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Instituto Politécnico da Guarda

BOLOGNA PROCESS DRIVES E-LEARNING AT PORTUGUESE POLYTECHNIC

Guarda Polytechnic (Instituto Politécnico da Guarda) is a state-run centre for Higher Education. Based in the Portuguese city of Guarda (population 32,000), it has a virtual campus based on the Blackboard Learn™ platform, and provides a comprehensive range of study paths to Bachelor and Masters degree levels. Core subjects are arts and humanities, business and social sciences, engineering, medicine and health, science and technology.

The university system in Portugal has a strong theoretical basis and is highly research-oriented while the polytechnic system provides a more practical training and is profession-oriented. Until 2006, only universities were able to award a Masters degree, yet new legislation, based on the Bologna Process, has made it possible for polytechnic schools to offer courses leading to both Bachelor and Masters degrees.

The Bologna Process is a strategic response by European governments to globalization and the demands of a new knowledge-based economy. At its heart is the creation of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) that enables greater international co-operation and exchange through greater standardization and quality assurance of higher education provision in European countries.



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The process began in 1999 when the Bologna Declaration sent out a strong message to higher education institutions in European countries. Alongside the drive for a common approach, there was a call for institutions to facilitate greater citizen mobility and broader access to education.

Guarda Polytechnic took on the challenge in 2002 and launched an online education pilot in the Higher Technology and Management School (Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão). The project focused on teaching courses and to a lesser degree, professional training for teaching staff. It had a very basic level of integration with existing information systems.

Challenge and Objectives

The pilot let the leadership team at Guarda Polytechnic study first-hand, the role that new information and communications technologies could play in evolving higher education. Armed with these results, they were eager to take what they learned and develop a new online learning space.

The challenge was to create a virtual campus that would not only enhance the quality of education provision, yet also help the polytechnic to meet the requirements of the Bologna Process. This required a process change from the pilot, wherein a student had to ask a professor to take his or her class online and the professor then had to ask the system's administration for this course to be created.

The management team initiated the change process and the students quickly became an important driving force because they immediately recognized the advantages of having their courses online. Key challenges and objectives moving forward were:

- **Integrating the learning platform with existing information systems**
- **Extending online learning provision throughout all the Polytechnic's schools**
- **Evolving the quality of education and its delivery to achieve better outcomes**

Strategy and Implementation

The drive towards a modern virtual campus prompted the organization to quickly gather momentum as it moved from pilot, to integration and on into the evolutionary phase:

- 1. Pilot: Set infrastructure, train the faculty and gather data to enable evolution.**
- 2. Integration: Align technology and organization to drive adoption.**
- 3. Evolution: On-going dissemination of e-learning knowledge, process improvements and further integration and evolution.**

The 'Virtual Campus Project' saw e-learning extended to all schools in the polytechnic and further integration of systems and processes. As part of this evolutionary process, the Blackboard Learning platform was chosen to provide greater technological alignment with the strategic objectives.

Mindful of the drive towards European Standards & Quality Assurance in the EHEA, the polytechnic created a Content Project Department in 2007 to support the faculty in producing standardized educational content to support teaching. Standards were used to create, transform, adapt, and improve interactive content for the online internship environment.

To get the best of both worlds, Guarda Polytechnic has adopted a blended learning model that combines online training with classroom time. The most popular features of the Blackboard Learn platform are: publication of digital content, warnings and notifications; discussion forums; submission of work; tests and inquiries; plagiarism-detection; multi-media; screen casts; recorded lectures; blogs and journals; and group pages.

Since the Blackboard Learn platform is not open-source, a development Application Programming Interface (API) is provided for the development of new application modules. This has made it possible to automatically integrate information in the academic management system on to the e-learning platform.

By 2010, the Blackboard Learn platform was being used for undergraduate and graduate studies in four of the polytechnic's schools. Today Blackboard Learn is used in all of the polytechnic's schools and all courses are online. The subjects covered are education, communication, sports, management, engineering, tourism and health with qualifications starting at technological specialization diplomas and running through to Bachelor and Masters. The 3,800 user-base is made up of over 3,200 students, over 200 professors, administrative staff and outside users.

Results

Today, the Blackboard Learn platform is not only a key part of the education environment but also crucial at the organizational level; enabling internal collaboration and sharing of information between directors, professors, administrative staff, students, and members of other organizations.

All faculty members offer their courses online. According to the students and faculty members, the main advantage of online courses is the ease of interaction between people and the highest educational value is given to the distribution of information and documents. Guarda Polytechnic is developing several building blocks like Student Surveys that enables them to collect student opinions about the learning quality at the Institute.

Since it is available 24/7, the e-learning solution provides an undeniable assistance in the implementation of the Bologna Process. Some of the well recognized benefits include:

- **The knocking down of physical and time barriers to classroom learning.**
- **Activities that delegate more responsibility to students such as participation in journals, groups, blogs, and forums.**
- **Self determination whereby students set their own pace of self-teaching and interaction.**



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The role of the professor has also changed from lecturer to coach. Alongside the provision of information, teachers are now more actively engaged with students. And they are benefiting from continuous evaluation made possible with new technology. So students can be measured on their interaction in the virtual environment; course work can be submitted online and automatically checked for plagiarism; and there are online tests and participation records.

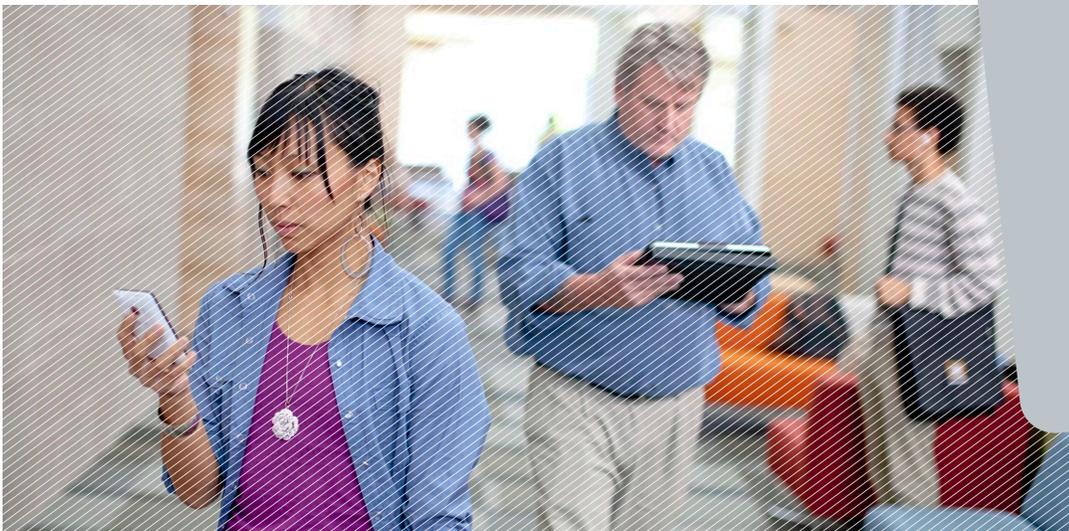
Finally, the management team can be confident that the new learning environment is sustainable and future-proof, based on its track record in other countries and an on-going investment in new functionality. This means that Guarda Polytechnic can be confident that it will keep pace with new changes to the Bologna model.

Making Education Mobile

To further enhance the technology already being utilized on campus, in early 2012, Guarda Polytechnic adopted Blackboard Mobile Learn™ across their campus to extend teaching and learning activities to faculty and students using mobile devices both inside and outside of the

classroom. Mobile technology allows for discovery and creative processes to take place anywhere and encourages self-directed learning. Guarda Polytechnic believes that their institution's mobile-learning strategy must be up to pace with the type of technological environment students already know and use in their everyday lives. Collaborating, teaching and learning can now take place anywhere, anytime. Student and faculty ideas, images and videos can be uploaded and shared instantly. Mobile Learn is also enabling staff at the University to stay current with all internal management processes now that this information is available through the dedicated Blackboard community area of their Mobile application.

Whether it's a lifeline to a social community or adopting a preferred learning tool, online access to e-learning via computers, tablets, and mobile phones are a way of life for students today and schools should be meeting the needs of their audiences.



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