

# Scaling up online teaching and learning with Anthology at the University of the Free State, South Africa

How data is driving increased digitalisation efforts at UFS



The University of the Free State (UFS) is one of the oldest higher education institutions in South Africa. With three diverse campuses in Bloemfontein and Qwa-Qwa, the university serves 40,000 students across seven faculties.

UFS has a long history with learning management systems and for the last decade has used Blackboard® Learn as its LMS on all campuses.

**INSTITUTION TYPE:**  
FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC

**LOCATION:**  
BLOEMFONTEIN, SOUTH AFRICA

**ORGANIZATION SIZE:**  
40,000

Back in 2012, the UFS committed to a blended learning and teaching strategy. We needed a stable online learning platform that was used extensively in a higher education environment, internationally and nationally, and we opted for Blackboard [Learn].

**Tiana van der Merwe**

*Deputy director of the university's Centre for Teaching and Learning*

Between 2012 and 2016, the Blackboard Learn LMS was hosted locally, but UFS had big plans, and in 2017 opted to make the change to a SaaS route, migrating to Anthology's cloud-based LMS. Van der Merwe further explained: "By 2017, adoption of the Blackboard [Learn] LMS within the institution was just of such a magnitude - and we knew we wanted to scale this to an even larger extent - we decided to go to the cloud. Since we've gone down the SaaS route, we had the infrastructure and stability to support learning and teaching initiatives within faculties."



## The COVID-19 effect

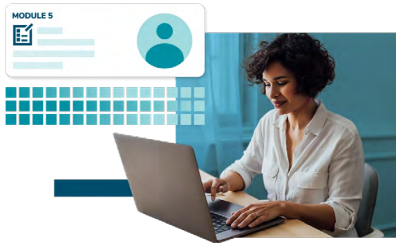
Making the move pre-COVID set UFS in good stead for what was to come. As was the case with most academic institutions, the pandemic pushed a massive surge in digital adoption and upped the pace of the university's digitalisation strategy. With such rapid change taking place, providing a stable and scalable LMS for their academics and students remained a priority for UFS.

"During COVID, our up-time on the system was 99.9%," said van der Merwe. "There was a total of three minutes of downtime for maintenance and upkeep that the university community didn't even notice. This was incredible, given the extraordinary time we experienced." With a stable system in place, UFS focused on scaling its online teaching and learning, quickly. Van der Merwe added: "We now have 99% of our teaching modules using the Blackboard LMS. Our next priority is to improve the quality of blended learning initiatives and ensure that technology is meaningfully integrated within the curriculum."



## It's all in the data

One significant advantage of moving to SaaS was gaining access to the data and analytical tools which come free with Blackboard Learn. "These past two years in particular, we've worked extensively with the data available through Blackboard," explained van der Merwe. "We have an analytics team at UFS, and it has become a key tool for us on a strategic but also teaching and learning classroom level."



The wealth of data available and UFS's willingness to delve into it have enabled the institution to continue to scale up its use of the LMS. Through faculty-specific reports on adoption - detailing how many staff and students are accessing and using the platform, and how they are using the different tools – van der Merwe and the team at UFS can track progress and actively encourage it. “With a current picture of how each faculty is using the platform, we can make suggestions for improvements and show them the possibilities,” said van der Merwe. “This helps us with faculty-specific initiatives that encourage adoption.”

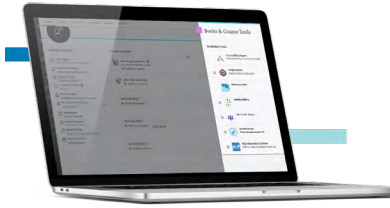
“It’s important to have access to the data, but then to allow faculties to contextualise it,” she continued. “They have the insight that can explain trends in data, and they are also best placed to know how to address those trends, for example, through additional student support.”

Seeing the power of data is driving adoption by academics at UFS, and one of van der Merwe’s most requested training sessions shows academics the student data they have access to through Blackboard Learn and how they can use this data to improve learning and teaching, and to support their students more proactively.

## The next level

As part of its new five-year digitalisation plan, UFS launched a curriculum renewal programme in 2021. The programme is designed to help academics think about how their subjects are taught in a blended learning environment and integrate aspects such as the LMS to create a meaningful learning experience for students. “Because,” explained van der Merwe, “the technology means nothing if it is not really embedded in the curriculum. Our aim is to become serious about technology, but the curriculum and the quality thereof are still the most critical aspect of learning and teaching.”

The programme started with around 100 staff and will be rolled out over the next few years to help more academics engage with the curriculum towards a new blended learning future at the institution.



The digitalisation plan also includes the roll-out of Blackboard Learn Ultra, Blackboard Learn's next-generation interface. With so much work already taking place to engage students and teaching staff through the LMS, van der Merwe sees a phased approach for UFS in the deployment of Learn Ultra. "Our plan is to let the early adopters and digitalisation ambassadors (champions) play around and become the change agents in the faculty, and then we will systematically move staff and students over to the new interface. It gives us the best of both worlds. There will be so much change as part of the new post-COVID environment, as well as institutional priorities such as the digitisation strategy, and we want to move people over as they feel comfortable. We want to equip them with the necessary skills, infrastructure, and support to use the new environment successfully."

Van der Merwe sees this people-centred approach as part of their success at UFS. "We have learning design teams allocated to each faculty, providing support to our academic staff, so they have a face that they can consult with and provide the necessary support. These relationships have been key in helping teaching staff feel comfortable with the technology, especially with regard to their teaching," she explained.



## People bring it together

The importance of good relationships extends beyond campus, and van der Merwe sees the support from Anthology, and the wider Anthology community in South Africa, as a key factor in successfully scaling up online learning management at UFS.

We have a very good relationship with [Anthology], and I see them as partners in the process. I can pick up the phone - and I do pick up the phone - and I know we will be supported immediately.



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*Deputy director of the university's Centre for Teaching and Learning*

“This relationship was critical when it came to renewing our contract with [Anthology]. As was the support from the wider community - we knew we could reach out to our friends and colleagues, such as those at UP (University of Pretoria), for support. It’s very important to have that community,” she continued.

“During COVID, we had all the technology to continue teaching and learning, but it would not have been possible if it was not for the people. If academic and support staff, as well as students, didn’t feel that they could do it, if they didn’t feel supported, if they didn’t feel empowered, then teaching and learning couldn’t continue. That is why at UFS, we are serious about making sure we give you the right tools, but we also want to make sure that you feel supported to achieve what you want to achieve in your teaching and learning,” van der Merwe concluded.

With a stable and reliable LMS in place and an exciting five-year digitalisation plan that will continue to push digital adoption at the institution, UFS continues to scale up its online learning management and empower academics and students and be a model of teaching and learning excellence in Africa. At Anthology, we are inspired by our partnership with UFS, and will continue to support and drive the institution’s teaching and learning goals and ambitions.

# It would not have been possible if it was not for the people.



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