

How A New VLE Strengthens The Learning Experience



University of the Free State

Founded in 1904, the University of the Free State is situated in Bloemfontein, the capital of the Free State, South Africa. Ranked 9th in the South African university league tables and with over 25,000 students, the institute is split across two campuses, one in Bloemfontein and the other in the more rural area of Phuthaditjhaba (Eastern Free State).

Dissatisfaction with the old solution sparks an interest to move to Blackboard Learn™

In 2006, the University of the Free State moved from its existing WebCT virtual learning platform to a popular open source solution for the deployment of both its on-campus (blended) and off-campus (distance) modules. However, having ported over all its learning modules to the open source solution, the institute began to experience a lack of technical support and development, resulting in a poor service delivery to its students and academics. Subsequently, the institute realised that it had to make drastic changes in order to deliver the necessary online learning environment. In June 2009 an executive decision was made to move to Blackboard Learn™, Release 9.0 as the official Learning Management System of the University of the Free State. In June 2009 the university began its implementation by piloting 10 projects across five of the faculties on campus. Approximately 10 modules were rigorously piloted by 3,000 students for six months - prior to going live in January 2010. By July 2010 the University of the Free State was running at full capacity, with 1,500 modules being accessed by 25,000 students.

Implementing and rolling out a new solution

This strategic decision to move from the open source solution was aligned with the University of the Free State's commitment to excellence in teaching and learning, and was supported by the Vice-rector.

Various resources and tactics were deployed in the implementation and management of the new LMS.

Design teams, consisting of learning designers and developers, were appointed to support academic staff in the design and development of learning materials and resources on the new learning platform. The designers' role was not restricted to the design and development of learning materials but also to act as change agents within faculties - promoting the effective use of the Blackboard and becoming "the face" of the LMS: persons that academics could contact for ongoing support, while the developers did the behind-the-scenes work.

Two factors were seen as crucial in the success of these design teams:

- firstly the personal relationships built between learning designers and academic staff and
- secondly the interdependent relationship between learning designers and developers.

Designers and developers worked closely together, focusing on putting the best possible solution on the table not only for academics, but most importantly students as well.

Training of academic and support staff on the new LMS is a crucial factor in the successful implementation of any LMS. The University of the Free State's training workshops did not solely focus on the "how to?" in the use of tools, but emphasis was also placed on teaching and learning, and how tools could support classroom



practices and problems. Some of the issues addressed included over-subscribed classrooms (some classes had up to 1600 students), as well as supporting students from previously disadvantaged communities.

An initiative was launched to award academics for innovative use of technology in the classroom. During an annual E-learning showcase day, academic staff was given the opportunity to show how they had used Blackboard in their teaching and learning while competing for the E-learning award. This recognition for the innovative use of technology has provided a platform for academics to learn from one another and share best practices, and thus build their own community of practice.

Addressing plagiarism

Overcoming plagiarism is recognised as a global issue for academic institutions and the University of the Free State was no exception. Its mission was to establish a system to negate this problem. Plagiarism in assignments had been a constant problem for the institute, with no recognised method for controlling or eliminating it. However, a number of the institute's faculties were using Turnitin, but after evaluating against Blackboard's SafeAssign™, the decision was made to implement Blackboard's anti-plagiarism solution.

Subsequently the university developed an official protocol and policy for the lecturers – how to detect plagiarism and what to do when you detect it in an assignment? This has proven an excellent selling point to lecturers to get them to embrace Blackboard. As a result of the adoption of SafeAssign, the institute has had its anti-plagiarism policy approved by the university's senate and executive committee, and it has now been implemented across various levels of the institution.

Using mobile devices to provide access to learning especially in remote areas

Another challenge for the university was the inconsistency in connectivity and internet speed across its two campuses, one of which is sited in a rural area. To remedy this problem the university evaluated the usage of mobile devices to give students in remote areas access to learning.

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A survey conducted by the university established that 97% of its students had access to mobile phones. In view of this research the university was keen to see the integration between Blackboard Learn and Blackboard Mobile™ Learn and how they can harness its functionality to reach its students with mobile devices. The University of the Free State is one of the forerunners in South Africa in terms of harnessing mobile learning to deliver content and assist students via their mobile phones.

A successful roll-out, setting an example for the region

In 2009 University Free State had 400 modules on the open source solution and by June 2010 it had already surpassed the 1,500 module mark on Blackboard. "This increase in adoption of the Blackboard Learn platform can be greatly contributed to a dedicated team of people that does not only focus on the technology, but on improving teaching and learning" Tiana van der Merwe comments.

The University of the Free State believes that one of its key success factors in rolling out the new release of the Blackboard Learn platform was its phased planning: Focusing initially on deploying the Blackboard Learn for Course Delivery and ensuring its lecturers were fully trained and comfortable using the platform, before adding the Community Engagement and Content Management modules.

Meanwhile, the institute has been so impressed by Blackboard Learn's functionalities and the system's stability that it is currently testing 9.1 on a test server with a view to fully upgrading in January 2011.

Although the University of the Free State was the first university to adopt Blackboard Learn, Release 9.0, the other four largest universities in South Africa are now following suit and currently reviewing Blackboard Mobile Learn whilst piloting Release 9.0.

Tiana van der Merwe comments, "Our students are putting a huge demand on our academics to get their courses on Blackboard Learn, as a result we are expecting by the end of 2011 that the majority of all graduate courses will be on Blackboard and most of the post graduates modules too."

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