

Strengthening collaboration between higher education, further education and secondary schools to achieve higher results

Situated in Belgium in the heart of Western Europe, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven has been a centre of learning for almost six centuries and is now one of the largest and most renowned universities in Europe. In 2003 the Flanders government issued a decree following the Bologna agreement that universities and schools of higher education had to form associations so that these schools would receive the most appropriate level of research expertise and support needed to help them effectively develop their academic programs. Therefore, K.U. Leuven made an application to form an association and collaboration with 12 catholic schools of higher education located across Flanders.

K.U. Leuven originally implemented Blackboard Learn™ as its own central learning environment for the whole university in September, 2001. However, the development of the K.U. Leuven Association in 2003 was to have an enormous impact upon their e-learning environment. The K.U. Leuven Association now educates over 80,000 students and these students are located across Flanders. The challenge for the university therefore was to seamlessly roll out its Blackboard Learn platform to effectively work across all 12 institutions within the new K.U. Leuven association. Eight of the 12 institutions were already working individually with Blackboard, so these were at least familiar with the environment; however four were completely new to Blackboard.

Overcoming complex IT infrastructures and integrating several systems

The initial challenge for implementing Blackboard Learn was the sheer enormity of the K.U. Leuven association. With so many students it was imperative that the Blackboard Learn platform was truly scalable. A further challenge was that each individual school within the association needed to retain its own brand within Blackboard Learn and have

its own modules contained within it. For the students it was important that they felt comfortable within the learning environment, that they received a local feel and not that they were part of a bigger environment. However, to counter this it was necessary to have the global infrastructure in place so that students and teachers could access and work together with students from other schools.

K.U. Leuven has a very strong relationship with the catholic secondary schools in Flanders. In order to support these partnerships, in 2005 K.U. Leuven hosted the e-learning environment of the catholic schools consortium, VVKSO. The university's objective was to invest time in nurturing relationships with catholic

QUICK FACTS

- Founded in 1425 by Pope Martin V, K.U. Leuven is the oldest traditional Catholic university in the world and the oldest university in the Low Countries
- Katholieke Universiteit Leuven connects 12 institutes, 167 schools, and more 130,000 learners in over 2,500 active communities every day

secondary schools to ensure that the students are already familiar with K.U. Leuven when they have to choose their education institution of choice. Additionally with 80% of all catholic teachers in Flanders educated at K.U. Leuven, it needed a link with catholic schools in order to place students who are training to be teachers to gain relevant work experience. When K.U. Leuven was approached by a consortium of secondary schools that was already using Blackboard Learn with the request to host their server they took advantage of this opportunity. The obvious challenge then was how to run two Blackboard servers successfully.

K.U. Leuven in effect has two Blackboard Learn platforms since then - one for K.U. Leuven association for higher education and one for secondary schools. Both Blackboard environments run over the same hardware infrastructure providing the advantage of being able to adjust the configuration to allocate resources where needed during peak usage.

The wide scale implementation in September 2004 across the K.U. Leuven association called for a major restructuring of the user support on several levels. The team at K.U. Leuven had to process all the administrative and course data into Blackboard for each institution, develop and test new tools and building blocks, support the local administration of the different institutions, and solve technical problems. Not all twelve participating institutions were embedded into the Blackboard Learn platform at the same time. Each year three institutions were brought in with the whole project taking four years to complete.

The rationale for K.U. Leuven in having two systems is because higher education traditionally requires more complex IT infrastructures and processes. The administrative systems at K.U. Leuven are incredibly robust so they can link to the other large systems within schools for higher education. At the same time, secondary schools have less expanded IT infrastructures. Every institution within the K.U. Leuven association and secondary school has its own team of local administrators who help students and colleagues in their daily use of Blackboard. They organise information sessions and workshops and are responsible for the helpdesk for students and staff.

Successfully connecting over 130,000 learners across 2,500 active communities every day

K.U. Leuven has successfully worked with Blackboard to build a partnership between higher education and secondary schools connecting over 130,000 learners in over 2,500 active communities every day. This type of partnership offers opportunities for closer collaboration, greater efficiencies and smoother transition across the different stages of a student's journey.

The Blackboard Learn platform enables staff members to provide rich digital information beyond the boundaries of their own institution and to communicate with students in a familiar environment. Staff members can communicate with each other and exchange experiences. Collaboratively they can prepare and develop interactive course materials and share with others.

Through this common e-learning environment students can now easily and effectively work with their peers in the participating on a variety of study programs. Course materials are centrally stored and accessible to everyone. Students can take a course at another institution within the association without the need to transfer physically - saving costs and time.

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 blackboard.com/emea.

This partnership between HE and secondary schools continues to offer opportunities for closer collaboration, greater efficiencies and a smooth transition throughout the stages of every student's academic journey.

Leen van Rentergem
Director ICT Services,
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven