

OWL Migration Plan Community Feedback Summary

Executive Summary

Western University has been using a customized version of Sakai to power OWL, our learning management system (LMS), since 2012. While aspects of Sakai have served our community well over the last decade, the search for a new LMS is the result of a community-wide user review of OWL in 2019, ongoing changes to the learning environment, “lessons learned” that arose throughout the pandemic, and the release of Western’s strategic plan in 2021, all of which identified several important current and future opportunities to improve the LMS experience at Western.

In alignment with and in support of Western’s strategic goals, the OWL Migration Plan seeks to find a new LMS that will:

- enrich student experience through a more modern, accessible, and device-friendly interface
- provide consistency and ease of use in learner and instructor experience
- be the core of Western’s learning environment that can enable strategic priorities
- support Western’s strategic growth
- offer the ability to rapidly and dynamically expand system capacity and performance to match usage needs

As part of this process, the OWL Migration Plan team sought feedback and insight from the Western community of learners, instructors, and staff to understand their needs in a learning management system for the purpose of teaching and learning. This information will be used to guide the selection of a new LMS to power OWL as it relates to instructional activities. *Instructional activities* are defined as any activity related to learning, and so reaches beyond academic course instruction to activities such as co-curricular modules, training and development, materials developed by staff units that programs include as optional or required activities, and tools that integrate with OWL to support instruction (e.g., Course Reading Tool, LibGuides).

In summary, the Western community has asked that our new LMS address the following priorities:

1. A modern, intuitive, efficient, and consistent interface
2. A reliable and stable learning and user experience
3. Improved functionality in several key areas and improved integration of external tools
4. Support learners with accessibility requirements, in part by making it easier to create accessible content in the LMS

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Collecting Community Feedback

Community input into a new learning management system is an important piece of the OWL Migration Plan. The project team built in strategies to provide the community with opportunities to ask questions and give feedback. Feedback from the community was essential in shaping the evaluation materials that guide Western’s selection of the new LMS.

Throughout the spring and summer of 2022, the OWL Migration Project team engaged Faculty, Student, Administration, and Staff groups with early awareness presentations and information to ready the campus to provide feedback through surveys and listening sessions. A website with key information and timelines about the project was developed ahead of the August 2022 survey launch. Most importantly, surveys and listening sessions allowed the project team to hear specific feedback from OWL users and gather further requirements for a new LMS.

Community Survey Responses:

Community surveys were conducted from August 24 – September 21, 2022. Three unique surveys were sent to students, faculty, and staff.

- The faculty survey received 600 responses.
- The student survey received 2,929 responses.
- The staff survey received 1,215 responses.

The quantitative results of the community surveys are available in the *Evaluator Report on OWL Migration Project User Feedback Surveys (Quantitative Data)*. Qualitative data is also summarized through the themes below.

Listening Sessions:

Survey respondents were also invited to themed Listening Sessions to share more about their needs in a future LMS. The OWL Migration Plan team conducted 15 listening sessions with faculty, students, and staff from September 22 – 30, 2022. Topics included: Accessibility, Administration and Course Coordination, Assessments, Graduate Teaching Assistants, Large Classes, Collaboration, and General Topics. Additionally, the project team hosted targeted stakeholder sessions for groups with specialized technical and functional requirements and unique LMS use cases.

All qualitative data from the listening sessions, survey, and targeted stakeholder sessions were analyzed and themed, then employed along with the surveys' quantitative data to inform the development of the requirements and evaluation criteria for selecting the new LMS.

Community Feedback Findings

Based on the Western community OWL user feedback, Western's priority needs for a future Learning Management System (LMS) to support teaching and learning are:

1. A modern, intuitive, efficient, and consistent interface
2. A reliable and stable learning and user experience
3. Improved functionality in several key areas and improved integration of external tools
4. Support learners with accessibility requirements, in part through making it easier to create accessible content in the LMS

These themes are detailed below, noting where specific faculty and student considerations and concerns converge and diverge. Where applicable, staff concerns related to instruction are included in the faculty concerns.

1. A modern, intuitive, efficient, and consistent interface

All types of users asked for an LMS with a modern look and navigational interface that is aesthetically pleasing and intuitive and efficient to use. From a teaching and learning perspective, this theme is perhaps the most important in the search for a new LMS as:

- Intuitiveness and efficiency strongly influenced the extent to which instructors and/or course creators were willing or able to use OWL to support instruction. Many users do not use OWL or use it less than they would like because the current LMS is not particularly intuitive or efficient, and OWL in its current form has a steep learner curve.
- The “blank course shell” configuration of the current OWL affects students' ability to focus on learning: currently, considerable time is spent learning how to interact with OWL for each course, how to create and find content, and how to accurately interpret what is expected of students due to the large inconsistencies in how instructors use tool and build course experiences in OWL.

In addition, all users want the ability to search and organize content within the LMS, particularly in the Gradebook, Forums, and general course content (i.e., the Lessons tool).

Faculty Perspectives:

- The interface for course creators should be quick and intuitive, using less steps or “clicks,” particularly as it relates to creating and editing tests & quizzes, assignments, the Gradebook, Groups, Forums, and general content creation.
- Copying and updating course content within and across courses (both year-to-year and among different courses or sites) must be easy and involve less steps.
- Instructors and course creators want the option to keep a consistent format for content across courses, and, where changes are necessary (for example, changing an assignment deadline), they should be easy and quick to make.
- Faculty acknowledge that there is a tension between being able to create a highly customized OWL site, a more intuitive, easy to learn interface, and student desire for a more consistent experience across course sites. While faculty lean toward wanting more customizability, we also heard this might limit how their colleagues choose to use the LMS in the future (or if they use it at all).

Student Perspectives

- Navigating and browsing the LMS and courses should be easy and intuitive.
- The LMS should encourage instructors or course designers to structure courses and use tools consistently among programs and different courses, e.g., tools are in the same order with the same name, content located in the same area of each course, the order in which students should work through content and activities is consistent and clear, etc.

2. A reliable and stable learning and user experience

Many users in the Western community, regardless of their role, shared frustrating and stressful experiences with the current LMS in the form of site downtime, crashes, slow navigational speeds between pages and different sections of a course site, and upload/refresh speeds. Instructors teaching large-enrolment classes noted that they experienced some of these challenges more frequently when working in the OWL course site. Preference is for the new LMS to:

- Have improved “up times” (e.g., less crashes or time down for maintenance) overall.
- Have reliable performance at all times, but particularly when there are large numbers of students using the LMS at the same time, especially as it relates to simultaneous mass student log-ins and specific tool use (i.e., Tests and Quizzes).
- Have fast and consistent upload/refresh speeds overall, but particularly as it relates to tools that contain more complex or larger data files (e.g., Gradebook, Forums, Lessons) and regardless of class size.

3. Improved functionality in key areas and external tools integration

OWL users had many suggestions about the types of functions they would like in a new LMS. While some suggestions reside outside of what can be addressed *only* through the introduction of a new LMS (e.g., they might reflect qualities of other software that interact with our LMS), common key suggestions across users within the scope of evaluating a potential new LMS included:

- Seamless tool integration of the most popular software used by Western community (Office 365, Zoom, Gradescope, etc.), or built-in features within the LMS that make for good substitution of these tools. Users clearly indicated a preference to keep tasks within the LMS rather than “link out” to external tools or sites
- Smart search features that allow users to quickly find what they are looking for, particularly in areas such as general course content (e.g. the Lessons Tool), Forums, and Gradebook
- Assignments submissions in different file formats and mediums (video, audio, text); the ability to use different media more seamlessly in other areas of the course, (e.g. Forums. Test and Quizzes) is also desirable
- Modern forums that make it easy to do group work, communicate, and to track and assess discussions
- Tools that allow instructors and students to easily track student progress and engagement in a course (e.g., what still needs to be completed, last time logged in, missed work), with notifications available related to upcoming or late/missed tasks
- Tools that support providing individualized and automated feedback to students on their work (with preference given to individualized feedback tools)
- Tools that enable interactive activities within the LMS lessons (e.g., self-assessments, practice materials)
- Tools that more efficiently facilitate groupwork across all LMS activities
- Tools that help students better navigate academic integrity

Faculty Perspectives

- Instructors want a robust and easy-to-use interface to create and modify assignments, quizzes, tests, and exams that are administered through the LMS. More in-line grading options (e.g., not having to bulk upload and download assignments to grade them)
- Better features for assigning and grading group work and peer review, as well as for distributing grading across multiple individuals and roles (e.g. TA, Grader)
- A robust grading and feedback system that allows for complex Gradebook calculations, grading mass submissions, providing pinpoint feedback, and considering efficiently addressing individual situations such as student absences, accommodations, need to reassign weights to assignments, late submissions, resubmissions, missed submissions, etc.
- Availability of data and statistics on student assessments, such as how long it takes to complete quizzes, answer questions, how often students interact with online course content, etc.

- More accurate “student” view of the course

Student Perspectives

- Integration with personal calendars (Outlook, Google Calendar, etc.) and the ability to see all course due dates in one place; overall an easier or more consistent way to see all notifications in one place across all courses.
- More consistent options for communicating with instructors: most student would prefer to keep communications within OWL, and many requested a chat feature that would enable them to chat with peers and, in some cases, the instructor within the OWL site (particularly if they have a question during a timed assessment)
- Improve test and quizzes navigation for longer assessments, e.g., easier to go “backward and forward” as one would be able to do with a paper exam.

4. Supporting Accessibility

Accessibility data revealed two main themes: (1) accessibility as it relates to supporting individuals with accessibility requirements, and (2) as it relates to general ability to effectively access and use OWL for any user. For theme (2), all roles requested:

- A stable mobile experience that performs at the same standard and with the same functionality as the web-based version: students in particular requested this
- Other accessibility issues are included in theme 1: A Modern, Intuitive, Efficient, and Consistent User Interface. Instructors and content creators noted that they did not find OWL “Accessible” because of its current configuration and learning curve, and that they felt this often led to inequities in teaching as some instructors were either more pre-disposed to build “good” OWL sites and/or had more time to do so.

In relation to supporting individual users with accessibility requirements, common requests across all roles beyond what will be considered in the standard review process for AODA requirements were for:

- Enabling users to make simple customizations so their LMS experience is more accessible according to their own preferences, e.g., dark-mode, changing font size and colour, organizing the home screen, etc.
- For the LMS to provide prompts and guidelines for AODA compliance for instructors and content creators (example: reminder to add alt tags to images and to flag content that may create a challenge for specific users, e.g., table layout, no alt tag, page layout).
- In addition, some of the functionality requirements described in Theme 3 will meet requests related to more options to create courses using a Universal Design for Learning approach (e.g., more options for multimedia and file types across LMS tools, including how assignments are submitted and feedback given).