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# How to Choose the Right Learning Management System

Buyer's Guide

From the classroom to the workplace, learning management systems (LMSs) are transforming how people of all ages learn. But with increased demand come higher expectations from everyone—learners, educators, administrators and executives alike. Consumers of content expect it to be relevant to where they are in their learning journeys and easy to access from anywhere. Course builders want to be able to create and curate the best content possible. They also have to be able to customise learning experiences, setting up individualised learning paths, automatic notifications and rules-based content releases. The organisation needs to see that learning is having an impact—whether boosting enrollment and retention, driving skills development, or getting learners up to speed fast.

To accomplish that, you need the right LMS and partner.

Welcome to Your LMS Buyer's Guide

Whether you're evaluating an LMS for the first time or reassessing your needs, it's critical to seek input from your institution's administrators, educators and learners, and use the evaluation process to choose a platform and vendor that best meet everyone's requirements.

We created this buyer's guide to help you through the selection process.
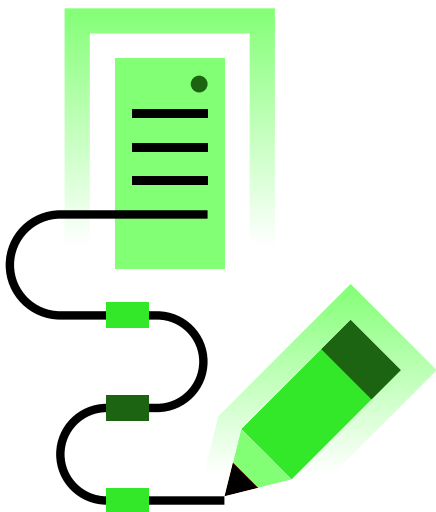
About This Buyer's Guide

This guide will identify key aspects and characteristics of LMS platforms to help you decide which system best fits your learning goals and objectives. Ultimately, you want a solution that helps you provide the best educational experiences possible—managing content, delivering on-demand and live experiences, tracking individual and group progress, and integrating seamlessly with other technologies and applications.

Features and capabilities to be on the lookout for include:

- content creation and curation
- an easy, intuitive user experience
- personalisation options
- skill-building techniques
- data analytics and reporting capabilities
- helpful administrative features
- integration with other technologies
- service and ongoing support

Whatever type of learning platform your organisation chooses, the right platform and partner should provide the features and functionalities that will meet and exceed your unique demands.

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Setting the Stage for an Effective Evaluation

Before you jump into platform and vendor reviews, you need to start by gathering key information around who your stakeholders are, what requirements you have, and how you're going to implement and communicate the change.

1. BRING TOGETHER YOUR COMMITTEE

At this stage, you need to take into consideration the needs of all your users and sponsors—from novices through power users. Your committee may include:

- an executive sponsor
- educators and instructors
- administrators
- IT teams
- support personnel
- directors of customer or member engagement
- an accessibility coordinator

Make sure you choose team members who work well together, have both technical and nontechnical perspectives, and are committed to and invested in the process.

2. SURVEY YOUR STAKEHOLDERS

You want to be able to zero in on the specific needs of the people who are going to be creating and consuming your learning content and experiences. These people may include:

- learners (students, employees, members, customers and others)
- instructors, educators and faculty
- administrators
- instructional designers
- executives

When it comes to collecting stakeholder data, there are two main considerations to take into account. First, limit the number of responses so you can manage the data most effectively. Typically, 20 to 25 responses is a good target. Second, make sure you include some open field responses so people can elaborate on their ideas. What day-to-day challenges can the LMS help with? How would overcoming these challenges improve their job or the quality of learning?

3. DEFINE YOUR TIMELINES

Starting with the date you're aiming to be fully live, create a workback schedule that outlines timelines for important milestones of the project.

4. ARTICULATE YOUR NEEDS AND REQUIREMENTS

Set out the high-level goals of the LMS evaluation project so you have a good idea of what you want your project team to accomplish. Then, review these goals once your project team is in place so that everyone is clear on their mission and purpose.

Some sample goals might include:

- We are not getting a satisfactory return on investment from our current LMS. We need an LMS that delivers measurable results.

- Our current LMS can't scale to meet our future needs. We need one that does.

- We have low adoption rates for our current learning platform and need to improve those.

- We need to find a new LMS that both faculty and students will embrace and use to their full advantage.

- Our current learning platform is not helping us achieve our business goals. We need to find an LMS that will help us achieve the goals in our strategic plan.

- We need higher retention and completion rates, and we need to find an LMS that will help us measure these key metrics and achieve those goals.

- Our current LMS is coming up for renewal and we want to explore other options.

- We need an LMS that can work for student learning as well as faculty professional development.

- We need an LMS provides the capability, flexibility and depth that our instructors and learners expect.

- We need to find a new LMS that adjusts to diverse user needs and offers deep analytics for administrative insights.

- Our current LMS does not work well on mobile devices. We need to find an LMS that has a fully responsive design.

Designing a scripted rubric for demonstrations will ensure vendors focus on your specific needs and requirements.

5. COMMUNICATE THE CHANGE

Selecting the right LMS starts and ends with meeting the needs of your community, which is why it's so important that they be kept in the loop at every stage.

Along the way, there are some **best practices** you can keep in mind:

- Make sure your stakeholders understand what's in it for them—whether that's making their jobs easier, improving the learning experience, or giving them access to new and better tools.

- Share updates through a variety of communication channels, including social media and email.

- Harness the excitement of internal advocates. Influencers will not only be comfortable and confident with the product; they'll be able to provide support for the wider team too.

- Give people access to the training they need, whether in the form of on-demand materials, hosted sessions or other materials.

- Stay tuned in to on-the-ground feedback. You can do pulse surveys to gather quick input, host open question periods during larger team meetings, and open dedicated chat channels for people to share their thoughts in real time.

Choosing and implementing a new LMS should be a process that not only reflects the needs of all your stakeholders but also keeps them informed and excited, driving adoption, engagement and growth even after launch.

Selecting the Right LMS

WHAT TO LOOK FOR: FEATURES AND CAPABILITIES

Content Creation and Curation

Being able to create custom learning content can be valuable for institutions and organisations of all types and sizes. LMS platforms vary in the extent to which they offer tools that allow content creation and curation. Some may offer content uploads only in DOC, XLS, PPT, PDF, TXT and RTF formats. Others may support elements such as links, videos and entire course packages.

Before choosing an LMS product, consider the following questions:

- Can you upload all your existing assets, including videos and examinations?

- Can learners connect to web content hosted elsewhere, if required?

- Does the LMS platform support the latest international standards for online learning, including SCORM, AICC, IMS and Tin Can/xAPI?

- Does it offer a native content builder to develop course content from scratch?

- Can content managers organise the curriculum, learning materials and evaluations into an effective and meaningful learning pathway?

- Can learners easily locate and access learning materials from different learning pathways and coursework specializations?

Larger organisations might require an LMS with more robust content creation capabilities that involve video, audio and gamification opportunities and more expansive online learning content libraries. Choosing an LMS that provides both control and flexibility can be crucial to your long-term success.

User Experience

Understanding the varying ways in which different users—including instructors, administrators and learners—engage and interact within your selected LMS platform is essential. When reviewing user features and functionalities, look for easy navigation capabilities between learning modules. Also, determine whether multimedia or other instructional presentations are easily accessible and whether the LMS is responsive across a range of devices.

Other factors to consider when gauging the relevancy of the user experience include:

- branded elements and logos

- decluttered navigational controls

- multi-platform functionality

- mobile-friendly capabilities

Your LMS needs to offer a sleek, engaging user interface with easily customisable features and controls.

Accessibility

Accessibility is important for all learners. In the U.S. alone, one in four people lives with some type of disability. The right LMS should help make it easier for your organisation to create courses that are not only engaging but highly accessible too.

Questions to consider include:

- Can learners easily customise their preferences to suit their needs?

- Are you able to present material through different mediums?

- Are learners able to interact with content and provide responses in a variety of ways?

- Is the platform compliant with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 Level AAA standards?

- Are there features or tools included in the platform that help you make your content more accessible?

Accessibility-related features aren't just necessary for users who may have a long-term disability. Making learning experiences more accessible can make them more flexible for everyone. An individual in a noisy room, for example, may need closed captions to follow along and a transcript to revisit after. Someone suffering from an eye infection might benefit greatly from content that has the right contrast ratio of text to background colors and descriptive tags for images. A person who finds it easier to demonstrate what they know orally can submit a video or audio file of themselves talking through a concept.

At the end of the day, it's about making sure that all users have a variety of ways to consume content, demonstrate their knowledge and skills, and engage and collaborate.

Personalisation

The ability to set individual personalisation preferences can make a big difference in satisfaction levels for users and the long-term success of your programmes. When an LMS becomes more personalised to a user's preferences, the learners become more invested in the process.

User-driven personalisation features may include:

- customisable dashboards with day- and night-vision options

- adjustable color palettes for menus and sidebars

- personalised feeds, notifications and nudges

- multi-language interaction and support capabilities

Even the ability to set pronoun preferences and distinct avatars can make the LMS experience more engaging, enjoyable and individualised over the long term.

To encourage wider adoption, an LMS platform should also include special built-in features that can provide content based on a learner's interests and interactions within the software. As the learner travels through the platform, the LMS becomes more intuitive, guiding the person down specific pathways and opening more relevant, exciting content and activities.

Skill Building

The right LMS should help learners master new skills and upgrade existing ones, allowing for the creation and management of an array of resources that are specifically geared toward helping learners internalise concepts as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Be on the lookout for an LMS that enables you to

- administer awards, badges and certifications
- facilitate social learning opportunities with peers
- take video learning to the next level

Features like these can be particularly helpful in fostering learning because they motivate and encourage learners. For example, a low score in a given activity may result in timeouts, while high scores could unlock additional educational opportunities and badges.

Data Analytics

Learning data and analytics can be powerful tools for learning professionals. When choosing the right LMS, look for systems that provide detailed information about adoption, engagement, and performance and reporting functions for compiling quick evaluations.

Look for an LMS that has the following functionalities:

- a robust report-building engine
- a library of standardised report templates
- scheduling capabilities for teaching management

n LMS with the right reporting features also allows instructors and administrators to quickly determine which courses are the most popular among their user base, which ones are less effective, and which areas of teaching and training require more advanced educational resources. Meanwhile, the LMS platform also makes it easy for learners to track their personal progress with completed lessons and rate their overall performance.
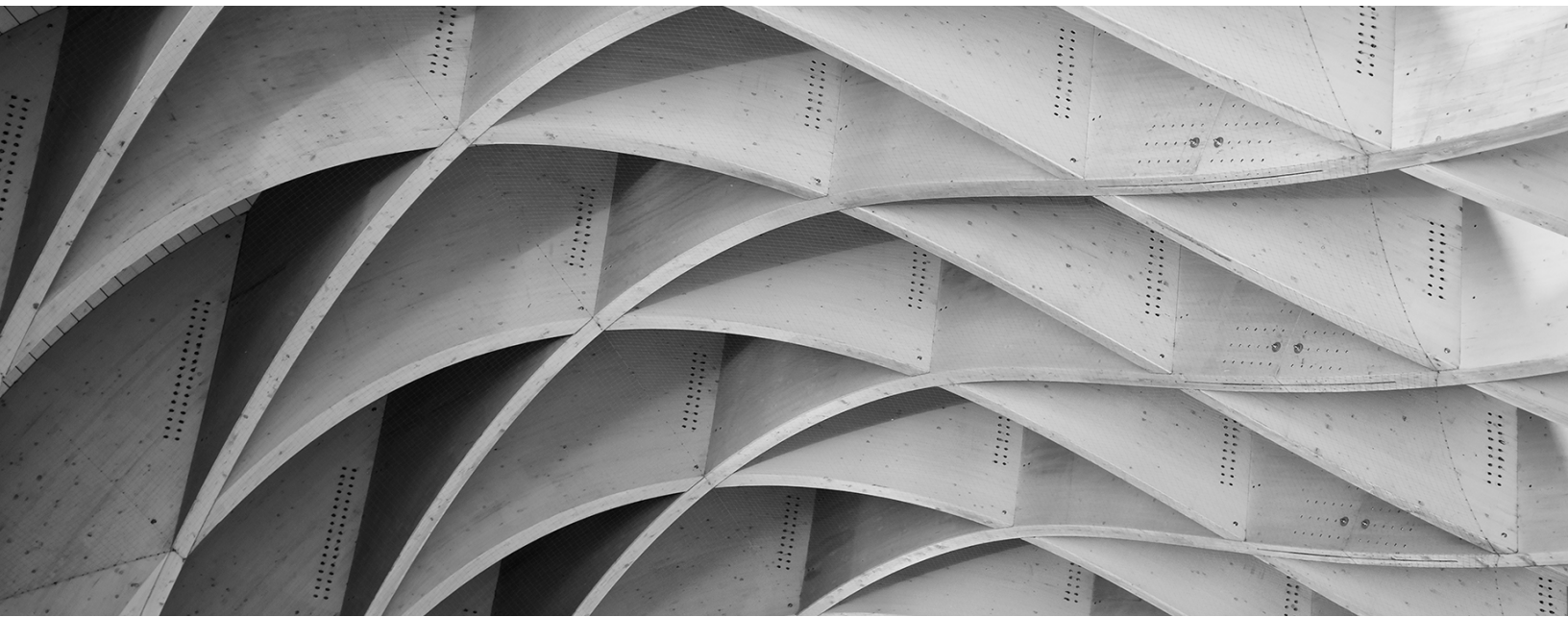
Administration

Administrative capabilities are where many instructors and administrators may find the most diversity between products. Some systems provide a full suite of tools, while others offer only minimal access to data or reporting functions. Meanwhile, some online learning systems provide drag-and-drop interface capabilities for content creation and management. Others require HTML/CSS coding.

Concerning the security, monitoring and protection of your learning content, LMS vendors with cloud-based systems are largely responsible for the security of your system in order to protect against outside breaches and cyber threats. They have various built-in safety features, including secure data transmission and network protection, endpoint threat and protection, single sign-on (SSO) capabilities, and expert vulnerability management.

Questions you should ask potential LMS vendors include:

1. Do you offer constant uptime?
2. What's your disaster recovery plan?
3. What security policies does your organisation have in place?
4. Will maintenance windows make the LMS unavailable for use?

You may also see variation with user management capabilities. You want an LMS that will help do the work for you—automating user creation and enrollments, offering self-registration and catalog features, and managing large numbers of users with bulk features.

Integrations

Your LMS needs to be able to integrate with the other tools that are part of your institution or organisation's tech stack. For example, some LMSs provide easy integration with CRM software, so learners can easily search for courses based on their areas of interest.

Always remember that your LMS needs to address the needs of two different audiences: the learners and the instructors. Each group's preferences and requirements must balance one another. Otherwise, you may end up with a platform that's too complex for administrators to manage or too difficult for learners to use.
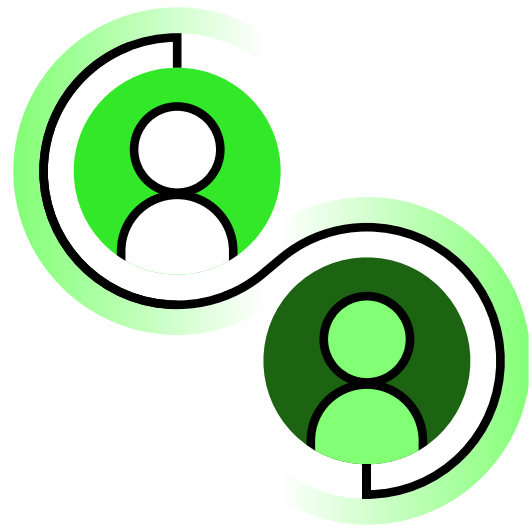
What to Look for: Services and Support

The right services can be key to helping you get more out of your learning platform and services. More than that, they give you confidence not only that your vendor has broad expertise within the space, but also that they'll be there to support you well beyond launch.

Implementation and Training

When it comes to **implementation**, you want a plan that's customised to reflect your needs and a partner that will be there to help you do some of the heavy lifting—including course migrations, SIS configuration and setting up SSO. Training should help your educators and administrators get up to speed fast through on-demand content, individualised plans and personalised support.

Learning Strategy

Whether you're building from the ground up or migrating from one LMS to another, making the transition can be challenging. Look for a partner who can offer support with:

- strategic planning
- change management
- communications and marketing
- learning programme design
- learner experience mapping
- measurement and evaluation

The right strategy can give you the support you need to understand your learning goals and effectively launch your learning programmes.

Content Development and Design

Creating awesome learning experiences is about more than simply having great material. It needs to be well structured and presented too, incorporating proven best practices and giving your teams the knowledge and tools that they need to drive adoption, engagement and retention.

When you're evaluating LMS vendors and the services they provide, ask these questions:

- Can their in-house instructional design teams build different types of learning experiences—asynchronous, synchronous or a blend of both?

- Will the content be accessible for all learners?

- Will the templates be easy for your internal course creators to reuse and adapt?

- Can they create custom branded elements, including widgets and badges?

It's also important that you be able to easily tailor the type of support you get. In some cases, you may need one-time help to upgrade an existing course. In others, you may want ongoing access to dedicated experts to help keep your content as fresh and engaging as possible.

Support and Consulting

You need an LMS vendor that will be ready to help you simplify the day-to-day management and optimise how you're using the platform. Find a partner that can:

- offer ongoing assistance with key administration tasks

- provide technical support with updates and projects

- help you get more out of your learning data and analytics with customised reports and visualizations

Whether you're new to online learning or a long-time LMS user, the services and support your vendor provides should help enable success at every step—from onboarding to adoption and beyond.

Questions to Ask When Evaluating an LMS Vendor

When you're researching vendors, you want to evaluate them considering the following:

- financial health and stability

- history and longevity

- customer retention/churn

- executive stability and capability

- thought leadership

- innovation, R&D and product road map

- expertise with implementation, course conversion and support

- commitment to long-term partnership

There are a number of questions you can use to help assess those criteria.
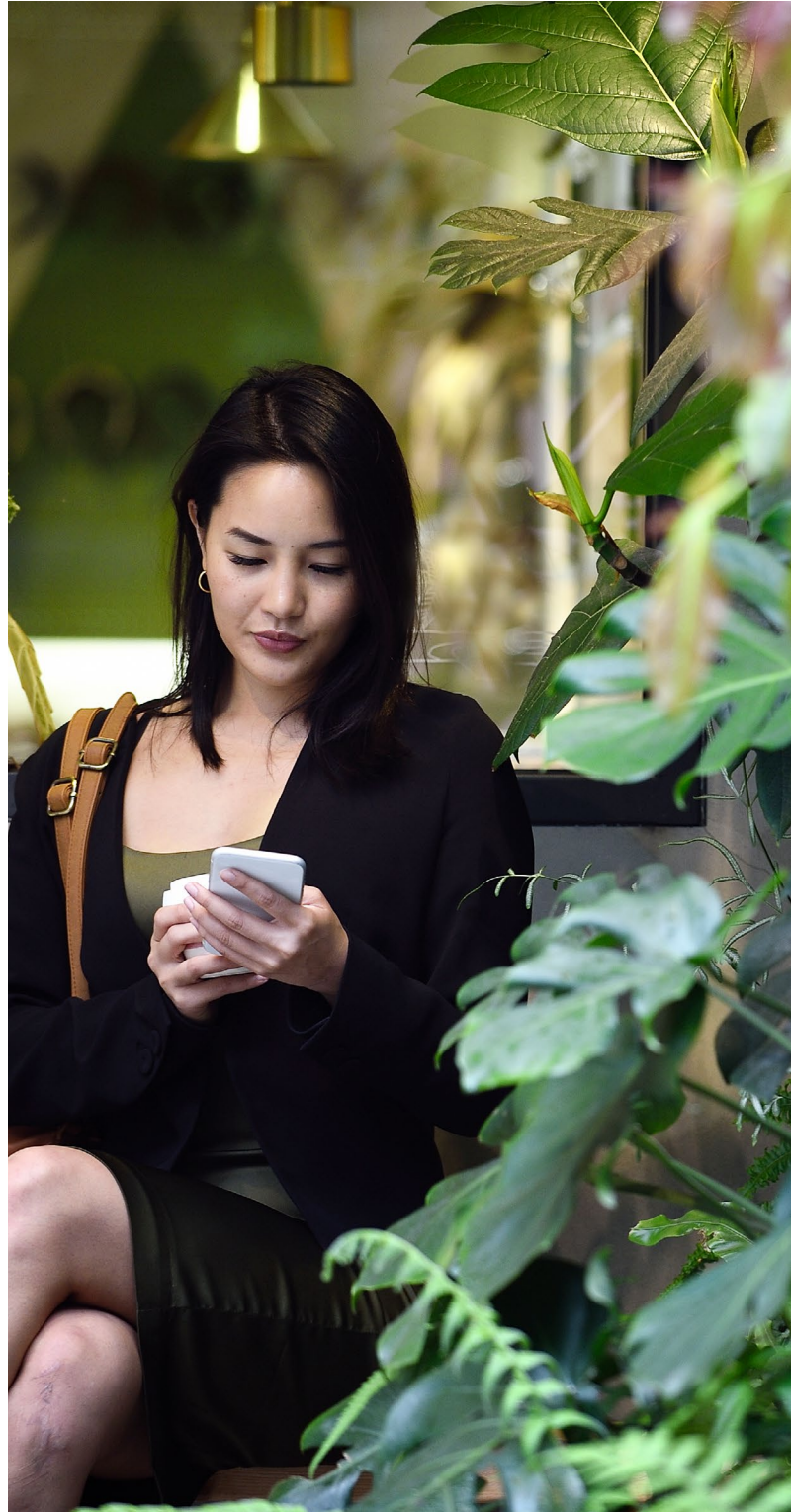
ABOUT THE VENDOR:

- How long has your company been providing an LMS?

- What additional services does your company provide?

- Is it likely that your company will be regularly releasing new features in the future? How will your company be delivering them to your consumers? Will your LMS platform experience any downtime during these upgrades?

- What makes your LMS stand out from your competitors?

ABOUT THE PLATFORM

- How can your LMS help reduce administrative burdens by building better product knowledge?

- How can I create a continuous user experience with a cohesive look and feel so learners don't feel like they're hopping between one LMS and another?

- Will my learners be able to access courses anytime, anywhere and on any device—even if they're offline?

- How do I control who has access to content and permissions?

ABOUT THE PARTNERSHIP AND POTENTIAL

- Does your company provide guidance on how to improve my programmes to make them more effective?

- Will the LMS be able to cater to diverse learning preferences and needs?

- How can I measure the impact of my programmes? What types of metrics and reporting features will be available?

- Will the platform be scalable? Are there additional charges involved?

- Can your platform integrate with other systems so I can run additional reports?

Conclusion

Online learning platforms are fundamentally changing how people of all ages learn. Content needs to be relevant, engaging and accessible anywhere and at any time. Courses need to be easy to set up and customise to reflect individual needs and preferences. And programmes need to be effective, increasing engagement, retention and skills development for learners, institutions and organisations alike.

For these reasons and many more, finding the right LMS partner for your organisation has never been more important. Good luck with your search!

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ABOUT D2L

D2L is a global learning innovation company, reshaping the future of education and work. We're leading the way into a new era of personalized learning, driven by the belief that everyone deserves access to high-quality education, regardless of their age, ability or location. Our signature technology products—D2L Brightspace and D2L Wave—enhance the learning experience for millions of learners at every stage of life, from the earliest days of school to the working world.

Learn more at D2L.com.

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