ADA University
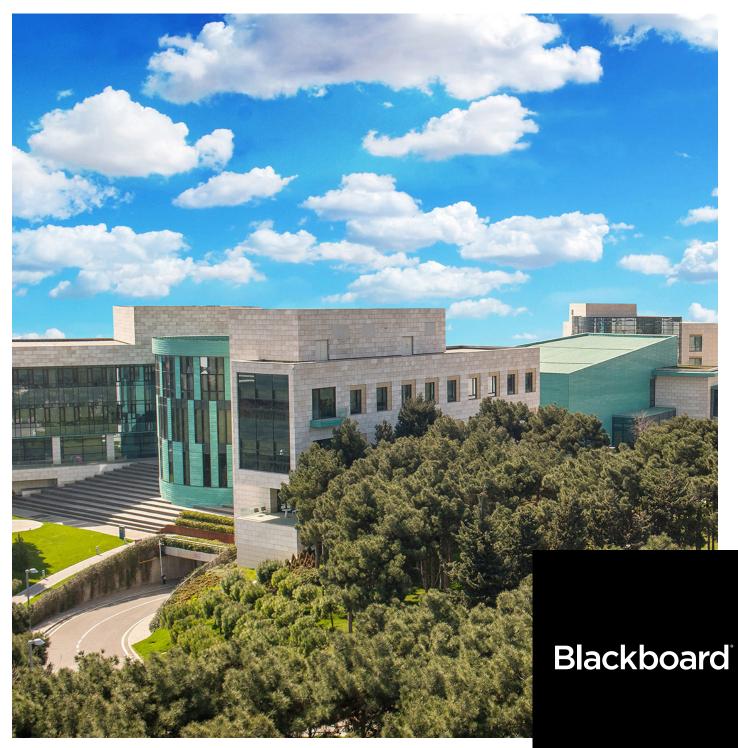
Empowering educators with effective digital teaching and learning practices to boost student performance

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Technology has become inseparable from the everyday lives of students, and with each new generation of learners it is becoming increasingly possible to leverage technology to support student success. To do so, institutions must be equipped with the necessary tools, and their faculty members with the necessary skills. As a global leader in online teaching and learning, Blackboard is deeply committed to enabling the innovative use of technology to deliver a higher quality of education. In line with this, Blackboard has developed the Digital Teaching and Learning Series (DTLS), a certification programme that offers professional development to education practitioners in the use of digital learning technologies. The series is specifically designed to empower teaching staff to capably and efficiently meet the needs of today's learners.

ADA University in Azerbaijan is widely regarded as a pioneer amongst its peers in the region. The University recently devised a strategic plan to boost student performance by using technology to make improvements to its teaching and learning. As a crucial step in its strategic plan, ADA University introduced a new learning management system (LMS), Blackboard Learn, into its infrastructure. However, to achieve the desired results, ADA University needed to enable large-scale adoption of the LMS across its faculty in a relatively small timeframe.

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– Vafa Kazdal
  Vice Rector of Academic Affairs

The Opportunity at the Glance

Challenge: University leadership quickly became aware that simply implementing best-in-class technology was not enough. They also needed to invest in faculty training to drive adoption of the LMS. "It was critical that new learning management system was introduced as part of overall pedagogical philosophy of ADA University and adopted by its faculty as a tool to achieve one of its main goals – creating innovative learning culture" says Vafa Kazdal, Vice Rector of Academic Affairs. Only then could this implementation translate into improvements in academic performance.

Solution: ADA University leveraged Blackboard's Digital Teaching and Learning Series to advance the knowledge and skills of its faculty members. The courses and workshops shed light on the importance of adopting technology within teaching practices, as well as introduced the staff to the many benefits of non-traditional models such as blended learning and the flipped classroom. Instructors were also made aware of how they could monitor individual student performance and adopt strategies for timely intervention.

Results: ADA University is now close to being one of the largest institutions when it comes to the number of certified faculty members and key support staff through the DTLS programme — all 125 members are expected to complete their certifications by mid-2020. Adoption rates are gradually increasing, and the teaching staff has since observed a marked increase in

student engagement. The staff has reported better communication with its students, enhancements to the grading and feedback processes, improved organisation of coursework, as well as a rise in the motivation levels of students.

Linking Technology to Teaching and Learning

Challenge

In 2017, ADA University put its new strategic plan into action — the university began to scale up its investments in digital technologies with the ultimate goal of boosting the academic performance of its students. Two new platforms, a student information system (SIS) and the Blackboard Learn LMS, were introduced into the institution's teaching and learning infrastructure. But it soon became clear that the mere implementation of an LMS would not be enough to achieve the institution's objective.

"Posting some content online and grading a handful of assignments through the new LMS was not good enough for us. We wanted the learning technology to be an integral part of the daily lives of our faculty and our students. We realised that without investing in the professional development and training of our faculty, we would never be able to reach the required level of adoption," explains Samira Rasulova, Director of Faculty Affairs and Academic Administration at ADA University.

To enable true widespread adoption, ADA University realised it would first have to overcome the barriers to adoption. Among these were the varying skill levels of the teaching staff in the use of technology, which ranged from basic users to native users. Another factor was the staff's resistance to the adoption of non-traditional, unfamiliar methods of teaching such as blended learning and the flipped classroom.

Solution

Through its strategic partnership with Blackboard, ADA University was introduced to the Digital Teaching and Learning Series. The series perfectly fit the university's needs as it was geared for the professional development of faculty members and support teaching staff. Through the certification program, education institutions can comply with institution standards for teaching, increase the investment value of their learning technology, provide a consistent pedagogy delivery using technology, and have confidence in their academic staff's teaching and learning approach.

Blackboard Accredited Facilitators began delivering DTLS workshops on ADA University's campus and through occasional remote-classroom sessions in the summer of 2018. The university's goal was to get all 125 of its staff certified through the DTLS programme, including faculty members and key support staff across its four schools of Business, Education, IT and Engineering, and Public and International Affairs.

"The course on the fundamentals of digital teaching and learning proved particularly useful to the staff. Many of them didn't fully understand our reasons for adopting Blackboard and how it could benefit their teaching.

We needed to link technology to teaching and learning, and this course shed light on the philosophy at the core of digital teaching and learning. It also elucidated the benefits of blended learning and the flipped classroom, and how technology could help us monitor student performance and intervene in a timely manner where necessary," notes Rasulova.

Feedback from ADA University's staff on the DTLS courses has also been quite favourable with several participants praising the programme's hands-on approach, immediate practical applications, and introduction of new teaching methods.

Results

ADA University is now very close to achieving its objective of certifying all 125 of its staff through the DTLS programme. By the middle of 2020, the univeristy expects its entire faculty and key support staff to have completed the series and receive certifications. Meanwhile, with regard to any new staff that might join or visiting staff that might come onboard for a semester or two, ADA University has assembled a group of faculty support specialists that have completed the entire DTLS programme and can now capably assist new or visiting staff with technology adoption.

"We have interviewed several faculty members as well as surveyed students. Overall, we have received excellent feedback on the increase in student engagement. DTLS emphasises the benefits of collaborative learning, and we have seen our staff adopt new strategies to encourage group activities, peer assessments and participation through online discussion forums. Students have also praised the quality and speed of feedback they now receive from faculty members through these online channels," shares Rusalova.

ADA University's faculty has made several changes to their pedagogical practices after attending the DTLS courses,and has since seen many noteworthy improvements. The teaching staff has reported increases in interactions with students and collaborations with fellow instructors, and improved organisation across course materials. In some cases, the efficiency of online grading has even resulted in reduced office hours.

"The main benefit of the programme is that we have managed to eliminate a lot of additional work. The attendance tool, for example, is very helpful. I can easily mark students when they are absent or

late, and students can easily view their overall attendance in one place. I can now also reach my students in multiple ways, through announcements and group e-mails, or I can schedule office hours or hand out grades in real-time, all through one platform," says Esmira Tahirova, the Azerbaijani Language Instructor.

"After attending the DTLS programme, I started using more web-based resources and was able to deliver customised materials to the different groups for each of their projects. Since then their motivation levels have increased — digital teaching and learning has improved their understanding and they have started to view the subject as more interesting," comments Gulmammad Mammadov, Professor of Physics at ADA's School of It and Engineering.

Looking ahead, ADA University is considering the idea of becoming a Center of Excellence of DTLS to help the wider proliferation of the knowledge and skill its faculty has acquired through Blackboard.

Conclusion

Empowering educators with professional development in effective digital teaching and learning practices can truly optimise the use of an LMS. Through their learning, teaching staff can better channel the tools available to them to deliver a stronger experience to their students. Blackboard's Digital Teaching and Learning Series can provide this crucial professional development to create a consistent, results-driven teaching and learning infrastructure for teachers and students.

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