

How a virtual learning environment can transform higher education

QA qaeducation.co.uk/ict/virtual-learning-environment

Monday, October 21, 2019 - 08:37

Greg Crichton, Head of Information Services at Oxford Brookes University, discusses the university's IT strategy, and how its agile virtual learning environment continues to help it achieve its vision of transforming university life through the use of digital technologies.

At Oxford Brookes University, our IT Strategy 2020 is well underway. The key outcome of this long-term strategy is to deliver and support a rich set of information technology services that are customer-focused, and contribute to our vision of transforming university life through the use of digital technologies and services.

Providing information technology services that meet the needs of our students is a key objective for our IT Services. Their needs are diverse and they are generally very early adopters of new technologies, which create opportunities for the University's IT landscape.

In 2013, as part of this strategy, we started our partnership with CoSector – University of London, when we decided it was time to implement a new Virtual Learning Environment (VLE).

Drive for change

The first project I inherited when I moved to a new role in the University was to implement a new VLE. The drive for this change came from student and staff, who told us that the existing platform wasn't flexible enough. This resonated with our IT colleagues as, from a technical viewpoint, its flat hierarchy didn't allow us to create categories that could represent programmes.

In order to align with the IT strategy, we wanted to offer a much more versatile approach, and at Oxford Brookes we strive for quality when selecting new digital services, specifically favouring ones that are future proof and can adapt to changing needs.

Part of our strategy continues to be focused on the use of technology to enhance both the transactional elements of staff and student experiences and transformational learning, which underpins a commitment to providing an excellent online learning experience. In order to achieve this, it is vital that the university offers an attractive, digital learning experience that meets the needs and expectations of both our staff and students.



Oxford Brookes decided to do some peer analysis and requirements gathering, to evaluate the services that other institutions were using. Once this process had been completed, Moodle, a widely used VLE, was seen as the right solution for us. CoSector was chosen as the service partner due to its knowledge of the sector, being an academic institution itself.

Today, the University works with the CoSector Digital Learning team, which includes the hosting and technical support of the Moodle VLE platform, including Mahara (e-portfolio) integration.

An ongoing partnership

The original tender for the VLE implementation was very technical, and CoSector were initially required to only host the Moodle platform. However, since the partnership began, our relationship has evolved significantly and we've expanded the use of Moodle into other areas outside of online learning; including the integration of student management records and mobile apps. As a result, the Moodle platform has changed from a standard VLE, into one of the University's most used digital services, and it has become thoroughly embedded into the University's digital environment. And maintaining a 24/7 service is critical to teaching and learning at the University.

CoSector provides ongoing technical support and advice for this, and both organisations have since embraced a service credit model, which provides a better understanding of how much capacity each side has, and allows for easier communication. This gives a level of independence to the University: for example, if a product requires changes within the Moodle platform, the University can quickly inform their Digital Learning team, and, as a result of opting into the tailored Service Level Agreement service, we can request the

installation of third-party plugins as well as plugins developed onsite. This activity is based on an element of trust between both parties; speeding up the process and enabling a better workflow between the two organisations.

Oxford Brookes has a vision to be at the forefront of digital transformation in the HE sector, and good working partnerships are fundamental to this vision succeeding.

Bournemouth & Poole College select CoSector – University of London for its virtual learning environment

Bournemouth & Poole College is home to 11,000+ students from across the region, the UK and the world. The institution is the largest provider of Further Education (FE) and Apprenticeships in the surrounding area. The college supports a range of values, among them a passion for learning and success, within a supportive and caring environment. In order to uphold these values, it is important that the college offers the best learning experience that is supportive to the needs of every student.

Bournemouth & Poole College's core focus is on developing the work skills of students to ensure that at the end of their study, they are well placed to start or to progress in their chosen career. The college has a strategic plan 'The Bournemouth & Poole College strategy 2017-2020: Inspiring Excellence' to ensure it meets this vision. The ambition is to be recognised for excellence and by 2020, the college will be outstanding with student achievement rates amongst the highest.

To help achieve its mission, the college has a number of areas of focus including; offer flexibility in delivery, developing its curriculum to meet the skills needs of the local economy; value and empower its staff and unlock their potential and make the college an attractive place to work; and foster innovation and be prepared to take risks, whilst ensuring a high trust culture.

To this end, the college needs to offer an attractive, learning proposition that will enhance and enrich the student experience.

Challenge

In 2012 the college was using a virtual learning environment (VLE) platform, however this solution provided a high renewal quote and did not support the Individual learning plan (ILP) that Bournemouth had in mind for its staff and students.



They therefore sought a new VLE that would support the features it needed, as well as providing a modern looking front end, that staff and students could interact with quickly and efficiently, whilst enabling a seamless, hassle-free learning and teaching experience.

The VLE also needed to be used by a host of different individuals in a variety of ways. For example, students needed to be able to upload their work, be able to make edits, and submit it for marking within a particular timeframe. Teachers needed to be able to access work submitted from any location, at a time that suited them.

It was also important that the VLE had a wide range of plug-ins and add-ons to conform to the college's wider digital strategy.

Bournemouth needed help with the migration and hosting of the new VLE and implementation needed to be as quick and seamless as possible to avoid disruption to learning, and on-going support and technical assistance was vital.

Solution

The college selected CoSector – University of London's Bloom team to implement and support the hosting of Moodle, a VLE platform which manages data specific to students, teachers and other college staff.

With Moodle, the college could upgrade its ILP, with a full integration on to its BPC student record system and also securely host all of its data which is critical to enabling staff and students to have a positive learning and teaching experience. As well as course material, Moodle provides access to the library service, student support functions, career planning guidance and the Student Union activities and services.

CoSector seamlessly managed the migration process ensuring all content from the previous platform was securely transferred to Moodle. To ensure this was as smooth as possible they also supported the conversion of the colleges courses from its previous platform into Moodle versions.

Keith Ball, ILT Technical Officer comments: "We chose to partner with CoSector – University of London, as the Bloom team that manages the Moodle platform has a wealth of experience that we needed to effectively manage, support and consult us on our VLE, the Moodle platform."

Benefits

The Moodle platform stores and hosts all course materials and makes it simple for students to quickly and easily access it remotely. Hosting data in this way with the Moodle has also made it far easier for teachers to mark and grade student assignments, and insert comments and annotations as relevant.

With Moodle, data can also be accessed at any time, any location, with a consistent experience regardless of device i.e. phones, tablets or PCs.

Ball adds: "The Bloom team at CoSector – University of London are a true partner. They have improved the learning experience for our students and made it easier for academics, and administrators to do their jobs. The Bloom team is always on hand for ongoing support via the customer desk and has helped us with updates of the most recent plug ins to develop the platform even further; analysis/reporting; integrations; training for staff and security."

Having CoSector – University of London manage and host the Moodle platform is better for the college than managing it internally as this would require more staff resource, and therefore budget. It is therefore more cost effective and more efficient to have the hosting outsourced to an experienced third party like CoSector – University of London as they are digital learning experts."

For more information on Bournemouth & Poole College and the virtual learning environment, see thecollege.co.uk and cosector.com

Categories

ICT