E-LEARNING: HOW TO GET STARTED

The definitive guide to create a successful online course











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The research and production behind the Online Course Design Guide is a collaboration between Construct Education and Edunext.

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Here is a quick guide with a set of recommendations and best practices for developing new initiatives in the e-learning world.

After reading this guide, you will have enough information to turn your idea into a great course.

Introduction

E-learning plays a vital role in the existing educational setting and **Construct** and **Edunext** are companies with both powerful knowledge and the right tools for powering and delivering online courses. Both companies have worked in many e-learning projects and have recognized that most initiatives fail in terms of trying to create and launch courses due to a lack of experience in content development and course planning. Consequently, if you are considering using an **Open edX LMS** or any other platform as your Learning Management System, you will need to know the essentials in order to gain the most from the experience.





Decide on Your Goal



There are many options on the road to an online course, and thus many trade-offs to be made. To help structure your decision process around these trade-offs, it is important to understand what you are aiming for on a strategic level. A few common goals include:

•Creating Brand Awareness:

Courses aligning to this goal may be heavier on branded media. Case studies will follow your brand and content may be more surface-level with fewer assessments.

•Helping learners acquire a particular skill.

The key to creating an effective and profitable online course lies in getting specific and focusing on delivering the specific result your potential clients and learners are looking to achieve (instead of teaching a bunch of content), your course instantly stands out as the choice to help your people.

•Profit generation.

Stay laser-focused on the results your clients will invest in achieving. Get focused by narrowing your audience, narrowing your result, and narrowing your content and your course will instantly stand out. After defining the audience you want to reach, you should set your Income Goals/Fix Price For Your Online Course.

You may have multiple goals in mind, but no matter the goal, it should be **SMART**: **Specific**, **Measurable**, **Achievable**, **Relevant**, **Time-bound**. Once you have formulated SMART goals, it will become clearer how best to approach the next steps of your course design.

S: Specific

Focus on the primary intended outcome for e-learning and have a specific goal for success (i.e., what is your goal? Focus on **How**, **What**, **Who**, **Where**, **When**, and **Why**).

M: Measurable

Select e-learning tools that can be measured, but be aware of the time-bound data, as you would want to ensure that the collection of feedback is targeted and that it will provide the necessary input to inform future improvements.

A: Attainable

It is a consensus to use common tools available to avoid any conflicts in opinion, especially when this involves a shared goal. Always remember that all goals should be achievable.

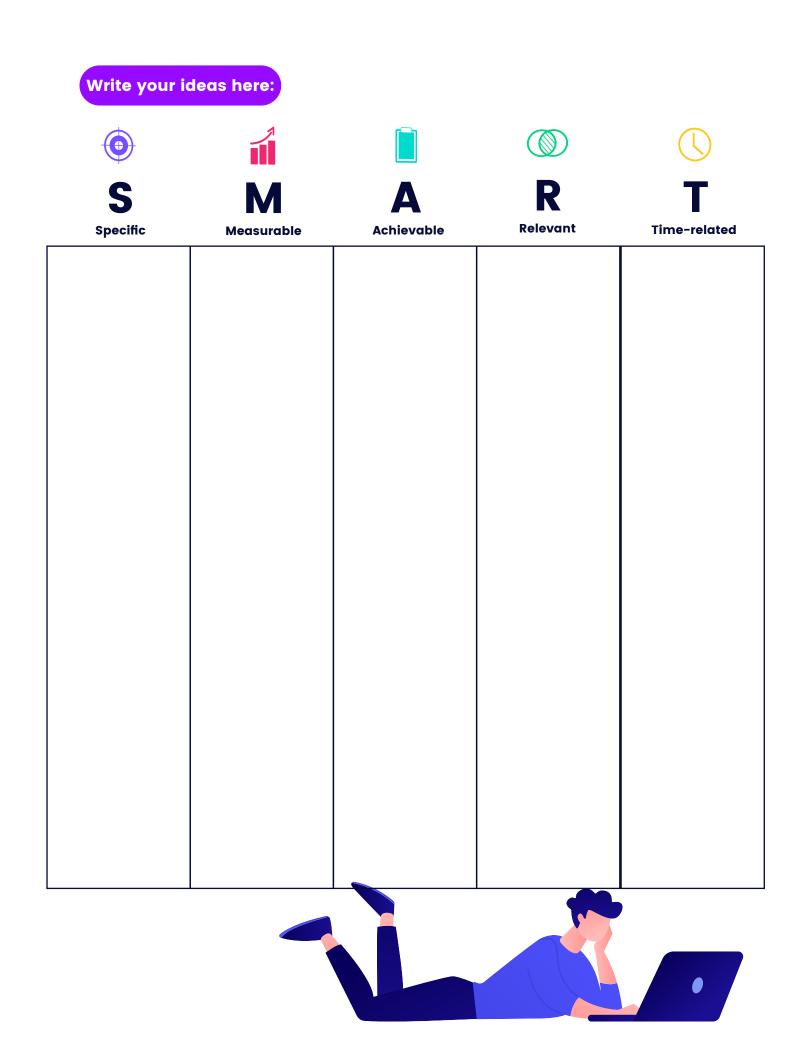
R: Realistic

Set a goal that aligns with the potential unique inputs, as the right goal will realistically challenge e-learning circumstances. So, be realistic in setting a timeline.

T: Time-bound

Set a proper timeline for the accomplishment of the goal. Allow time for changes before deadlines; you want to account for time for learning curves of both educators and students when implementing a new e-learning tool.





Select a Specific Course Topic/ Subject and Direction

The meteoric rise of online education—which was largely accelerated by the shift to adapting and creating online learning environments during COVID—fostered a huge need for content in the marketplace, on various topics, and with varying degrees of quality. Before investing in a course, it is best to think of your product-market fit. To assist with this, you will need to conduct market research and clearly determine the size of the investment you would aim to achieve with your own online course.

Choosing the right online course topic is a vital first step that will prevent you from spending lots of time creating a course with no demand. Before you select a topic, identify what subjects you and your team really excel at.



Firstly, as a 5-minute exercise, brainstorm ideas of subjects you already have some level of expertise on. Then, write down a list of possible ideas off the top of your head. For example: photography, baking, marketing, yoga, building a website, running a local business, getting fit, etc.

Below, we suggest some methods to select the topic and subject's direction:



Eidetic imagery

Envision what you want to create in very concrete and specific terms so that you can better understand how to materialize it in reality. Close your eyes and just imagine what your course would look like online. Jacqueline Sussman, an author, speaker, seminar leader, coach, and one of the foremost practitioners of eidetic imagery, says that "Imagery and creativity go hand in hand,because any time we want to do something creative, we're likely seeing images in our minds."

Starbursting

Starbursting is a form of brainstorming used to generate questions in a systematic, comprehensive way. Place your main idea at the center of a star diagram, labeling each point of the star with the 5WH questions.



Who?

Who will be taking my course? Who will be leading the process? Who exactly is the course intended for?

What?

What information do potential students want to see in the course? What will be the purpose of the course? What is the 'one big outcome' the course will teach? What are potential students' personality traits, interests, lifestyles, or opinions? What reasons could they have to learn from this course? What teaching methods are most likely to engage your learners? What do they already know (if anything) about the topic? What do they look forward to in their spare time, or even in their professional lives?

How?

How will the course be designed? What will the course structure look like? How can you incorporate learners' interests, lifestyles, or opinions into the course content? How can you respect their diverse abilities and needs (e.g., language or cultural differences, or learners who learn in different ways)?

Where? Where will the content be produced? Where will it be deployed? Where will it be advertised?

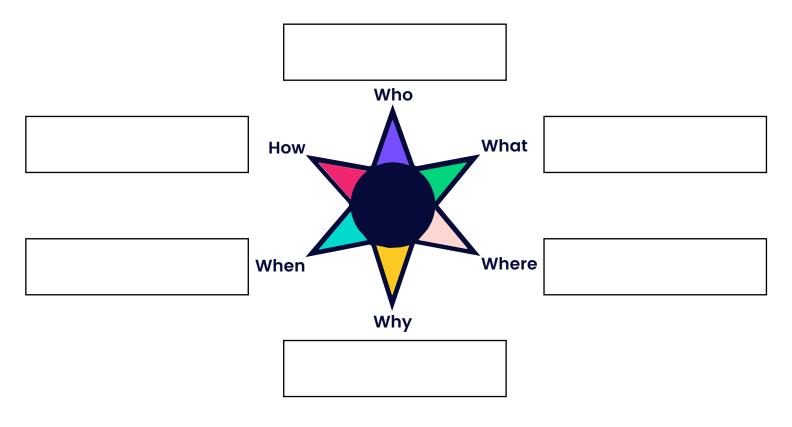
When? When will the course be launched to the market?

Why? Why is the course different from other courses? Why would someone take the course ?

It's good to write all these things down, even if they feel obvious, because things you might take for granted could be the cornerstone for a great course idea. Getting it all down on paper helps otherwise invisible skills and interests come to light.

For example, it's very important when designing a learning experience to establish early on whether the prior knowledge a learner has of the topic is extensive, limited, inaccurate, or non-existent. Different approaches work for different levels of prior knowledge, and research shows that learners benefit most from the act of generating their own connections between what they already know and what they are learning. Learners with low prior knowledge will also benefit from more 'scaffolding'.

You can create your own questions using the following template:



Sketchnoting

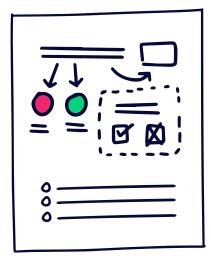


Sketchnoting is a creative technique of note-taking that uses a mix of linguistic and nonlinguistic representation, icons, words, and pictures. 75% of our brain is designed to process information better through images. For this reason, when we use images to support written content, we obtain an easily understandable and visually attractive result. In fact, images help your learners to understand and retain concepts, connect ideas, and ultimately gain a better understanding of the content.

An illustrated example of sketchnoting is given below:









Identify and Define Your Audience



Before kicking off the design and curation of your content, it is important to understand not only the target audience, but their background level of knowledge when they start the training. Furthermore, it is essential to determine the reason for and outcome of doing the training.

NICHE IT DOWN

Now that you have a general list of ideas, it's time to work out the specificities:

- 1: Who exactly is the course for?
- 2: What is the 'one big outcome' the course will teach?

It doesn't matter if your course is about business, hobbies and skills, arts and crafts, health, lifestyle, music, etc.—it should solve someone's problem or speak to a need they might have.

The more specific your target audience, the better your chances of creating a course that serves that group well, and the more likely it is that they will take your course.

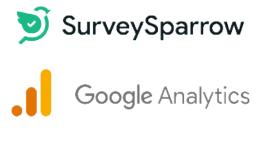
You should ask yourself what information learners will need to learn in order to gain a basic understanding of the subject matter, what future training courses will be needed as they gain a certain level of expertise, and whetherl the content will be useful in the real world or would be required the training as part of in-service training requirements in order to acquire a level of competency and know-how to perform their everyday duties.

Just keep in mind that discovering the needs and demands of your customers is the road to building an effective marketing strategy.

Always remember the ABCD rule: Audience, Behavior, Condition, and Degree.

Robert Heinich, along with his colleagues Michael Molenda, James D. Russell, and Sharon E. Smaldino, developed the ABCD Learning Objectives Model and published it in their 2001 textbook, Instructional Technology and Media for Learning.

Here are some of the tools you can use to define your target audience:





socialmention*

audiense:



Typeform

Google Trends

Test Your Idea and Conduct Market Research

Always try to run small tests on representative sample markets, as this can save a significant amount of time.

Rather research what already exists on the market and look for evidence of an existing demand. It is also important to gain insight into your audience, understand their problems or needs, and think about how you can create a unique course that can help them.



Analyze the audience you identified in the step above and investigate how this course might fit into their lives; remember that you are looking for validation of a need and seeking to determine whether your product will fill that gap in demand—ideally in a way that surpasses other similar product options. An important step involves double-checking whether the target market is willing to pay for this solution (unless you have alternate funding sources).

It is important to understand this in the context of your larger project goal from Step I of this guide; if the goal is profit generation, part of the market research may include gaining an understanding of your market size and determining how difficult it would be to reach that market. A course on the history of the Maldives between 1840 and 1845 will have a different market size compared to an introduction to Microsoft Excel. Market size may not matter if you are looking to build an internal training for the purposes of upskilling. Iterate on Steps 3 and 4 until you feel comfortable investing time in the remaining steps.

It's important to note that although you may dream of finding a shiny new niche untapped by any other business, this is very unlikely. If you find a niche with zero competition, it's likely a sign that others have tried to address this gap in the market and found it to be unprofitable. Essentially you want at least some healthy competition—a good sign that you're onto a winning niche—but not so much that you risk failing at breaking into the market on account of oversaturation. Start by conducting a quick Google search and making notes about all the competitor sites you find. Take your time analyzing their websites, social media, products, and branding.

Here are some questions to ask to help you get started:

- -What kind of content are they creating?
- -Is their content high or low quality? Could you do better?
- -What tone of voice do they use?
- -Who is their target audience?
- -How regularly do they release content?
- -How do they engage with their audience?
- -What are their customers saying on review sites like Yelp?

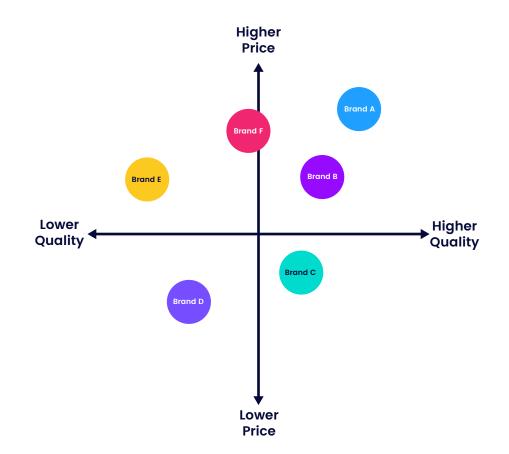
Understanding what your potential competitors are doing, and what you could do differently, is vital for creating a great learning experience.

	List the top competitor sites.
Here's a checklist to ensure that you	Analyze the listed competitor sites.
don't miss anything in your research:	Consider what you could do differently or better.
	Analyze the Google results page to determine whether the niche is too competitive.
	Conduct keyword research.

You can use different tools to help you conduct your research, such as those shown in the graphic below:



You can also use the format below to analyze your competition in terms of both price and quality:



•Label one axis with 'Price' and another with 'Quality.'

•Plot all your competitors on this chart according to their customer bases.

•Research where there are several brands clustered together, which shows that a market is oversaturated.

Write a Course Outline



A great starting point for your course development would be to design a course outline in the form of a Learning Blueprint. This document will serve as a high-level course layout and breakdown of all the different components and essential parts of the overall training book or module.

An online-only course can vary greatly in terms of length, weekly workload, and, ultimately, the number of course modules. The length of online classes varies; some can be completed in as little as one week, while others take longer. On average, online courses last eight to nine weeks—especially those offered through universities.

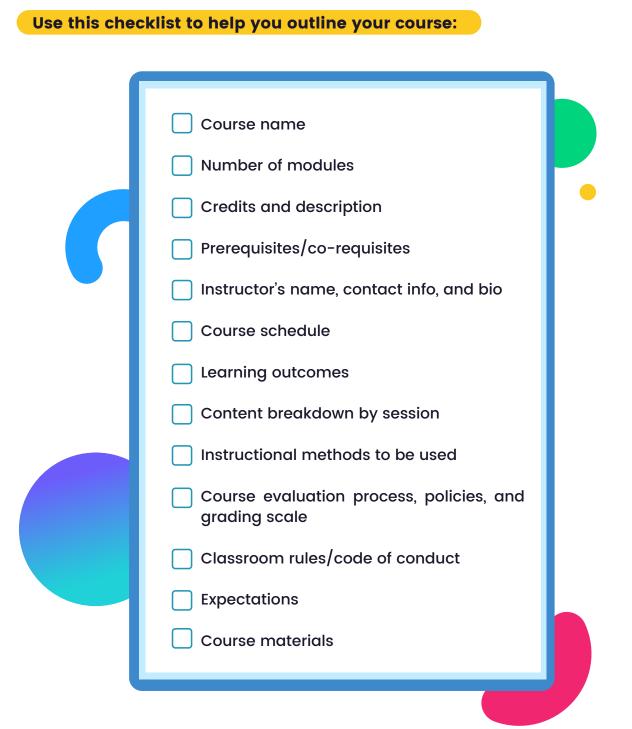
It is certainly possible to create longer courses or modules; however, the risk of losing student engagement increases proportionally to the length of a course. Your content is fighting for your audience's attention alongside other offerings on the internet. Keep in mind that in this technologically-advanced age students are constantly tempted to open a new browser tab and check out what is happening on social media or on YouTube. Keep courses short and punchy—that is your best weapon.

One useful tip is to brainstorm ideas/areas for what your course will teach and to write these down on Post-it notes. Organize them into a logical order and into 3–5 main groups (your core modules). For the last step, write a final outline of your course as a series of 3–5 main modules with individual lessons that make up each module.

The exact structure will be different for each course, but it is important to focus on clarity and on delivering the main outcome or transformation of your course in the simplest and quickest way possible. Don't be tempted to add in everything you know—this will make your course too long and jumbled, and result in it lacking focus.



It is essential to put everything in an organized document; this can serve as a style and build guide informing the Instructional Designer of any other assets—such as graphic and video content—that would be required as part of the learning experience. In addition, any information regarding learning outcomes, review quizzes, exams, and assignments can be outlined in the Learning Blueprint, making it a comprehensive high-level overview of the entire course. The Learning Blueprint can also outline the different roles within the project—stating the responsibilities of each along with the deadlines for deliverables.



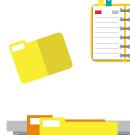
6. Create the Course Content

Upon the completion and sign-off of a Learning Blueprint and style guide (in the form of a graphics guide detailing all the graphic resources and content to be used in the course), the course content can be created in line with the structure and layout approved in the Learning Blueprint.

Storyboarding (or atlassing) can commence with the help of either subject matter experts (SMEs) in the required field or members of faculty (when school- and university-level courses are being designed). The Atlas will contain all the details for the course material—how it should be structured, formatted, and built on the LMS platform, together with any special instructions on how to present certain parts (such as visual content or review and/or knowledge checks) throughout the course. Designing the atlas is usually a collaborative effort between Construct and the client, with at least two rounds of review built into this process in order to ensure that the curated content is accurate and factually correct and up to date.

In terms of format, remember that video Is king! Video is the closest medium to learning in person. Besides, creating videos is not too difficult to accomplish either. There are three approaches to making your videos:

> **Approach 1:** Use templates, PowerPoint/Keynotes, slides and voice overs as simple, cheap, and quick techniques to ensure the creation of a good quality course. Create slides and record voice overs talking through them; the output results in a video. All you need for this is PowerPoint, a microphone and Camtasia (PC) or ScreenFlow (Mac).







Approach 2: Film yourself (or someone else) in person; this is particularly useful when demonstrating a practical skill or technique. You can get a local filmmaker to help you or learn how to do it yourself online, and you can also embed video clips on PowerPoint/Keynote slides.



Approach 3: Another option if you don't have a studio is to use a light board and a good camera, which will allows you to write and draw while maintaining eye contact to deliver their message in a natural and engaging way.

Whatever the circumstances, remember to keep your video short and substantial. Lessons of less than 20 minutes each are better for keeping your students engaged. However, you should aim for 5–10 minutes per lesson where possible, as this creates clarity and an easy-to-navigate course structure.

When editing your videos, remember to record some practice runs and watch them back to look for ways to improve. There is no need for your video to be perfect; it is simply advised to spend some time cutting out obvious mistakes, gaps, and pauses and making sure that each video flows well.

7. Choose the Course Format



Having expertly-designed and curated content can be greatly enhanced if the course format and structure fit the course content. At Construct, we assist our clients with deciding on this and help to accomplish expertly-designed courses that not only suit the purpose, but look and feel professional. A well-designed layout and format for a course can help provoke curiosity in potential learners and also attract and captivate more individuals who are eager to partake in the course. A well-designed format can also make the learning experience and learning journey a lot more meaningful and inclusive, allowing a diverse variety of thinkers, creators, innovators, and individuals to gain the most from the course.

8. Plan the Course Design and Structure

Construct and **Edunext** offer multiple solutions to learning challenges. We help revise and improve content to suit and align with the specific needs identified for online learning courses. With our expert advice, we can assist with structuring information in a way that is easy for learners to follow, understand, and remember. Using our skillfully-developed learning quality framework, (i.e. Motivating, Authentic, Active, Accessible, Memorable, and Social, as detailed below) Construct can help you to deliver the best-designed course content that incorporates our tried and trusted learning best practices for a quality learning experience that will lead learners toward mastering the objectives set before them in the most successful way possible.

MOTIVATING

Learners move mountains when learning fosters autonomy, competence, relevance, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1986).

AUTHENTIC

Learning is often more powerful when situated within real-life, especially workforce, contexts (Lave and Wnger, Herrington, 1989)



ACTIVE

Doing, not passively consuming, learning is a key to understanding (Freeman, Bloom, 2014)

ACCESSIBLE

Meeting learners where they are means universal design to accommodate individual learning differences such as disability, technological, cultural, or geophysical challenges (Meyer and Rose, 2014)

MEMORABLE

Reducing cognitive load to help learners process information sweeps away roadblocks, especially online (sweller, Mayer, 2006)



SOCIAL

Learners often benefit when engaging together in varieties of peer-based learning opportunities (Bandura, Vygotsky, 1962)



(Taken from Construct's Learning Quality Framework for Quality Learning Design)

Define the Objectives and the Scope

Before diving into the actual design of your course content, it is important to define the scope of the training—that is, the specific intended goal. Construct employs a 'Backwards Learning Design' approach, whereby any learning content developed is aligned with expertly-crafted learning objectives to support learners in mastering the required outcomes. Course and module outcomes are developed first, followed by meticulously-designed assessments, and finally, these are all aligned to quality learning content and activities. When employing a Backwards Design approach, there is no irrelevant content, no gaps, and no inapplicable or extraneous assessments in the final product.

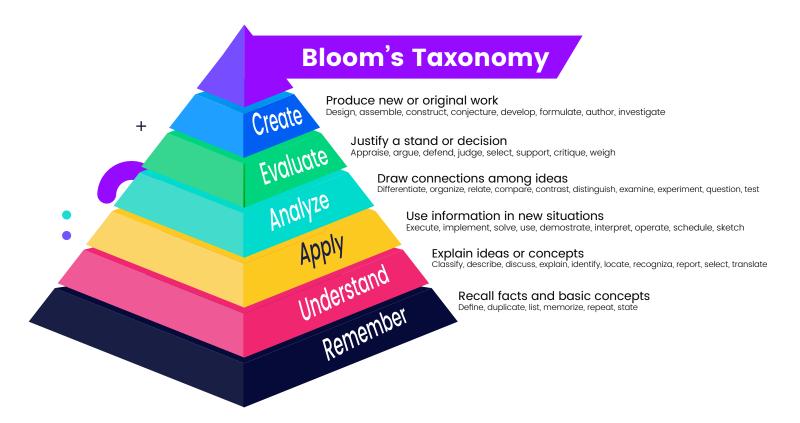
In this step of the process, It is very important to design outcomes with the following in mind:

•What knowledge, skills, and dispositions does the learner need to take away from the learning content?

•How will the learning objectives be measured for proof of concept to demonstrate that a learner has mastered the set outcomes and objectives?

At Construct, we find that many clients particularly struggle to define clear **learning outcomes**. Without clarity, it is both difficult to measure learning success and to know whether a learner is achieving the aims of the program. Therefore, we collaborate closely with our clients to ensure that learning outcomes are well designed, and provide an even breakdown of content to satisfy each learning outcome.

Bloom's taxonomy is a classification of learning objectives according to the cognitive processes involved in the minds of learners, which was first edited in 1956 by the American educational psychologist, Benjamin Bloom. From lowest to highest, the categories that make up Bloom's taxonomy are: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating.



Determine Your Timetable and Budget



At Construct, we pride ourselves in not only producing learning programs of the highest quality, but doing this in a timely fashion within the client's budget. Having a well-structured timeline with clearly-defined and clearly-communicated deliverable deadlines ensures that available resources are utilized efficiently. Our skilled Project Managers manage all client expectations in an expert fashion, ensuring that deliverables are handed over on time and within budget to guarantee that the project develops promptly under all circumstances. Construct's Delivery Managers can assist with designing these aspects of the contract and ensuring that all parties are clear, motivated, and informed of all client expectations upon project kick-off.

Our advice for you when creating the timetable and budget is to do the following:

- Analyze your list. If you find that you have little or no discretionary time available, re-evaluate the tasks to determine whether they are absolutely necessary. You may find that some responsibilities can either be delegated or tackled in a more efficient way.
 - Determine your final deadline. Whomever sets the deadline will have taken the complexity of the work into account.
- List each step or task and assign it a budget. Prioritize tasks in terms of urgency vs. the benefit, and consider no-cost and low-cost ideas first.
- Assign a team member the responsibility for each task. It is often a good idea to document primary and secondary responsibility, or lead and support responsibility.
- Work backwards to set due dates for each task. Define when the task starts and when it should be finished.
- Organize your project schedule in one tool and share it with your team. You can do this on a piece of paper, on a spreadsheet, or in a Gantt chart.

11. Select Your Tools



Once all the essential course design and development aspects have been completed and clearly defined, the correct LMS for the project needs to be determined.

Nowadays, there are many options among LMSs: proprietary and open-source, on-premises, and SaaS LMS. However, Open Source Learning Management Systems offer a cheaper alternative to commercial LMSs. They also offer greater flexibility for customizing and personalizing the experience, and it doesn't matter if you do not have a technical team in-house to support with installation, hosting, maintenance, support, and upgrade activities. There are many providers that can help you with these for a cheaper price than commercial LMSs.

There are many options to consider when choosing the right tools, but we recommend not getting side-tracked and taking a long time to decide on one. Just pick an option and go for it! For initiatives that require massively scalable learning software technology, the developers behind edX have created a solution called Open edX. It is the learning platform of choice for many global and diverse organizations, including: Pearson, IBM, Stanford, MIT, Harvard, WWF, Johnson & Johnson, Microsoft, and Amnesty International.



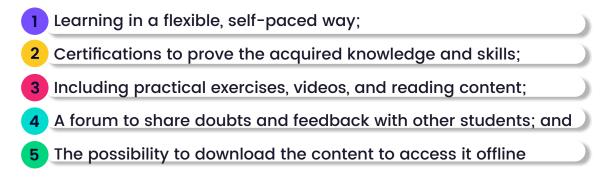
Edunext is an expert on this technology and has a wide range of tools to help you create effective course materials and build vibrant online learning communities and courses that encourage active learning.

Construct, on the other hand, employs many skillful learning designers, strategists, and technologists who are well-versed in an array of different platforms, including Open edX. Whether you decide to use a specific platform—perhaps because you already have the credentials and access to use it—or want to rely on professional expertise to help.

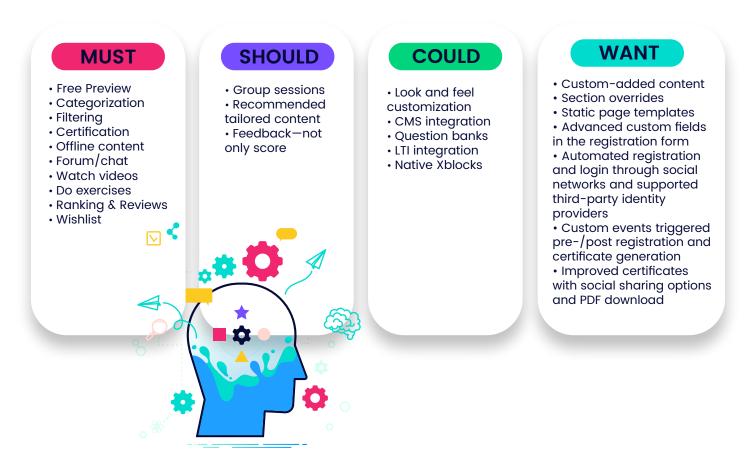
you decide on the best LMS platform for your particular needs, we are willing to assist you in any scenario.

Selecting the right LMS is crucial, and Edunext and Construct provide expertise in a vast array of ancillary online design tools to enhance online content and achieve the highest quality and most memorable learning experience. Speak to a consultant from our teams for expert advice on determining the best way forward in your journey to transforming your learning into quality online e-learning for everyone!

Some essential capabilities you should consider when choosing an LMS include:



You can use the below example to create your own list of capabilities and features in order to select the right LMS:



We hope you enjoyed our guide! A last freebie for you that will help save you a lot of time when you are ready to choose your LMS can be found below:

The Top Open-Source LMS Vendors

	edX	Sakai	fnoodle	💮 canvas
CMS Notifications SSO SCORM, LTI, API CRM	**** ***** ***** *****	**** **** **** **** ***	**** **** **** ****	**** **** **** ****
Assessment tracking Administration Reporting Feedback tracking Student tracking Automated report creation	**** ***** ***** *****	**** **** **** **** ****	**** **** ***** *****	**** **** ***** *****
Gamification/ Simulations Assessment & Testing Audio/Video conferencing Learning outcomes Social & Collaboration	**** **** ***** ****	**** ***** ***** *****	**** ***** ***** *****	**** **** ***** *****
LMS branding Reporting User interface Functionality Certificates	**** ***** ***** *****	**** **** **** **** ****	**** ***** ***** *****	**** ***** ***** *****
Adaptive learning Social learning e-commerce e-learning Blended/ Hybrid learning	**** ***** ***** ***** ****	**** **** **** **** ****	**** ***** ***** *****	**** **** **** **** ***



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Construct

Construct helps leading universities deliver impactful and innovative education experiences that attract, engage, and retain their students. We do this by working collaboratively with your faculty and subject matter experts to create learning solutions tailored for your students.

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