

University of Derby

Since 2009, over 600 enquirers from more than 30 countries have booked on to the University's Virtual Open Days which are powered by Blackboard Collaborate. In fact, these Virtual Open Days have been so successful that the primary call-to-action in all of the University's advertising is to invite prospective students to attend a Virtual Open Day – as this has become the key way in which the University converts enquirers through to students.

Since 2007, the University of Derby has utilised Blackboard Collaborate to improve the experience of its online distance learning students. The highly interactive and engaging nature of Blackboard Collaborate Web Conferencing has allowed faculty and staff in many areas of the university to feel a connection with the University and to meet online with Academic and Support Staff, Students' Union representatives, and other enquirers. Whether holding meetings, training sessions, or offering numerous courses live online, the University has found seemingly countless ways to utilise Collaborate. But perhaps most notably, the University holds Virtual Open Days to inform prospective students about its programmes – and these Virtual Open Days pay enormous dividends by allowing the University to easily and inexpensively attract new students who otherwise wouldn't enroll in the University.

The University of Derby has traditionally had a high rate of converting prospective students who attend its on-campus Open Day activities into students who enroll in the University. And since these on-campus Open Days have always been so successful, the University decided to see if they would be equally successful if held online – thereby allowing staff to present the same information but without asking the prospective students to spend time and money getting to campus..

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Julie Stone,
Head of the University of
Derby Online.

“We wanted to replicate this on-campus experience for distance learners who could not attend the campus,” said Julie Stone, the Head of the University of Derby Online.

Naturally, Mrs. Stone and her team turned to Blackboard Collaborate™ Web Conferencing.

“Through Blackboard Collaborate we are able to talk, chat, show PowerPoint, and video stream information and pictures of the campus, making this a very rich experience for the students,” says Mrs. Stone. It allows socialisation activities to occur, which leads to high levels of engagement and encourages deep and active learning to take place. Students quickly put a face to a name of their tutor or peers and the barriers of motivation and feeling isolated quickly disappear. Students are further encouraged to meet in their own time in the classrooms to work collaboratively. In fact, independent student hours in the classrooms soon outnumbered tutored hours when the initiative was launched.

According to Mrs. Stone and her distance learning team, the “jewel in the crown” is when the prospective students begin to talk to each other. Even though these students often don’t know each other, they instantly begin to form a bond during these Virtual Open Days that makes them eager to attend the University.

The introduction of the Virtual Open Days has been an integral part of an overall strategy to grow the University of Derby’s online distance learning business. The whole of the student experience was taken under review and a commitment was made to improve the students’ experience. In a period of just over two years, the number of online distance learning students at Derby has more than doubled, growing from 700 students in 2009 to over 1,500 students as of Autumn 2011.

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“It has essentially allowed what is a part-time offer to have a global reach, as our students are based all over the world including Hong Kong, Singapore, USA, Canada, and Africa,” says Charlotte Abbott, Online Distance Learning Operations Coordinator at the University of Derby.

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In addition to helping the University attract more than 300 new students via the Virtual Open Days, Blackboard Collaborate has also been used as part of Derby’s retention strategy.

“The facility of Blackboard Collaborate has enabled us to provide a better service to students and to be able to focus on a student experience which allows a distance approach with a human interaction/intervention that our student feedback surveys have illustrated are critical to the motivation of students,” says Miss Abbott. “One student told us, ‘I found the panel were warm, friendly and refreshingly open to concerns and questions put towards them. The forum also gave prospective students an opportunity to converse with fellow prospectees and set the stage for an open and social atmosphere to conduct our enquiries.’”

The University is now revisiting its use of Blackboard Collaborate to look at how it might further refine its student interactions, and it’s also exploring Blackboard™ Enterprise Instant Messaging and Blackboard Collaborate Voice Authoring as it seeks to grow its online business significantly over the next five years into a £10M business activity.

