



Microsoft Windows 2000 Advanced Server Customer Solution

New College Durham Enhances Online Learning Experience

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New College Durham needed a solution to supplement its traditional teaching methods, enabling students and lecturers to access and share information online. The Blackboard Learning System™, running on Microsoft technologies, delivers a multi-functional Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) eliminating time-consuming and costly processes, and creating an efficient learning resource.

Situation

New College Durham is a leading education provider in County Durham and the northeast region. Its further education and higher education courses cover a wide range of academic and vocational disciplines and are open to full and part-time students of all ages, aspirations and abilities.

New College Durham aims to work in partnership with other education providers to create and sustain a learning community. The college plays a leading role in delivering and encouraging participation and achievement.

In order to fully extend its potential, the college needed a tool for teaching and distributing information that would support the techniques it offered. It already ran an intranet for online distribution, but lecturers found these resources difficult to use.

Most staff didn't have the Web-development skills required to publish lecture information online. They were forced to send material to the central IT department who would publish it for them. "The sheer number of requests led to a bottleneck effect, creating a backlog," says George Wraith, Product Development Manager, ICT Department, New College Durham.

Instead, staff reverted to printing out the information, defying the purpose of an online solution. They sent lecturing material to the reprographics department, which charges to produce materials, a costly process that had to be repeated with each lecture update and every new year.

There was also the problem of distribution. "One particular lecturer has students from nine separate courses in one class. If those students don't come to the lecture, it's extremely difficult for that lecturer to locate them all to pass on their class materials," says Wraith. "This caused a lot of aggravation and loss of important information. It was an inefficient system."

Solution

New College Durham needed a solution that could be integrated with Capita's Portfolio Management Information System (MIS), which holds student and course information, a personnel system, and a timetabling system. To avoid manual input, it was important that the solution enabled automatic updates every time a new student was added to the system.

The college took part in a series of interoperability pilots sponsored by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), which finished in January 2002. The pilots explored a number of areas surrounding the concepts of interoperability including:

Solution Overview

Customer Profile

New College Durham is a leading education provider in County Durham and the northeast region, with courses that cover a wide range of academic and vocational disciplines.

Business Situation

The college needed a flexible tool for distributing information that would support the teaching methods it already employed.

Solution

Blackboard Learning System supported by Microsoft® Windows® 2000 Advanced Server.

Benefits

- Personal interface for each student
- Around the clock connection
- Cutting costs not corners – return on investment
- More time for teaching
- Local collaboration

Software and Services

- Microsoft® Windows® 2000 Advanced Server
- Microsoft® SQL Server™ 2000
- Microsoft® Windows® 2000 Professional

Partners

Blackboard



- The feasibility of using a standards-compliant Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) as a key element in the creation of a Managed Learning Environment (MLE)
- Interoperability with existing MIS systems
- Ease of use
- Availability of learning material
- Quality of partner support

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George Wraith
Product Development Manager, ICT
Department
New College Durham.

After the pilots, which tested the interoperability of VLE's such as Capita's Learnwise and Fretwell-Downing's LE, the review committee made its recommendations. In May 2002 New College Durham approached Microsoft partner Blackboard, to implement the *Blackboard Learning System*. The system is supported by Microsoft® Windows® 2000 Advanced Server, which delivers the functionality and reliability needed for an efficient VLE. “Advanced Server has proven to be robust and cope with everything we throw at it,” says Wraith.

Microsoft SQL Server™ 2000 supports the college's database. This offers a scalable and powerful Web-enabled database to cope with the steady growth of data.

The *Blackboard Learning System* is an easy-to-use resource that delivers learning materials to students online. It encourages use by both lecturers and students and is made up of several communications tools including:

- Announcement module - lecturers can make announcements or post information such as room changes
- Course information module - course syllabus can be detailed, reducing the need for paper handouts
- Course document module - lecturers can publish their lecture structure
- Assignments module - assignment information can be broken down in detail
- Digital drop box - students can submit assignments online
- Discussion forum - students and lecturers can post items or topics for discussion
- Chat-room and virtual classroom - users can chat or conduct discussions live

To ensure that the college received the most benefit from the system, the Blackboard Global Services team provided advice and best practice guidance for the integration of the Blackboard system with the college's existing administrative system, MIS Portfolio as well as with LDAP. “Blackboard's consulting services were excellent. I can't speak highly enough of them. They helped us learn as we went, so that if there are any problems in the future, we will know how to fix them,” says Wraith. Blackboard also delivers ongoing intensive training and awareness sessions for select users.

Benefits

By September 2002 students and staff were using the Blackboard system. Now there are 8,500 users enrolled on the system, 700 registered staff and more than 4,000 courses available.

Personal Interface For Every Student

“It is an ideal communications tool,” says Wraith. “Once students are enrolled in the course and in the MIS, their details are imported automatically into the system. With a user name and password, the students can access their own 'my courses' box, which fires up an easy-to-use, tailored interface displaying all information about their specific course.”

The online assignment submission feature saves time, and the chat rooms and discussion forums encourage students to join in, giving them more confidence to contribute to lectures. These combined features promote enhanced learning that could potentially lead to greater academic achievement.

Around-The-Clock Connection

The *Blackboard Learning System* enables students to access or email work and information quickly at any time of day or night, even from home, which is a huge benefit for students who require flexible access. Advanced Server ensures critical applications are constantly available, so there is no inconvenient system downtime.

Cutting Costs, Not Corners – Return on Investment

As notes and course information are now available online, the college makes costs savings through reducing the need for huge paper reproduction jobs. And now that lecturers can publish content themselves, there is only need for one technical administrator to maintain the

system, thanks to Advanced Server's simplified system management and the easy to use administration tools provided within the Blackboard system.

Flexible online learning is also a more attractive prospect for existing and potential students. It engages them, increasing participation and communication between students, and between students and lecturers, ultimately enhancing the learning process. "The solution better meets student needs, encouraging them to complete their courses. The college will potentially benefit from higher recruitment levels," says Wraith.

Blackboard and Microsoft technologies offer a fully scalable solution, which enables new servers to be easily added as student numbers increase, while supporting the availability and flexibility needs of the MLE.

More Time For Teaching

"The lecturers can take control of their lectures," says Wraith. "They can see all the students that are enrolled in their course and closely monitor and encourage those that contribute less." Lecturers also have more time for staff development and teaching, as the need for distribution of lecture notes and course details, and other paper-based administration is greatly reduced.

Wraith continues: "The *Blackboard Learning System* is a supplementary tool for learning. It is not designed to replace lectures and lecturers but is hugely appreciated by users, enhancing their learning experience."

Local Collaboration

For New College Durham, the solution opens up opportunities, not only for expanded distance learning, but to set up strong connections with local outreach centres and schools. "It is the ideal vehicle to deliver information to students in secondary schools. This is important, as students become familiar with the college and are encouraged to enrol here when considering their further or higher education," concludes Wraith.

Other known local users of the *Blackboard Learning System* include Newcastle University, City of Sunderland College and UNN, creating the possibility for better collaboration between these institutions and the sharing of best practice.

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For more information about Blackboard products and services, visit the Web site at:

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For more information about New College Durham's services, visit the Web site at:

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