Seven Client Perspectives: Transitioning to SaaS Deployment and Blackboard Learn with the Ultra Experience
Educational institutions globally are making the switch from Managed Hosting and self-hosting to SaaS deployment, and from Blackboard Learn Original to Learn with the Ultra experience.

SaaS deployment for Blackboard Learn provides a scalable and reliable foundation for world-class learning experiences. With SaaS, educational institutions globally will reap the benefits of cloud architecture including continuous updates with zero downtime, enhanced quality, and rapid product innovation. With SaaS, Blackboard staff are managing the operations of the system 24x7x365 and new features, maintenance, and fixes are delivered faster than ever.

Once on the SaaS deployment for Learn, institutions have the option to enable Blackboard Learn with the Ultra experience (Learn Ultra), Blackboard’s redesigned, modern, fully responsive interface and intuitive user experience that saves time, drives student and institutional success, and goes beyond the traditional learning management system (LMS). Learn Ultra delivers a simpler, more powerful teaching and learning experience, that better engages students, eases the burden on educators, and clears the path to success.

The following seven universities in the Middle East and Turkey have decided to transition to the SaaS deployment for Learn, and most are adopting or planning to adopt Learn Ultra. Read below to gain insights into their experiences so far.

**King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (Thuwal, Saudi Arabia)**

**Reason for Moving to SaaS:** King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) moved to SaaS deployment for Learn in late March 2019 from Managed Hosting as its first step toward Blackboard Learn with the Ultra experience.

“We wanted to ‘re-launch’ the Blackboard LMS at KAUST,” says Zafer Ali, ADM Functional Specialist (Blackboard Lead) at KAUST. “We conducted various workshops with our users and found that they didn’t want a system that had ‘101 tools,’ but rather something that was simple, intuitive, and easy to use. They wanted a product that allowed them to do the basics, like uploading assignments and communicating with one another. We found Learn Ultra to be the best fit and needed to move to SaaS in order to get it.”

**Transition Experience:** The migration to SaaS was smooth, as it only took three days to fully transition. The university reports having no issues so far, noting that the learning environment is now quicker and Blackboard’s technical support has been good in addressing concerns or issues.

**Perspective on SaaS:** To moving to Blackboard Learn with SaaS deployment, Zafer says:

“The move to SaaS was a lot easier than I thought it would be. The
Blackboard technical team was very helpful and gave us plenty of time for testing. They made sure we were happy, confident, and comfortable before we cut over. They were also available afterwards to help tackle any issues, if they were to arise.”

Batterjee Medical College – Jeddah (Jeddah, Saudi Arabia)

**Reason for Moving to Learn Ultra:** Batterjee Medical College migrated from an in-house LMS to Learn Ultra in September 2019. The college identified several advantages to moving to Learn Ultra, including an increase in usability and accessibility to users through more secure data sharing, as well as the power of an automated backup system. Additionally, the need for 24x7x365 technical service, disaster recovery, and demand for new releases were all key decision drivers for the college to make the switch. The college also found Learn Ultra to be more cost-effective.

**Perspective on Learn Ultra:** According to Dr. Osama Kensara, Dean of Batterjee Medical College – Jeddah, the college is looking forward to experiencing less to no system down time, especially during critical time periods such as year-end exams.

Regarding his experience in moving to Learn Ultra, Dr. Kensara says:

“Technology is moving so quickly that Batterjee Medical College requires a system that can keep up. The Blackboard Learn SaaS experience will help you in meeting this need.”

Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi (Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates)

**Reason for Moving to SaaS:** Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi migrated to the Learn SaaS in July 2019 from Managed Hosting. The university’s goal was to be a smart campus—a fully digital campus—and as a part of this plan, university leaders prioritized the adoption of the latest, most advanced education technologies such as artificial intelligence, virtual or augmented reality, and Blackboard Learn.

With the SaaS deployment for Blackboard Learn, Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi is better positioned to expand their e-learning offering and satisfy users throughout their student journey. According to Hamdan Alkhalbani, Head of Digital Transformation and Innovation, university leaders decided to move to Learn SaaS with the aim to:

- Offer technical service around the clock, beyond normal business hours
- Provide a strong, scalable environment with up-to-date infrastructure to support university initiatives
- Better manage risk by offering a disaster recovery solution
• Provide a positive experience for both students and faculty members
• Offload Learn system management to allow their team to re-focus on user adoption and engagement
• Implement initiatives that increase user engagement, enhancement, and productivity
• Keep the system up to date with new releases to help empower users and achieve their learning journey expectations
• To fulfil the trend to SaaS, which Alkhalbani believes will become mandatory for universities in the short term

Transition Experience: “The transition to SaaS was smooth and the Blackboard team was highly professional,” comments Alkhalbani. The system has been stable, and all features are working as expected. In addition, the university has received good support from Blackboard’s implementation team in addressing their questions.

Perspective on SaaS: By moving to SaaS, the university was looking forward to zero downtime, increasing the platform’s effectiveness and stability, increasing user engagement, empowering faculty to use the tools with ease, and enabling a steady and continuous learning experience. Alkhalbani believes Learn SaaS is far more efficient and stable and is looking to adopt Learn Ultra during phase three of the implementation.

“Based on our experience, we would absolutely recommend any institution move to Blackboard Learn with the SaaS deployment. Blackboard has a great team that works hard to satisfy clients and keep them on track,” says Alkhalbani.

University of Sharjah (Sharjah, United Arab Emirates)

Reason for Moving to SaaS: The University of Sharjah (UOS) migrated to the SaaS deployment for Blackboard Learn from Managed Hosting in August 2019. University leaders saw this move as a means of strengthening their student and faculty experience as well as minimizing the demand on their information technology team as SaaS eliminates system downtime, introduces fixes faster, and minimizes support required by staff. Additionally, their goal is to adopt Learn Ultra, and SaaS is the gateway to this more modern offering.

Transition Experience: According to Anissa Bettayeb, Head of Academic Computing Services at the university, the migration to SaaS was very smooth, especially given the fact that the university was the first in the Middle East to perform a course migration. This process required them to redo the setup of all existing settings and customizations. Since the transition to SaaS, the system has not gone down, and while they have placed a few tickets, Blackboard’s support has addressed them in a timely manner.

Only a few days after migrating to cloud, the university hosted their first online exams on SaaS with more than 1000 students starting their exam at the same time, which was previously impossible.
Perspective on SaaS: Regarding the experience of moving to SaaS, Bettayeb says:

“The move to SaaS was a great experience. Every higher education institution should consider the move to SaaS and Learn Ultra as a means of enhancing the student experience. We plan on moving to Learn Ultra as soon as it is available in Arabic.”

Maltepe University (Istanbul, Turkey)

Reason for Moving to SaaS and Learn Ultra: For Maltepe University, moving to a more modern interface that provided zero downtime updates was a priority. In September 2019, the university switched from Learn 9.1 with the Managed Hosting deployment to Learn Ultra. The decision to migrate was made mostly due to the demand for new releases, as well as the institution’s desire to follow the SaaS trend.

Transition Experience: “The migration process was smooth thanks to Blackboard’s knowledgeable transition team,” shares Erdal Yaslica, Director of the Distance Education Center at Maltepe University. “Our instructors agree that the new interface is more user friendly. Although there is some feature discrepancy between the two interfaces, they are far outweighed by the operational efficiencies we’ve gained.”

Perspective on SaaS and Learn Ultra: Since moving to the SaaS deployment and Learn Ultra, Maltepe’s leaders have experienced a decrease in the demand for technical support and an increase in system usage—improvements they attribute to Learn Ultra’s more streamlined and user-friendly interface. As far as challenges go, they believe improvements should be made to exams, which the Blackboard team is looking to solve through a release in the near future. They would also like to have a ticket system that allows faculty and students to submit their own tickets to get support when needed.

Maltepe also switched over to Learn Ultra, which Yaslica believes was the right decision for them. They are looking forward to having some of the new features available in Learn Ultra, in particular for mobile. Yaslica believes Ultra brings great benefits, particularly with features being released faster.

“The process of moving to SaaS was easier than a system upgrade, and that’s something that we never have to concern ourselves with again. The team at Blackboard has been fantastic throughout the process. The platform is more stable, and our resources have been freed up to add greater value to our university. There couldn’t be a simpler decision!”

-Robert Irving, Director, Information Technology Center, University of Sharjah
Regarding his experience to moving to Blackboard Learn SaaS, Yaslica would say to other educational institutions:

“Ultra offers the advantages of a simple interface, increased ease of use, and to be always using the latest version.”

**Izmir University of Economics (Izmir, Turkey)**

**Reason for Moving to SaaS and Learn Ultra:** Prior to making the transition to the SaaS deployment for Learn, Izmir University of Economics (IUE) was using Managed Hosting. When university leaders were first introduced to SaaS and Learn Ultra, they were impressed by the new look and feel of the system. They believed Learn Ultra presented an excellent opportunity to offer their faculty a more comprehensive, intuitive, and streamlined user interface, which their users were demanding. They were also looking to mitigate technical service costs and to supply the demand of new releases without having to worry about Managed Hosting. Following the SaaS trend was another important factor in making their decision to migrate.

**Transition Experience:** IUE began moving to SaaS in early June 2019. Regarding the migration experience, Dr. Esin Caglayan, IUE’s Teaching and Learning Center Director, shares, “It’s been a smooth transition with the assistance of Blackboard’s Cloud Provisional Team.” Progress updates were provided on a regular basis, and two separate SaaS sites were set up for IUE’s use: a temporary test migration site to be used to test the migration from their Managed Hosted environment to SaaS and a permanent test site where Learn Ultra could be immediately enabled. “Tests began on the first site and the very few issues that came up were raised and taken care of by the migration team and Blackboard staff,” shares Caglayan.

Since the migration, things have been going well, according to Caglayan, with no major issues to highlight. More tests are on the horizon for the university to get fully acquainted with the new system and reach a higher level of expertise so the team can begin to train faculty. The issues encountered so far have been handled “in a professional manner,” comments Caglayan.

**Perspective on SaaS and Learn Ultra:** IUE is highly anticipating Learn Ultra’s more user-friendly environment, along with simplified workflows and a more modern look and feel. They are also looking forward to taking full advantage of the benefits of a cloud architecture, “which promises to eliminate downtime during updates and allows us to get new features, enhancements, and fixes on a regular basis,” comments Caglayan. For them, the greatest challenge will be in training faculty and providing assistance once they switch to the Ultra experience.

IUE is currently at the planning stages of moving over to Blackboard Ultra, with staff members attending the Blackboard Learn Ultra Cohort Training Series. After that, an Ultra pilot with three to five faculty members will be coordinated. Outreach and communication will be the main component within their plan to ensure all faculty members are prepared for the change. In order to ensure a smooth transition, a timeline has been put in place.

“The rapid growth of SaaS is undeniable. With SaaS deployment for Learn Ultra, the LMS will be delivered on a modern cloud computing architecture for increased stability, data recovery, and faster roadmap delivery. What’s more, the earlier you migrate to SaaS, the sooner you will be introduced to the Ultra experience, which has simplified workflows, and a more modern look and feel.”

– Dr. Esin Caglayan, Izmir University of Economics, Turkey
Effat University (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia)

**Reason for Moving to SaaS:** Effat University migrated from Managed Hosting to the SaaS deployment for Learn in summer 2019 in order to provide a stable environment with zero downtime. They wanted to eliminate their class cancellation crisis periods that resulted in their previous system’s frequent unavailability. The need for technical service outside normal business hours, risk management, competing demands for information technology resources, and the SaaS trend were all aspects considered by the university’s administration and information technology teams when making the decision to move to Learn SaaS. SaaS according to Omar Koronfula, Application Assistant at Effat University’s Management of Information and Educational Technology Services division, “runs smoothly, and without faults.”

**Transition Experience:** The actual migration, according to Koronfula, was completed on schedule. She attributes the testing of every system component, feature, and building block on the SaaS test environment a key component of the smooth transition. The team kept notes and documented solutions along the way to ensure migration would run as expected. “When we moved to the SaaS production site, nothing interrupted the migration schedule since we knew all the issues that needed to be fixed,” shares Koronfula.

Since the migration, the University has benefitted from all system features and services running smoothly, and feedback from end users has been positive. Koronfula also notes that Blackboard’s support team has been professional, “providing solutions if available and delivering our concerns to the developers to correct system flaws in the coming release.”

**Perspective on SaaS:** With the move to SaaS, the university is benefiting from delivering a secure, stable, and robust system to students and instructors. Even more importantly, they can now perform system maintenance without disruption to end users. Koronfula explains, “Before we had to do system upgrades twice a year, upload the security certificate and system license, and unfortunately, all these services required system downtime and backup. In addition, we were restricted by server resources, high operational costs with limited processes, increasing data storage requirements, and the cost of the disaster recovery process. All these challenges and requirements were solved by the cloud environment,” she shares. Currently, the main challenge is to improve usage of system capabilities to optimize the university’s teaching and learning experience. They are looking to learn more about online courses and e-learning tools.

Regarding plans to move to Learn Ultra, Effat University is exploring all Learn Ultra features and benefits by attending Blackboard workshops. Questions such as how to plan their teaching and learning methods to make the most of Learn Ultra features and how to effectively succeed in using the system to its full capacity are being explored.

On their experience to moving to Learn SaaS, Korofula would say to other educational institutions:
“From the system admin viewpoint, it is a huge challenge to maintain the Blackboard system as Managed Hosting client. With SaaS, you can refocus your efforts on enhancing your utilization of Learn in terms of teaching and learning and delegate the Blackboard expert team to maintain your system.”

**Conclusion:** Higher education institutions have found that SaaS and Learn Ultra together answer the global call for a more modern, efficient, flexible, and scalable LMS solution that improves the user experience for faculty and students alike. With SaaS deployment, Blackboard Learn is delivered and managed using state-of-the-art cloud-computing infrastructure, providing a most reliable user experience, while Learn Ultra offers a modern, intuitive, and responsive user interface that offers an engaging user experience. Plus, institutions benefit from Blackboard’s around the clock support, timely and seamless updates, and consistent stability. With SaaS and Learn Ultra, information technology leaders can focus their efforts on other initiatives as they know they have a reliable and modern web experience in place.