uncovered some anecdotal evidence that, in Schools whose staff reported positive experiences with the upgrade project during interviews/focus groups, their students may also report higher satisfaction levels with Learn Ultra.

For example, an interviewee from Moray House reported positive experiences with the project, providing an example of work within their School that led to a successful local implementation and embedding of Learn Ultra. The Holyrood Digital Services Team took a pro-active communications approach to engage with colleagues, holding advice sessions to keep colleagues informed on the project, and to inform them what support was available. Key slides from these sessions are shown in Figure 10 below:

# Road to Learn Ultra

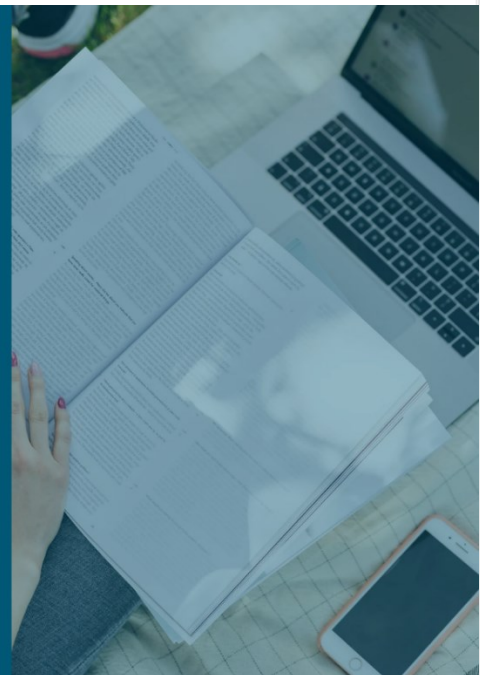
Contact: [digitalservices-holyrood@ed.ac.uk](mailto:digitalservices-holyrood@ed.ac.uk)

Below is one approach to course migration. Feel free to choose your own path.



## Getting Support

- [Request a playground](#)
- [Book a 10 Things Training \(PaM\)](#)
- [Book an Info Session or Further Support](#)
- [Good Practice Guidance](#)
- [Course Development Tips](#)
- Contact: [DigitalServices-Holyrood@ed.ac.uk](mailto:DigitalServices-Holyrood@ed.ac.uk)



# Task-Based Learn Ultra Training



One-hour in-person or online workshops from the central Ultra team:

- Tests and Question Banks
- Using Groups in Learn Ultra
- Marking Learn Ultra Assignments Using Blackboard Annotate
- Assignments in Learn Ultra
- Communication Tools in Learn Ultra
- Learn Ultra Gradebook - Introduction
- Learn Ultra Gradebook - Advanced
- Increasing the Accessibility of Your Teaching



Figure 9: Holyrood Digital Services Team, Learn Ultra Info Session, selected slides.

While there were only 10 students in total in the Cohort 2 sample, this small number of students appear more positive about Learn Ultra than Cohort 2 as a whole:

- 60 per cent (six students) find Learn Ultra 'easier' or 'much easier' to use, compared to 37 per cent among the whole of Cohort 2.
- 20 per cent (two students) find Learn Ultra 'harder' or much 'harder', compared to 27 per cent among the whole of Cohort 2.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The utility of this evaluation will be seen in the extent to which the lessons learned and the findings from one Change project can be passed on, build upon and used by the next. In conducting this evaluation analysis, the project team have identified a number of general recommendations for ISG project teams and groups, and colleagues across the sector who will be engaging in similar upcoming projects:

### *ISG and other professional services*

- *Learn lessons from other Change projects:* Reflect on the recommendations of previous strategic Change projects and how they feed into your own ongoing or upcoming projects.
- *Embed a 'Change' mentality in all projects:* Design and manage projects as Change projects, not simply systems implementations or technical changes.

### *Project Teams*

- *Effective Communication Strategies:* Establish an explicit communication strategy to facilitate transparent and timely communication with stakeholders. Use a combination of communication channels such as regular meetings, email updates, and Teams groups to ensure everyone is informed and aligned.
- *Stakeholder Engagement and Management:* Develop a stakeholder engagement and management plan to build relationships with key stakeholders throughout the project. Identify stakeholders, assess their interests and concerns, communicate regularly with them, and involve them in decision-making processes to ensure their buy-in and support.
- *A Clear Governance Structure:* Establish appropriate governance groups with defined terms of reference, with representation coming from across the University.
- *Local Representation in Governance Structure:* Foster a partnership approach by including local representatives in governance and implementation groups, and have them be responsible for dissemination of information in their local areas.
- *Continuous Improvement and Reflection:* Foster a culture of continuous improvement and reflection within the project team and with stakeholders by regularly evaluating progress, identifying lessons learned, and implementing process improvements where appropriate.
- *Ensure Senior Committees Understand the Project's Strategy:* Ensure that committee members have a clear understanding of how the project aligns with the university's strategic goals, mission, and values. Provide regular updates on how the project contributes to overarching objectives such as enhancing the student experience, supporting digital learning initiatives, and achieving institutional excellence.
- *Update Committees Regularly:* Provide committee members with timely and relevant information to support informed decision-making.



- *Collect Training Data:* If training is to be provided to stakeholders as part of the project, ensure sufficient data is collected to track progress (e.g. attendance rates, completions across Schools/Colleges, etc).

#### *Academic colleagues*

- *Early Engagement and Training:* It is beneficial to engage with Change projects at the earliest possible stage, by participating in training sessions and informational workshops.
- *Faculty Champions:* Identify and appoint faculty champions within your School who are enthusiastic about the upcoming change and willing to advocate for it. These faculty champions can serve as mentors to their peers, share best practices, and provide support during the transition process.

#### *Teaching Office colleagues*

- *Specialised Internal Support Teams:* Establish specialised support teams within teaching offices, dedicated to providing project support. Assign appropriate colleagues with relevant experience to ensure internal project coverage.
- *Clear Communication Channels:* Implement clear and accessible communication channels for School/College staff to receive updates, announcements, and guidance related to the project.

#### *Learning Technologists*

- *Pro-active Engagement with Project Team:* Engage early and effectively with the Project Team to ensure good communication practices are established. Communicate local progress to the Project Team regularly and identify areas where support is needed.
- *Pedagogical Support:* Provide appropriate pedagogical support to academic colleagues if the project requires it. If time and resource allow, offer assistance such as instructional design guides, training workshops, examples of good practice and tailored support.

#### *Governance and Implementation Group colleagues*

- *Clearly defined Terms of Reference:* Before assembling and convening groups, the Project Team should define the group's terms of reference, outlining the group's scope and objectives, to ensure members understand their roles and responsibilities.
- *Ensure information dissemination to Schools/Colleges:* The Project Team should ensure that group members understand their responsibility to inform their Schools/Colleges of key group developments and updates.
- *Encourage proactive involvement from members:* Ask members to bring local issues to the group for wider discussion.

## Appendix

The eight steps of John Kotter's Change Model	Project examples
<p><i>Establishing a Sense of Urgency:</i></p> <p>Leaders must communicate the need for transformation and highlight the risks of maintaining the status quo. By instilling a sense of urgency, organisations can mobilise stakeholders and overcome complacency.</p>	<p>The previous Learn Original VLE was outdated, updated infrequently and would eventually be decommissioned.</p> <p>Meanwhile, Learn's successor platform, Learn Ultra, was updated frequently by Blackboard/Anthology and had features that would address accessibility and usability issues with Learn Original identified by the University and enable integrations with hybrid working technology such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom which were rapidly gaining popularity in the University.</p> <p>ISG understood and need to upgrade the VLE and submitted a business case to University committees, underscoring the reasons why the upgrade was necessary.</p> <p>The University was embarking on an urgent process of curriculum transformation and review and it was sensible to put the upgraded VLE in place before colleagues engaged in a wholesale process of curriculum redesign so that the new curriculum could be built in the new VLE and colleagues would not have to change twice.</p> <p>Other peer universities were already underway with their upgrades and it was considered important that Edinburgh should not fall further behind in terms of student experience.</p>

The eight steps of John Kotter's Change Model	Project examples
	<p>Phase 1 of the project in 2022/23 implemented Ultra Base Navigation (UBN)<sup>33</sup>, the first step towards the full upgrade. UBN communicated and reinforced that VLE change would occur.</p>
<p><i>Forming a Powerful Coalition:</i></p> <p>Change efforts require the support of key stakeholders across the organisation. Leaders must assemble a diverse coalition of champions who are committed to the vision and can influence others. This coalition provides the necessary resources, expertise, and credibility to drive change forward.</p>	<p>ISG took an explicit partnership approach through the project to ensure involvement and buy-in from key stakeholders.</p> <p>For example, ISG recruited School and Local Learning Technologists from across the University to be part of the Project Team. This ensured they played a key role in the upgrade and enabling change in their local departments</p>

<sup>33</sup> [Learn VLE upgrade to Ultra Base Navigation](#)

The eight steps of John Kotter's Change Model	Project examples
<p data-bbox="203 357 562 384"><i>Creating a Vision for Change:</i></p> <p data-bbox="203 427 1106 564">A clear and inspiring vision serves as a roadmap for the change initiative. Leaders must articulate a compelling future state that aligns with the organisation's values and goals. This vision provides direction and motivates employees to embrace change despite uncertainties.</p>	<p data-bbox="1131 357 2033 453">The Project Team aimed to provide a platform that enhanced both the staff and student experience by providing a more modern and intuitive VLE.</p> <p data-bbox="1131 501 2033 852">The Team anticipated a degree of change resistance, and addressed this issue up-front at the beginning of the project. In a 2022 <i>Teaching Matters</i> blog,<sup>34</sup> Melissa Highton, Director of Learning, Teaching and Web Services (LTW), outlined the reasoning for the upgrade. The blog provided an overview of the upcoming project and noted that, while there is never a good time to upgrade a system, the upgrade was needed to ensure an enhanced VLE experience for staff and students. This first blog was followed by a series of Teaching Matters focused, themed posts which shared good practice and emerging thinking from the project over the duration.</p> <p data-bbox="1131 895 2033 1102">The project's vision for change was informed by the extensive programme of user experience (UX) research conducted during the project and the previous Learn Foundations project,<sup>35</sup> as well as published pedagogical research that explores the ways in which institutional technology tools can be best used to support learning and teaching.</p>

<sup>34</sup> [Melissa Highton \(2022\): The upgrade of Learn VLE to Learn Ultra at The University of Edinburgh](#)

<sup>35</sup> [Learn Foundations](#)



The eight steps of John Kotter's Change Model	Project examples
<p data-bbox="206 357 533 384"><i>Communicating the Vision:</i></p> <p data-bbox="206 427 1104 600">Effective communication is essential for gaining buy-in and building momentum. Leaders must consistently and transparently communicate the vision, explaining its rationale and benefits to all stakeholders. By fostering open dialogue and addressing concerns, organisations can foster trust and commitment.</p>	<p data-bbox="1133 357 2033 671">The Project Team dedicated significant time and resources to communications and engagement during the upgrade. The communications strategy identified several groups of key stakeholders and targeted them with multimodal communication, including blog posts, School/College visits and talks, committee papers, website articles, conference presentations (including the University of Edinburgh internal Learning and Teaching Conference and national conferences such as those organised by the Association of Learning Technologists and Blackboard /Anthology partners), and posters.</p> <p data-bbox="1133 715 2033 815">For example, senior members of the Project Team have published Teaching Matters articles and blogs throughout the project to update colleagues across the University:</p> <ul data-bbox="1182 858 2033 1104" style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="1182 858 2033 959">• Stuart Nicol: <i>'Learn Ultra Base Navigation: The changing face of our virtual learning environment' (May 2022);<sup>36</sup> and 'Adopting 'Ultra' Early: Leading the way with Learn' (Nov 2022).<sup>37</sup></i></li><li data-bbox="1182 967 2033 1034">• Karen Howie: <i>'Managing the upgrade of Learn from a stability and security perspective' (May 2022)<sup>38</sup></i></li><li data-bbox="1182 1042 2033 1104">• Satu Kapiainen: <i>'Learn Ultra: Delivering institution wide training to support change' (Feb 2024).<sup>39</sup></i></li></ul>

<sup>36</sup> [Stuart Nicol \(2022\): Learn Ultra Base Navigation: The changing face of our virtual learning environment](#)

<sup>37</sup> [Stuart Nicol \(2022\): Adopting 'Ultra' Early: Leading the way with Learn](#)

<sup>38</sup> [Karen Howie \(2022\): Managing the upgrade of Learn from a stability and security perspective](#)

<sup>39</sup> [Satu Kapiainen \(2024\): Learn Ultra: Delivering institution wide training to support change](#)

The eight steps of John Kotter's Change Model	Project examples
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Melissa Highton: <i>'Building a new learning platform for University of Edinburgh'</i> (Feb 2024).<sup>40</sup></li> <li>• Alan Hamilton (March 2022): <i>'Understanding how students interact with Learn Ultra and Ultra Base Navigation'</i><sup>41</sup></li> </ul> <p>Other relevant articles and Bulletin magazine articles were also published.<sup>42 43 44</sup></p>
<p><i>Removing Obstacles:</i></p> <p>To translate vision into reality, employees at all levels must be empowered to take action. Leaders should remove obstacles, provide resources, and encourage experimentation and innovation. By decentralising decision-making and fostering a culture of accountability, organisations can unleash the collective potential of their workforce.</p>	<p>The Project Team recognised that inexperience with Learn Ultra could be a potential source of change resistance, as well as causing local delays/resourcing issues when programmes were being migrated from Learn Original.</p> <p>This obstacle was removed by establishing the extensive '10 Things to get Started in Learn Ultra' training programme, which:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Was two hours long - long enough to cover important features of Learn Ultra, short enough to avoid overburdening time-strapped colleagues.</li> <li>• Was available in teacher-led and self-led formats</li> <li>• Was offered in face-to-face locations on several campuses and at various time of the day.</li> </ul>

<sup>40</sup> [Melissa Highton \(2024\): Building a new learning platform for University of Edinburgh](#)

<sup>41</sup> [Alan Hamilton \(2022\): Understanding how students interact with Learn Ultra and Ultra Base Navigation](#)

<sup>42</sup> [Our new Virtual Learning Environment - Bulletin \(ed.ac.uk\)](#)

<sup>43</sup> [A new look for Blackboard Learn VLE - Bulletin \(ed.ac.uk\)](#)

<sup>44</sup> [Learn VLE upgrade to Ultra Base Navigation](#)

The eight steps of John Kotter's Change Model	Project examples
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ran frequently, with sessions available weekly and during the summer, and both in-person and online.</li> <li>• Were never cancelled regardless of attendance numbers and cancellations so that no colleagues experienced trying to sign up for a session and then finding that it did not run.</li> <li>• Offered flexibility for local tailoring and adaptation to meet discipline specific focus.</li> </ul>
<p><i>Generating Short-Term Wins:</i></p> <p>Celebrating quick wins is critical for maintaining momentum and building confidence. Leaders should identify achievable milestones and celebrate progress along the way. These early successes demonstrate the viability of the change initiative and reinforce commitment among stakeholders.</p>	<p>The project had extensive project management and a fine-grained delivery plan, with numerous milestones during each phase. This produced many short-term wins for the Project Team as the upgrade gradually progressed.</p> <p>Implementing UBN successfully in the project's first phase represented a major win for the Project Team, and laid the foundations for the upcoming full upgrade.</p>
<p><i>Build on the Change:</i></p> <p>After achieving initial victories, organisations must consolidate gains and build on their success. Leaders should reinforce new behaviours</p>	<p>The Early Adopter Programme (EAP) was an initial success that the Project Team built on. Over 160 courses participated in this programme, providing invaluable insights that helped shape the support strategies for the wider implementation.</p>

The eight steps of John Kotter's Change Model	Project examples
<p>and systems, embedding change into the fabric of the organisation. This iterative process allows for continuous improvement and adaptation to evolving circumstances.</p>	<p>The EAP provided key learnings on how to embed organisational change after the full upgrade. For example, monthly College-level meetings with Schools were held to monitor progress stay alert to emerging issues.</p>
<p><i>Anchoring New Approaches in the Organisation's Culture:</i></p> <p>To ensure long-term sustainability, change must become ingrained in the organisational culture. Leaders should promote shared values and norms that support the desired behaviours and outcomes. By embedding change into policies, processes, and performance management systems, organisations can institutionalise new ways of working.</p>	<p>The project has embedded significant change at the University by providing a crucial upgrade to its VLE, and therefore to the staff and student learning experience.</p> <p>The project continued the commitment ( established as one of the lessons learned from the Learn Foundations Project) to employing student interns over the summer to support course roll-over</p> <p>The project has also embedded the importance of accessibility in the University. As a result of the project, Schools are now mandated to take part in accessibility reviews (it was previously opt-in).</p>

Table A1: The eight steps of John Kotter's Change Model, with project examples.



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