

Charles Darwin University and Blackboard Consulting: An Educational Effectiveness Journey

Institutional leaders need a way to guide institutions through the challenges surrounding educational quality, and traditional institutional research is not enough. What is needed are new processes and tools to generate meaningful data. This data leads to action, and action leads to improvement. It's a concept known as "education effectiveness," and Charles Darwin University in Australia is leading the way by turning the concept into reality.

Charles Darwin University (CDU) is founded on 50 years of delivering tertiary education in the Northern Territory (NT), Australia and is the NT's largest tertiary institution. As a multi-sector education provider, CDU provides unique pathways for students, from school-based vocational training through to advanced research degrees.

Last year alone, the University served over 170 communities in the NT (a jurisdiction of nearly 1.5 million square kilometers) as well as many distant interstate locations in Western Australia, Queensland, South Australia and New South Wales. Many locations are literally thousands of kilometers away from the University's main headquarters in Darwin, on the north coast of the vast continent of Australia. With such a large footprint, nearly seventy percent of CDU's higher education students study in flexible delivery mode with online delivery as a key component.

Professor Charles Webb, Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor, has been involved in a series of university-wide initiatives focused on facilitating a step change for CDU towards best practice flexible delivery and enhancement of teaching and learning quality. "In order to keep pace with our changing needs we had to make changes to the way we deliver educational programs to our students," he said.

Increasing the Effectiveness of Education

Educational effectiveness is achieved through a systematic quality assurance process – it is essential for maintaining a vibrant, relevant, and impactful curriculum. Blackboard Consulting defines "educational effectiveness" as the capacity of an organization to sustain adaptive processes to achieve its mission and goals. These adaptive processes are further defined as identifying expected outcomes for both educational programs and



Quick Facts

- + Northern Territory's largest tertiary institution
- + 21,000 students, 6,500 in Higher Ed, balance in vocational programs
- + Students drawn from the local area, across Australia and overseas
- + Nearly 70% study in flexible mode



Strategic
Solutions

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Professor Charles Webb
*Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor
Charles Darwin University*

administrative services, assessing outcomes attainment, and providing evidence of improvement based on an analysis of those results. With this in mind, Blackboard Consulting began work with the CDU team to determine ways that could improve student learning through flexible delivery, enhancing engagement and support of students through a community-based approach, and measure the effectiveness of instruction on students. “We’ve have enjoyed a strong association with Blackboard for a number of years,” says Professor Webb. “We continue to develop a strong partnership and value the Blackboard as a trusted advisor in this relationship.” A key component of the expansion of our partnership was to undertake a comprehensive review of our institutional mission, goals, and desired quality outcomes. “It is important for us to have an institutional approach to defining, measuring and improving the quality of our programs and services, and Outcomes Assessment is proving a very valuable tool in this regard.” says Professor Webb.

In consultation with key institutional stakeholders, Blackboard Consulting applied its strategic engagement framework—of vision, plan, implement and perform—to assist the University to identify a series of initiatives to improve educational effectiveness. Using a customized approach targeted to the needs of the University, all the basic elements of the model were addressed, including:

- **Institutional Strategy:** Flexible learning definitions, goals, and outcomes were formed to provide a vision for the desired end state. These elements formed the basis for next stages in planning and implementation.
- **Flexible Learning Strategy:** Blackboard Consulting assisted in the development of a flexible learning plan and supported the creation of operational elements in a formalized business plan.
- **Faculty and Program Development:** A series of instructional design, online teaching and learning workshops were held for faculty.
- **Student Support and Engagement:** Definitions, goals, and expected outcomes were formed to provide a vision for improved student support and engagement. A 24x7 help desk was implemented to enhance student support through a relationship with the Blackboard partner Presidium.
- **Program Delivery and Management:** Improvements in curriculum delivery through implementation of Blackboard Learn™, Release 9.
- **Improved Student Engagement:** A strategy for improving community engagement was implemented through the Blackboard Learn Community Engagement module.
- **Learning Environment:** Access, stability, and scalability were strengthened through a move to a Blackboard Managed Hosting™ environment.
- **Institutional Assessment Approaches:** Enhanced through the operation of the Blackboard Learn Outcomes Assessment module.

Professor Webb says guidance and support from the Blackboard Consulting team was critical. “You not only have to have a strong underpinning technology foundation, but you need to develop an understanding of how to engage the capabilities this foundation affords you to enhance teaching and learning to improve the educational experience of students. Blackboard Consulting have been a key partner in our strategy to improve the quality of teaching and learning at CDU.”

Outcomes Assessment Technology

One of the most important aspects for leadership at the University is the Blackboard Learn for Outcomes Assessment module, which is used to automate the tracking, analysis, and reporting of student outcomes according to University standards and produce assessment results designed to improve their programs. Blackboard Consulting worked with administrative and faculty leaders to build a culture of inquiry through systematic assessment leading to continuous program and institutional quality improvement. From the perspective of the University executives, it means parameters can be set to facilitate the University meeting the requirements of Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), a not-for-profit national agency that reports on quality assurance in Australian higher education, and their own institutional goals in a systematic and thorough manner.

As the Manager of CDU’s Flexible Delivery Team, Roni Roberts says, “The Outcomes module allows us to measure exactly that – outcomes. It’s a quality management system which in itself allows us to specifically target individual cohorts or individuals, for that matter, and survey or collect information about that individual that informs us of the quality or the levels of satisfaction, which then informs change based on the feedback we’re obtaining. It allows us to measure not just feedback but also to set benchmarks and identify whether the quality of the materials we’re delivering are meeting those benchmarks and standards which we’ve set.”

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Roni Roberts
CDU’s Flexible Delivery Team Manager

Professor Webb endorses this view. “The Outcomes module is powerful in that it enables you to act in the framework of continuous improvement but from an outcomes point of view,” he says. “That’s what attracted us. There was a technological platform that enabled us to implement some of our actions and activities towards improving quality but with a more specific focus on quantifiable results.”

One of the more practical and immediate benefits of running their evaluation tools at a course level using Blackboard Outcomes technology has been in the form of student engagement. “As a pilot, we used the Outcomes module for our course evaluation tools,” says Professor Webb. “It’s been pleasing to see a 400% increase in student responses as a result.”

Strategic Capabilities – by Design

Strategic partnerships are mutually transforming, and the Blackboard Consulting engagement at CDU has helped shape a new consulting vision: the Capabilities Analysis Consulting engagement.

Capability Analysis for Educational Effectiveness provides senior leaders with a framework for determining and improving educational quality across the institution and is marked by distinct milestones:

- Work with senior leaders to clarify a vision and plan for educational effectiveness
- Identify measurement methods for graduate attributes
- Configure Blackboard Learn for Outcomes Assessment software to align with process
- Transfer knowledge to application owners
- Generate actionable knowledge that leads to program improvement
- Make recommendations on improving methods and processes

This holistic approach recognises the diverse and unique set of prior experiences, knowledge, learning approaches and skills of students and their communities and provides various pathways to the achievement of their educational, personal and community goals. "From my perspective, I believe that the partnership with Blackboard is a vital element of the University's strategic ambitions to become a best practice flexible delivery organisation," says Professor Webb. "We've had tremendous support from Blackboard through a real willingness on their part to customize their products and services to meet our particular needs. It's a

purposeful, thoughtful engagement and a true example of an excellent partnership arrangement between a commercial organisation and the University."

For his part, Roni Roberts says the feedback within the institution has been extremely positive. "People can see the value of what a strategic approach can do for us, and I think they're generally excited about the prospect of having real information and concrete feedback," he says. "It's something that's meaningful to them because it comes from a tangible source rather than being merely anecdotal or a hypothesized theory."

Looking ahead, Professor Webb sees tremendous potential. "Through our engagement with Blackboard, we will be in contact with other international comparative universities with a similar mission and mix of students," he says. "We hope to exchange assessment rubrics of common graduate attributes with these similar universities. This gives us a great opportunity to demonstrate international benchmarking of the achievements of a key student outcome." In the meantime, Professor Webb looks forward to a continuing partnership with Blackboard. "Blackboard opens the doors to a community of educators and by taking advantage of their consulting services, we are confident the benefits will continue to grow."