



What students want: An exploration of the user experience of Moodle at Lancaster University

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Introduction

In June 2023, the Lancaster University Digital Learning Team (DLT) began a project to review the user experience of our Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), Moodle. This paper will review the findings and implications of the research into the student experience of Moodle.

Context and aims

The timing of this project coincided with an upgrade to Lancaster's VLE where the institution would move through multiple Moodle versions. To ensure stability for staff and students, the institution had not upgraded Moodle since 2019 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, by 2023, Moodle had undergone significant developments particularly to the user interface (UI). The upgrade would lead to improvement in areas such as digital accessibility, the appearance and the ability to view Moodle on a mobile device. Furthermore, Lancaster University launched a Curriculum Transformation Programme (CTP) in 2023 for implementation in the 2025/26 academic year. CTP's vision is to "ensure a sustainable future for Lancaster University by ensuring our education offer is distinctive, attractive, and inclusive for all students, whilst streamlining its design, shape, and delivery" (Lancaster University, 2024). Digital education and ensuring we understand our Moodle users will play a significant role in achieving this vision.

The aim of the Moodle student user experience project was to:

- Track the student response to the Moodle update
- Find out what students liked and disliked about Moodle
- Determine whether our internal developers could make any further changes to the UI
- Determine whether there needed to be changes in the way staff used Moodle to positively impact the student experience



Methodology

In June 2023, DLT held two student focus groups with representation from both undergraduates and postgraduates. A prompt sheet of twenty-one questions was used to guide the conversations and ensure there was consistency between what students were being asked. The range of questions included when students accessed Moodle, how they accessed it, frustrations they had when using Moodle and what they felt made a student good experience when using Moodle. All students who took part remain anonymous with identifying material being removed from responses.

A survey was also distributed to students with an incentive of a prize draw for vouchers if students completed it. DLT would have preferred to distribute the survey prior to the focus groups. However, it took time to pass the survey through the Student Survey Operations Group which evaluates requests for all new surveys. The student survey ran for three weeks in November 2023. There were 273 responses in total with 82% of respondents being undergraduate students and 18% being postgraduate taught students (*Figure 1*).

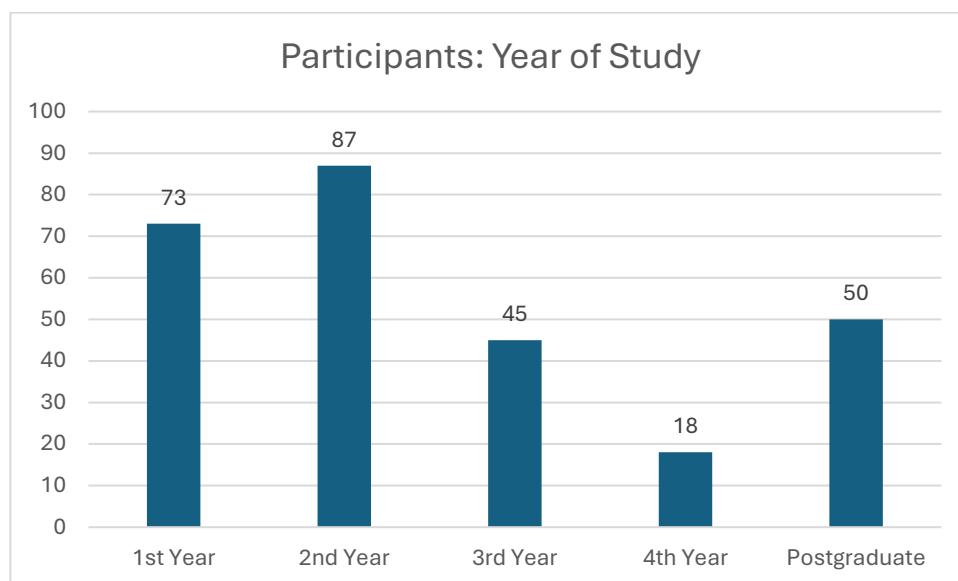


Figure 1: Number of undergraduate and postgraduate participants with undergraduates split into their year of study.

Following this user research, we did an additional survey and some usability testing on the design of Moodle courses. Interviews with individuals were conducted to discover more about the 'pain points' students had and to discuss their ideas for what makes a good online learning experience.



Results

Student feedback centred around a desire for more consistency across departments in Moodle space design. Consistency would help with navigation and student engagement. Students revealed that inconsistency is worse when a module is taught by more than one academic, as "lecturers are bad at communicating with each other on how they set up the course", thus making Moodle hard to navigate. This is supported by the survey responses to "What do you think makes a good course on Moodle?". 138 respondents wrote about the need for an organised layout. Out of those 138 respondents, 24 specifically stated a preference for a chronological or week-by-week format which perhaps indicates a preference for spaces to be organised chronologically rather than by topic. This requires further investigation. These findings fit with student experiences across the sector; the 2022/23 Student Digital Experience Insights Survey conducted by JISC showed student dissatisfaction with one respondent saying that online learning platforms "can be complicated to navigate as different modules and departments put resources in different locations sometimes" (Jisc, 2023). Students at Lancaster understood that these issues did not relate to Moodle itself but how staff used it; 83% of survey respondents found Moodle itself easy to use or had a neutral impression of it.

Students were asked what they wanted to see on a Moodle course to create a more positive experience. Students wanted clear links to guidance on areas such as referencing, plagiarism and the use of A.I. as well as tutor contact details and office hours. Students suggested that templates be used across departments "to enforce consistency in how [people] post things". Students wanted assignment materials grouped together in one place as well as a summary page of all their grades and feedback. This desire for a centralised feedback area supported the already ongoing work at Lancaster University to develop the 'My Feedback' plugin for Moodle.

When tracking the response to the upgrade in the survey, we asked, "since the Moodle upgrade in July 2023, how has your experience of Moodle changed?" (Figure 2). First-year undergraduates were not given this question as they had no experience of the previous version. The response was largely neutral with 73 students stating their experience had "stayed the same". 36 respondents said that their experience had "improved" or "much improved". Of the 57 respondents who said their experience was worse, only 32 gave a reason. This is something to explore further but 6 respondents specifically mentioned the increase in scrolling. This resulted from larger activity cards in Moodle's new UI which exacerbated the amount of scrolling on some already lengthy pages.

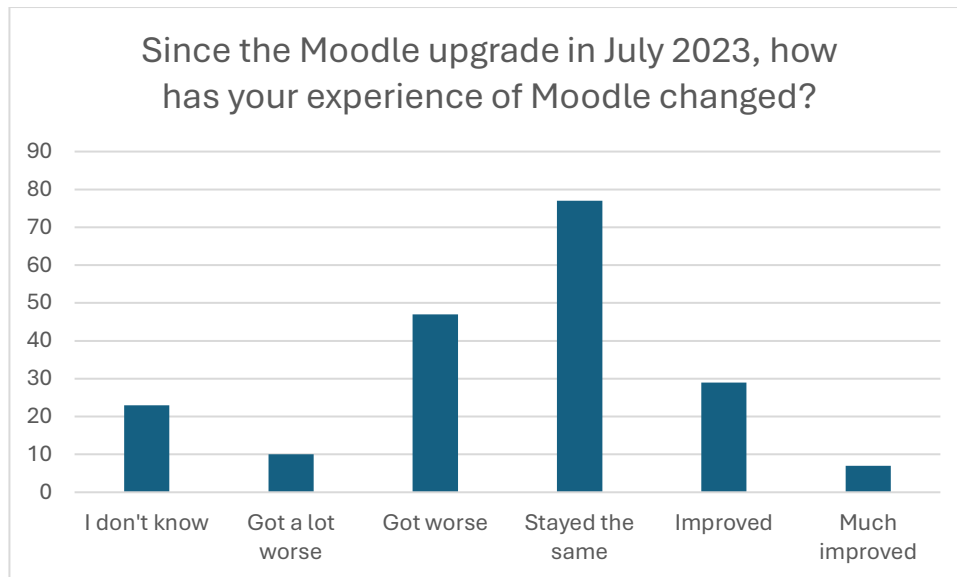


Figure 2: Student opinions on their experience following the Moodle upgrade in July 2023. First year students were not asked this question as they had not experienced the previous version of Moodle.

Implications of findings

To improve the UI and reduce scrolling, DLT reduced the size of activity cards in Moodle. This reduced scrolling by approximately 50%. The new ‘One Section Per Page’ course format was made more visually appealing, and this layout is now recommended to staff as a way to create clear and attractive pages. This new layout also helps to reduce scrolling.

A ‘How to design a good Moodle course’ training session for staff was also created. The session covered student preferences as well as quick tips for creating a well-organised Moodle space. This session was first delivered in February 2024. Work by Alec Gullon, a developer at Lancaster University, continued on the ‘My Feedback’ plugin which was released in July 2024. This responded to students’ desires for a single section where they could view their grades and feedback to track progress.

However, not all the changes that students wanted to see could be implemented. For example, students found the Moodle mobile app difficult to navigate but unfortunately, the app’s UI is controlled by Moodle itself and so we have very little ability to customise the experience.

At Lancaster, a ‘Digital Learning Framework’ which includes baseline guidance, is being created. This ‘Framework’ will support staff in creating a consistent and high-quality user experience in Moodle. To support its implementation, we are developing a template that will form the basis of Moodle courses. This follows the work of other institutions such as University College London’s “Connected Learning Baseline” offering a template and checklists for developing blended learning resources (University College London, 2021). The University of Bath has the



“Bath Blend Baseline” which also includes Moodle templates (Centre for Learning and Teaching, University of Bath, 2023). The aim is to have a signature Lancaster baseline and template by the start of the 2025/26 academic year as part of the Curriculum Transformation Programme. Moving forward, the baseline and template will form a key part of the module approval process and we will continue to make developments based on our users’ experience.

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