

The University Of The West Of England Satisfies Appetite For Collaborative Software

Ranked 5th in England out of 83 Higher Education institutions in a Teaching Quality Assessment league table published in the Times Higher Educational Supplement, the University of the West of England (UWE) is a forward looking university. With more than 30,000 students and 3,000 staff, UWE is the largest provider of higher education in the southwest of England. Students come to UWE from all parts of the UK while international students hail from more than 50 countries worldwide.

Recognised for the quality of its teaching, UWE has had a record of consistently excellent teaching ratings as assessed by the Quality Assurance Agency in peer reviews. The University offers more than 600 programmes at undergraduate, postgraduate, professional and short-course levels and has a history of providing high-quality education and training to students, achieving consistently high assessment scores for teaching quality. The University's strong links with major employers brings visiting lecturers to share their professional experience and provides excellent placement opportunities

for students. UWE prides itself on giving its students the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in their chosen careers.

According to Professor Julie McLeod, Assistant Vice-Chancellor: Learning, Teaching and the Student Experience, what sets UWE apart from other universities is the emphasis it puts on equipping students for the real world of work. UWE doesn't see employers as just a source of jobs at graduation. In fact, many UWE instructors continue to work as practising professionals in areas such as healthcare, the law, architecture, education, and the creative arts.

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Leader,
E-Learning Development Unit,
University of the West
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Thus, to ensure it remains at the forefront, UWE is very active in using technology to support teaching and learning activities. For example, it has more than 1,500 active courses in its Virtual Learning Environment, Blackboard 9, and an estimated 75% of its academic modular provision is now supported online. In fact, because UWE's e-learning activities matured so rapidly, in 2006 it became clear that there was an emerging need for more multi-media and collaborative technologies. Enter Blackboard Collaborate.

Manuel Frutos-Perez, Leader of UWE's E-Learning Development Unit, says that UWE wanted to give its instructors the ability to start creating and broadcasting audio and mixed-media learning materials over the Internet. His E-Learning Development Unit analysed the needs of its academic base and its corporate technology model, and concluded that UWE needed a robust and flexible set of user-friendly tools (ranging from basic to advanced) that would put minimal strain on the load of its systems and would require moderate support and maintenance. The solution became apparent rather quickly.

"Blackboard Collaborate fits very well within our model and needs," Frutos-Perez says. The tools are cross-platform compatible and can be accessed either via its VLE (Blackboard) or via the Blackboard Collaborate server. This makes them very easy to use and easy to access.

UWE implemented Blackboard Collaborate in September 2007 in numerous subjects ranging from computing and architecture to business and law. And in just a few short months, web conferencing, voice authoring and create capabilities were all quickly adopted and became integral parts of many courses.

From providing spoken course overviews, giving faculty the ability to thoroughly describe subject matter, or creating speaking and listening exercises within foreign language courses, UWE faculty have found many varied uses for Blackboard Collaborate in a variety of subjects, including:

- **Voice Podcaster to deliver weekly updates on courses (several subjects)**
- **Voice Podcaster to deliver lecture recordings (several subjects)**

- **Voice Email to develop formal telephone conversational skills (Architecture)**
- **Voice Presentation to describe the operation of online resources and databases (several subjects)**
- **Voice Presentation to provide an introduction to the course (several subjects)**
- **Voice Presentation to discuss case studies (Business Studies)**
- **Voice Recording to voice-annotate the course (several subjects)**
- **Voice Boards for foreign language practice**
- **Web Conferencing for peer-assisted learning sessions (Computing)**
- **Create for course content creation (several subjects)**

Specifically, there was one particular instance when a lecturer in the Faculty of Business and Law sought a way to enhance lengthy PDF case studies because he wasn't permitted to annotate them due to copyright restrictions. He wanted to augment the PDF case studies instead of making his students read the lengthy documents. Thus, he put them in the Voice Presentation tool and recorded several accompanying voice files to thoroughly explain sections of each case study. "He can voice annotate the case study and allow his students to comment on his sound bites. His students even make their own vocal postings. Now his students are getting a very interactive experience while the copyright restrictions are still in place."

As of the Spring 2008 semester, less than one year into its initial three-year implementation of Blackboard Collaborate, the uptake of Blackboard Collaborate has "far exceeded our expectations," according to Frutos-Perez. In fact, more than 1,000 voice postings alone have already been created. Therefore, Frutos-Perez and his team are hoping to build on the positive initial reaction in hopes of encouraging staff to make further use of Blackboard Collaborate.

"We have started to use the Voice Podcaster for purposes other than formal VLE-based learning, and as such have embedded it in a Careers resource website that we are developing at the moment," he says. "We are also working on a Simulated Learning project with our School of Law where we are planning to use some of the Blackboard Collaborate tools to provide certain functionality to the simulated learning environment."

More importantly, UWE instructors have been able to add a more collaborative touch to Blackboard. By taking advantage of the lively nature of Blackboard Collaborate, students in online courses have been more engaged. Academic staff use Voice Recording to voice-annotate their courses, they use the Voice Presentation tool to discuss online databases, documents and websites, and they count on Voice Emails as an enhanced communication tool and learning aid device. For instance, Voice Authoring capabilities allow students to develop formal telephone conversational skills that they'll need throughout their post-collegiate professional careers.

"Blackboard Collaborate has definitely helped to bolster the multi-media capabilities of our VLE, enriching the online learning experience of students across all faculties." Frutos-Perez says.

Though UWE is still early in its implementation of the Blackboard Collaborate tools, the positive reception and steady uptake suggests that students and staff consider them to be valuable tools. From UWE's perspective, "the tools have enabled us to very quickly deploy a voice suite that will serve the needs of our academic staff regardless of their level of engagement with online learning and regardless of the level of their technical expertise."

As usage figures continue to grow quickly, UWE grows increasingly encouraged by the high uptake of Blackboard Collaborate. UWE believes its dissemination strategy continues to work, that its staff continues to be able to use the tools largely unsupported, and perhaps most importantly, that faculty continue to find the tools worth using.

UWE points to two key factors for the success Blackboard Collaborate. One, the tools were needed. There was an "appetite among academic staff" for collaborative software. Second, Blackboard Collaborate is "so easy to use."

Because of the ease-of-use of Blackboard Collaborate, the central E-Learning Development Unit didn't have to implement a big training programme. The group didn't expect such rapid uptake because with some other tools in the past, the uptake was much slower.

When a faculty member approaches Frutos-Perez to enquire about Blackboard Collaborate, he instinctively tells them about its benefits. "The first thing I normally tell faculty is that they can really bring their courses to life," he says with a smile. "Our virtual learning environment, Blackboard, can often become a bit two-dimensional in the sense that it's very text-heavy, but the beauty with Blackboard Collaborate is that they can liven up their courses with almost no effort."

"We can infer that the continued increase in the number of tool instances reflects the perceived usefulness of the tools by academic staff and the positive feedback provided to them by students," he says. "We have found that the flexibility that the Blackboard Collaborate tools provide is extremely useful. It can cater to different needs and abilities."



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For more information about Blackboard Collaborate email collaborateintsales@blackboard.com or visit blackboardcollaborate.com

