

A Canvas Case Study:

WITS UNIVERSITY



South Africa



40,000 students

THE CHALLENGE

The University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) is a prestigious, research-intensive institution based in South Africa with a rich history that has spanned over a century. Proud of its dedication to social justice and the legacy left by notable alumni such as Nelson Mandela, Wits is passionate about supporting the needs of its diverse student population.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Wits was faced with the unprecedented challenge of enhancing the teaching and learning experiences for 40,000 students when traditional in-person classes were no longer possible.

Wits University recognised the need to provide flexible learning opportunities after they were forced to send all students home in March 2020 and quickly transition to emergency remote teaching. Unfortunately, the University was restricted by the capabilities of its previous learning management system which couldn't support the high-quality online teaching that Wits strove to provide.

This prompted the university to reach out to Canvas in the hopes of getting a modern and powerful learning management system that could manage the large, diverse student population during remote teaching.

THE DECISION

Wits had begun its search for a new learning management system in 2019, however, it wasn't until the start of the pandemic that the need for a robust system like Canvas became sharply apparent. Wits decided to adopt Canvas as its new learning management system due to its powerful features, flexibility, stability, and ability to cater to the institution's diverse student body.

The University made it clear that it wanted to cause as little disruption as possible to students, so employed an agile project management approach to ensure a smooth transition. During the adoption period, Wits formed a number of different groups to work on various aspects of the



KEY FINDINGS



1 Canvas provided a robust and reliable learning management system to support Wits University during emergency remote teaching.



2 The advanced features provided a welcome improvement to the previous platform that lacked features to support Wits' large population of diverse students.



3 Since the initial launch of 'Ulwazi', Wits has now made it mandatory for all classes to have a live 'Ulwazi' site for students to engage with.



4 Throughout the adoption process, Wits focussed on communication between stakeholders, which minimised resistance from academics.



5 Moving forward, Wits plans to make use of the extended capabilities of the Canvas platform and provide flexible learning opportunities in a more integrated way.

“What sold us on Canvas, was how easy it was to integrate other products into it as we really didn't want to have bits and pieces scattered all over the place”

Diane Grayson, Senior Director, Academic Affairs

Canvas implementation simultaneously. Each week, representatives from each group would provide progress updates to keep the project on track. In addition, Wits also published a weekly newsletter to inform all stakeholders, students, staff, and faculty members of progress throughout the transition.

THE RESULTS

After a successful implementation process, Wits was proud to launch 'Ulwazi', its new and improved learning management system. The name of the platform was of particular importance as it means 'knowledge' in Zulu, following the school's language policy of making greater use of indigenous languages.

The new system has brought significant benefits to Wits University, thanks to the intuitive nature of the Canvas platform which makes it easy for students to navigate and engage with their courses, resulting in a seamless transition to remote learning. One area that has made a large difference is the native mobile app feature, which was particularly advantageous for the Wits student population, 40% of whom don't have computers, ensuring accessibility for all.

Stakeholders within the University were also quick to make use of the expanded features of Canvas, such as Studio, which has allowed

teachers to go beyond text-only teaching and provide more engaging opportunities for students to interact with course content. Despite some initial reluctance to change, academic staff have increasingly embraced Canvas and recognised its value in enhancing the student learning experience.

From the start of 2021, Wits made it mandatory for every course to have an active ulwazi site. Since the return to on-campus activities in 2022, ulwazi course sites are an important component of Wits' blended learning strategy.

Now that they have created a robust platform that facilitates the new blended approach to learning, Wits plans to continue on its journey to enhance course design, maximise its use of technology, and take advantage of the opportunities Canvas offers to provide more integrated learning experiences for its students.

Wits University's adoption of Canvas as its learning management system has successfully addressed many of the challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic while promoting flexible learning opportunities for remote students. Through effective communication, an agile project management approach, and faculty support, Wits has transformed teaching and learning experiences for its diverse student population with the help of Canvas.

