

Establishing an identity and creating a lifelong bond with learners



In 2007 the universities of East Anglia and Essex joined to establish the University Campus Suffolk (UCS) with a mission to address the low participation rates in Suffolk and the sub-region. Delivering access to higher education locally, and with a focus on community, enterprise and innovation, the UCS includes a central campus in Ipswich with centres in Ipswich, Bury St. Edmunds, Great Yarmouth, Lowestoft and Otley, and a series of local learning centres - Learning Enterprise Access Points, or LEAPs - in smaller market towns.

Today the university has 4,200 students but regularly receives between 300,000 – 500,000 page views per month with two thirds of those views from students accessing their system away from the main hub. Its degree programmes are jointly accredited by the Universities of East Anglia and Essex and employability lies at the heart of all its programmes.

Focus on widening participation across five colleges

The challenge for the University Campus Suffolk was to widen participation in Higher Education across Suffolk and the surrounding regions to form a unified organisation with a single vision and equality of opportunity for all students across all sites while retaining individual identities. i.e. give all students the same access to student support, policies, course documents. However, to achieve this, the institute's objective was to bring together five geographically dispersed colleges. An additional objective for UCS was to foster a lifetime relationship with students from the time they very first applied to UCS to encourage future sponsorship from alumni.

Blackboard Learn As The Hub

Recognising that online content was the key to giving every student equal access to all materials regardless of where they chose to study, the University Campus Suffolk's strategy was to not only provide a VLE but also a virtual campus/intranet where students and staff could access UCS services from whichever campus they were based.

Everything from course documents to library catalogues to policies was made accessible via the Blackboard Learn™ platform as a central hub. Furthermore, the Blackboard Learn platform was rebranded 'Wolsey', after Cardinal Wolsey, a local hero in Ipswich and for which the initials stand for each of the five original colleges that make up the



University Campus Suffolk. In so doing, Blackboard Learn became a central hub providing a single resource for UCS as a whole, whilst retaining each of the five region's individual identities.

Using Blackboard Learn, UCS created three separate Wolsey portals; one for applicants, one for current learners and one for alumni.



The Applicant Portal allows UCS to make instant updates to content/information. The announcements tool is used significantly by the Admissions team to get instant messages out to all its applicants, which has proved a valuable facility and is now very much part of the communication strategy within Admissions.

After a review of the first year of the Applicant Portal it was clear that all applicants engaged with it and regularly communicated on the discussion forum many even meeting up for coffee having originally met online, this in particular has proved an excellent addition/success and has helped create communication and friendship groups amongst applicants prior to their arrival.

UCS is continuing to work with the Wolsey team on a number of developments to enhance the portal further. It recently opened up access to the portal to all applicants on receipt of application and has developed an on-line tracking service which the Wolsey team created to allow all applicants to have an instant update on the status of their application when they log on to the portal.

A Unified Identity, Increased Adoption, And Ability To Take On More Students

The Blackboard Learn implementation ("Wolsey") has been key in enabling UCS to forge a unified identity which acknowledges the individual regional centres which make up the whole institute. Blackboard Learn has also facilitated the University Campus Suffolk' vision of providing equality of opportunity to all students by providing location agnostic access to all materials.

The Wolsey Applicant Portal has been instrumental in widening participation across the regions by attracting and converting a high percentage of applications by improving UCS's customer service to applicants, providing information specific to applicants and enabling students to familiarise themselves with the Blackboard system before they even arrive at the college.

The Wolsey Alumni Portal provides an ongoing resource to former students ensuring a lifetime relationship between them and UCS. Students are given continued access to student services such as the careers department and UCS is able to send targeted information regarding

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new courses or advertising to students. Alumni are already a very important source of revenue for universities and the alumni portal will serve UCS well in the difficult years ahead.

Despite being one of the newest Higher Education institutions in the UK within its first year was heralded by the Times Higher Education Awards for its achievements in widening access to Higher Education and its dedication to addressing low participation rates across Suffolk and the surrounding counties.

Despite the imminent budget cuts, the University Campus Suffolk's 2011 grant will be increased by just under 4.6 per cent - taking its grant from the HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) from just under £13million to just under £13.6 million.

But unlike most universities it is able to take new students next year - although it will have slightly less to spend per head.

About three quarters of the nation's universities have seen the number of student places they can offer cut - but UCS is expected to take on an extra 300 students over the next two years. The recent funding announcement from HEFCE shows that they recognise and support the growth of UCS, albeit on a modest scale. This is good news for UCS, particularly in light of our current 38% increase in UCAS applications for 2011. Like other universities, UCS will now be looking to increase its funding from other sources - including business and other grant-offering bodies.

Verdict

Thomson Zulu, Senior Learning Technologist, UCS, comments, "The creation of the Wolsey Portals has allowed us to communicate more effectively with our applicants and alumni in a more accessible way. It has enabled us to provide applicants with more information upfront about their course, provide details about the Admissions process, orientation information and offer the facility to enrol on-line, some of which they previously would not have had access to until their arrival. By engaging more with our alumni Blackboard has helped us to ensure favourable sponsorship for the University Campus Suffolk."