CASE STUDY: CoSector – University of London supports online learning strategy at Oxford Brookes University

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We take a look at how two educational institutions came together to forge a new path in online learning...

Overview

Based in the South East of England, Oxford Brookes is one of the UK's leading modern universities. With over 150 years of history, it enjoys an international reputation for teaching excellence and innovation as well as strong links with business and industry sectors.

In order for the university to maintain its status as a contemporary learning institution, it is essential that it provides both staff and students with sleek, easy to use, digital educational services, such as virtual learning environments (VLEs).

For the past five years the university has been working as part of its revised strategy for transforming the student experience. Part of this strategy is 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 becoming the sector leader in online learning. In order to achieve this, it is vital that the university offers an attractive, digital learning experience that meets the expectations of both staff and students.

Across the university there are currently five IT departments, with around 100 staff, running through one centralised IT directorate.

Oxford Brookes as an institution is never static and is constantly evolving its digital services to provide the best learning journey for its students. With this in mind, outsourced hosted services need to be agile and provide a strong level of customer support to help with new developments to the service.

Therefore, it is important that they have a strong relationship with the vendors of the outsourced services they manage, and that there is a degree of trust on both sides if any changes need to be made.

Challenge

Six years ago, as part of its student experience strategy, the university decided it was time to implement a new virtual learning environment (VLE) to improve upon its previous online learning system.

The drive for this change was feedback from the students and staff that the previous platform wasn't flexible enough. The IT staff also felt that, from a technical viewpoint, its flat hierarchy didn't allow them to create categories that could represent programmes. It was very much modular course based.

In order to align with the new strategy, the university wanted a much more versatile approach. It strives for quality when selecting new digital services, specifically favouring ones that are future proof and adapt to changing needs. As a result, Oxford Brookes did some peer analysis and

requirements gathering, to evaluate the services that other institutions were using. Once this process had been completed, Moodle, the world's most widely used VLE, was seen as the right solution.

It was then a case of selecting a vendor partner for the implementation and hosting of the Moodle platform, and after a successful tender process, CoSector – University of London, then known as ULCC, was chosen as the service partner due to its knowledge of the sector as an academic institution itself.

CoSector – University of London then successfully implemented the new Moodle platform onto the Oxford Brookes system, replacing the previous service. As this was a large system to replace, with multiple integrations, the process took around nine months.

On-going service

Oxford Brookes currently works with the CoSector – University of London 'Bloom' team, which includes the hosting and technical support of the Moodle VLE platform with Mahara integration.

The original tender for the implementation of the VLE was initially very technical, and no further support was required from CoSector – University of London as part of this arrangement, apart from hosting. However, since the partnership began in 2012 the relationship between the two organisations has evolved, and with the help of CoSector – University of London, the University has since expanded its 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 key services, and it has become embedded into nearly all areas.

CoSector – University of London provides on-going technical support and advice for this, and both organisations have since embraced a service credit model which gives a better understanding of how much capacity each side has and allows easier communication. This gives a level of independence to the University, for example, if a product needs changes within the Moodle platform, the University can quickly inform the Bloom team, and as they opted in to the Tailored SLA service, Oxford Brookes can then request installation of third party plugins and to deploy plugins developed onsite. This is based on an element of trust, and greatly speeds up the process allowing a better workflow between the two organisations.

Benefits and results

The university has also seen an improved approval rate of its digital services with its stakeholders, with a recent national survey scoring Oxford Brookes at just below 90% for online learning satisfaction.

After a six-year relationship, the university continues to be impressed with the exemplary on-going service delivery from CoSector – University of London. Greg Crichton, Head of Information Services at Oxford Brookes, says: "CoSector are very much embedded into our VLE service delivery and have been very reliable over the years."

The use of CoSector – University of London has also highlighted the benefits of external hosting to the organisation.

Crichton adds: "When I analyse the data of the CoSector service against other internal services, I can now evidence to others that outsourced hosting can be more reliable than when we do it in-house.

"As one of our key services, keeping Moodle up and running is critical to teaching at the University. Moodle may not have seen adoption across the University if we had not worked with CoSector to ensure a flexible and usable service. Our partnership with CoSector is one of the things that has made the platform the success it is. We may not have achieved such a successful implementation if we hadn'thad that really effective partnership and communication with CoSector."

Dave Kenworthy, Director of Digital Services at CoSector – University of London also commented on the partnership: "We have enjoyed our journey with Oxford Brookes over the past five years, and we feel that both of our businesses have evolved, and with this, so has our understanding of each other's needs and requirements. This enables us to provide the strongest and most agile service we can, in order to greatly enhance the learners journey for all Oxford Brookes students and to improve teaching services for educational providers."

Conclusion

The university is pushing to be at the forefront of digital transformationand the CoSector – University of London relationship will be valuable in ensuring that this process runs smoothly. Not just to provide support with any changes that need to be made to the service, but also to act as a focus point against new services.

Crichten concludes: "With our strategy we need to not just talk about digital first, we actually need to do it, properly and seamlessly. We now use CoSector as an example for all other service delivery, as we know we're happy with its service baseline, and we can look at other vendors to compare.

"The platform CoSector is providing, and the way they provide it really works for us because they're updating it all the time and optimising it. That agility is really helping us push our online learning strategy forwards. I would definitely consider working with CoSector for other projects in the future. We are looking at expanding our capabilities in learning analytics and I believe that they could help in this area."

AUTHOR

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