# Battling The Elements...And Coming Out On Top



## Northumberland College

Originally opened in 1957, Northumberland College became a Further Education College in 1995 and now consists of two main campuses, and four smaller sites stretching from Newcastle to the Scottish border town of Berwick-on-Tweed. It offers a wide array of full and part time courses ranging from vocational courses, including NVQs and BTEC National Diplomas in subjects as varied as beauty therapy and motor engineering, to more traditionally academic higher level qualifications such as HNDs and HNCs, and some Foundation Degrees which the college offers in partnership with Northumbria University, the University of Sunderland and Sheffield Hallam University. Work-based learning courses are also offered many of which are supported online.

The college employs approximately 500 staff and has 5,500 students of which over 4,000 are adult learners. As part of its best practice strategic plan, Northumberland College intends to become an 'exceptional college' by 2013.

# **Heavy Snow Closing Down Schools And Colleges**

Northumberland College has been using Blackboard Learn™ for its virtual learning environment (VLE) requirements since 2008. The college had previously used an alternative VLE but found the product to be limited in its functionality. Recognizing the need for a far more comprehensive and intuitive e-learning system, it evaluated Blackboard Learn, a solution from Northern Europe, and a popular open source alternative. Based on robustness of solution, breadth of application, ease of use, and the fact that it could offer a fully hosted solution, Blackboard Learn emerged as the platform that met Northumberland College's demands.

In January 2010, faced with persistent heavy snow which led to the closure of more than 350 schools and colleges across the North East of England, Northumberland College was forced to shut its Kirkley Hall and Ashington campuses for six and five college days respectively. The college's objective was to make best use of existing resources and this is where the Blackboard Learn platform came into its own; keeping all students informed of the changing situation and indicating when it was likely that the college would re-open, while making all reasonable efforts to ensure disruption to students' education was kept to a minimum by enabling courses to continue to run as smoothly as possible.



### The Challenge:

Northumberland College faced extreme weather and made effective use of Blackboard Learn™ to ensure educational continuity



## Blackboard Learn Ensuring Continuation Of Education

When heavy snow hit the Northumberland area in January 2010, the College drew on its experience of using Blackboard Learn as a support to students in the classroom as well as providing distance learning on NVQ level apprenticeship courses in hairdressing and health and social care, which were specifically designed for learners who can't attend college on a regular basis. Staff very quickly made use of the communication tools to liaise with students and to ensure the weather caused as little disruption as possible to their learning.

Maureen Charlton, eLearning Resources Manager at Northumberland College, immediately began to post daily updates on Blackboard Learn, informing students of the latest information including which campuses would and would not open the next day. Alongside this, as the week went on and it became clear that more snow was on its way, teaching staff increasingly made themselves available via Blackboard to answer any questions students had. They also used Blackboard Learn to remind students of assignments that needed to be completed and of work that could be done from home. This proactive approach ensured that the students would not fall too far behind. Some tutors in the construction department even began to use the online forum tools within Blackboard Learn to mirror a traditional lesson by running class discussions online.

#### **Increased Adoption As A Result**

Northumberland College's strategy of extending the use of Blackboard Learn during the exceptional weather conditions was a huge success, with the number of logins to the Blackboard systems increasing by 122% on the first day that the college closed compared to the average for the previous month. Subsequent feedback from staff and students was extremely positive, with many saying they couldn't have managed so effectively without Blackboard to keep them up to date.

In fact, Northumberland College's solution to coping with the effects of the heavy snow has proved so effective that it is now looking to use the experiences of this period as a guideline to develop an 'educational continuity policy' that can be adapted to cope with unforeseen events that lead to the closure of college sites at short notice

Maureen Charlton, eLearning Resources Manager, Northumberland College said: "Since switching to Blackboard the adoption of eLearning across the college as a whole has risen by 200%. This is more than we expected, and our online provision of courses has gone from a cottage industry under our previous VLE to mainstream adoption throughout the organization."

"In fact, Blackboard has proved so indispensable that many students even logged onto the site on Christmas and New Year's Day. Blackboard Learn has proved itself to be an integral part of our educational continuity policy, which in itself is one element in our plan to become an 'exceptional college' by 2013."

#### **For More Information**

If you are interested to learn more on how Blackboard can help you and your organization increase the impact of education, please contact your account manager or visit us at www.blackboard.com

