

# MIDDLESBROUGH COLLEGE

Introducing a User-Centric Approach to Technology Adoption  
With Dedicated Support



Location

UNITED KINGDOM



Level

FURTHER EDUCATION



Users

12,500

## THE CHALLENGE

As the largest further education provider in Teesside, Middlesbrough College's mission is to help students fulfil their vocational potential while fuelling the local and national economy with the best and brightest new employees. The college reports that 95% of its students secure employment, an apprenticeship or access to further study, and that this success is due to a "positive and vibrant" learning environment, with a focus on delivering "real-life workplace experience".

According to Middlesbrough's Head of Digital Curriculum, James Wells, "We are ambitious, with an ongoing strategy to invest in our campus and resources, despite budget cuts in the public sector. As a progressive college, we were pioneering in our adoption of a VLE, purchasing a Blackboard system 14 years ago. The online tool promised a more measurable and flexible learning experience, but after more than a decade, we needed something new."

"We faced increasingly negative feedback from teaching staff about the legacy system," Wells said. "They found it limited in its flexibility and said it delivered an inconsistent experience. Student feedback also uncovered dissatisfaction, and it was clear that an extensive re-evaluation process was required."

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## THE DECISION

For Middlesbrough, a new system would have a dual role: preparing students for the workplace by providing them with the ability to learn independently, and freeing the teachers from an unmanageable admin burden.

Wells also knew that re-evaluating the college's VLE would be a vital step towards delivering a more consistent learning experience, but that this ambition could only be realised if teachers, students and managers all embraced the technology. "Getting everyone using the same system would mean that they could better collaborate, offer standardised assessments (formative and summative), and consistent feedback and rubrics. We knew that this would benefit students and teachers alike, improving the learning experience."

The key for the Middlesbrough e-learning team, when they began the evaluation process in 2015, was not just choosing a new system, but also ensuring that a smooth approach to procurement and implementation would ultimately lead to greater adoption and satisfaction. "Our team was made up of IT, teaching and management staff—and later in the process, students," Wells said. "A mix of participants was vital. We prioritised pedagogy-led objectives, but absolutely needed IT buy in and support, too. We knew that an inclusive approach to procurement would ultimately help us to ensure adoption."

"As part of the process, we visited customer sites," Wells said. "It was important to us to see tools in use, and we'd advise other institutions to do the same. In this setting, Canvas stood out from the competition. Its ease of use and navigation, clean user interface and integration with social media and apps were streets ahead of other tools. The promise of Office 365 integration ensured that students and teachers would be able to work in a familiar and comfortable environment—again, crucial for our adoption ambitions."

# 97% ADOPTION RATE IN THE FIRST YEAR

*“CANVAS HAS RISEN TO THE TASK, SURPASSING OUR EXPECTATIONS.”*

**JAMES WELLS**

*Head of Digital Curriculum at Middlesbrough*

## **THE RESULT**

Wells and his team were impressed with Canvas from the get go. “The implementation was smooth and was supported with regular contact with the Canvas customer team. The process always had momentum, and we found having our scheduled fortnightly call, and recorded sessions, was reassuring. Compared to our legacy system’s support, it was a breath of fresh air.”

“As part of the adoption plan, we didn’t want to use old content from our previous VLE,” Wells said. “Starting anew and purging old content forced teachers to revisit courses and to use the platform immediately.” For tech-savvy teachers this was straightforward, but for more reluctant staff, some additional support was required in the form of Canvas training courses: “Basics Part 1 and Part 2”. “The courses were excellent and helped even the most reluctant teachers become more comfortable with the system,” James said. “We held the sessions before and after the summer break, so that our staff felt ready to use the tools immediately in the new academic year.”

An Ofsted inspection, which coincided with the start of the term, added additional pressure to the college. “Managing this, along with a new VLE, was challenging,” Wells said. “We overcame some of these challenges with a Curriculum 360 pilot, which took some pressure off the teachers and enabled students to continue using the platform with tasks like peer-reviewed work and chat boards.”

“On reflection, although taxing, this was a positive experience,” Wells said. “Guidance from Ofsted also meant that the tool was worked hard. We immediately began using more sophisticated features to meet the inspection’s stringent demands. And Canvas has risen to the task, surpassing our expectations.”

According to Wells, “Middlesbrough is really getting its money’s worth out of Canvas. We have a 97% adoption rate in the first year. It took us more than a decade to reach this level with our old system. Ensuring adoption was an involved and complex process, but the usability, flexibility and clear benefits that Canvas provided were invaluable.”