As a new university devoted to enhancing learning and teaching, Kingston University has recently made a significant commitment to online learning and teaching. Kingston achieves consistently high ratings in Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) subject reviews for learning and teaching and is committed to maintaining this distinction. “The singular chalk and talk model is no longer applicable for HE institutions. The University required a virtual learning environment (VLE) that would enhance—not replace—the existing pedagogical models,” says John Saville, Director of Information & Communication Technology (ICT) Services.

Kingston recently took two major steps in demonstrating the University’s commitment to top quality online learning and teaching. First, the University funded a dedicated team to support virtual and Web-enhanced learning, and second, Kingston selected Blackboard as its VLE partner. Saville says, “With these two fundamental building blocks in place, the University is well positioned to enable the successful implementation of its innovative learning and teaching strategy.”

THE SELECTION PROCESS

Although the University was already piloting a VLE prior to selecting Blackboard, a cross-functional team of academic and administrative staff continued to review a number of leading solutions in search of a more intuitive platform that academic staff would welcome enthusiastically. “In addition to usability improvements, we required a VLE with an enterprise-wide vision that would meet the needs of the entire institution. We sought a platform that was scalable and a vendor that was committed to industry standards,” says Dr. Demetra Katsifli, Head of ICT Customer Services, who had heard a great deal about Blackboard and wanted to learn more.

To that end, a team from Kingston visited two Blackboard implementation sites in the United States to explore the platform and speak with peers about their Blackboard experiences. The team’s evaluation quickly moved beyond features and focused on Blackboard’s scalability, portal capabilities, and fundamental ease of use. After returning to the UK and further testing Blackboard’s stability and functionality, the team and the University Management agreed that Blackboard 5™ was the right decision for Kingston. Soon after implementing Blackboard in October of 2000, 25 existing Web-based modules were ported into Blackboard. Since its adoption, the number of Blackboard modules has grown to 150—a 500 percent increase in less than five months.
EXPECTED OUTCOMES OF TEACHING WITH BLACKBOARD

With Blackboard in place and rapidly gaining adoption among the academic staff and administrators, Saville, Katsifli and Dr. Tim Linsey, Head of Educational Technology Unit, expect that the platform will contribute to the following benefits to Kingston:

• Enhanced learning and teaching environment,
• Increased student retention rates,
• Improved student recruitment,
• Enriched relationships with alumni,
• Streamlined resource-sharing among schools and faculties, and
• Simplified user experience with single log-in.

Enhanced Learning and Teaching Environment and Increased Student Retention Rates

With more than 3,000 students and 100 academic staff already learning and teaching online, the benefits are evident to students and staff alike. Academic staff who teach modules with 200 or more students are currently using Blackboard to increase the one-to-one interaction with students and to facilitate online communication between students. In addition to holding online discussions and communicating through email, academic staff are able to address administrative issues online instead of in the classroom, allowing students to focus on learning. “Blackboard is an integral part of our IT infrastructure and clearly is a value-added means for improving the student experience,” says Katsifli. She believes that Blackboard will help to reinforce that Kingston is—first and foremost—dedicated to quality learning and teaching, student progression and retention, and is eager to support teaching with IT.

Improved Student Recruitment and Enriched Relationship with Alumni

To aid recruitment and alumni relations, Kingston intends to capitalize on the customisable portal available in Blackboard 5 Level Three, which will be integrated with the University’s student records system [for more information on integration see sidebar Maximizing the Learning Environment at Kingston University]. With the Blackboard portal, Kingston is able to present specialised views of the University by assigning user access rights and roles for both prospective students.

MAXIMIZING THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AT KINGSTON UNIVERSITY

“As part of our information strategy, we aim to deliver the right information to our students and at the right time, in a flexible, 24x7 environment. If a student registers for a module, that student must have timely access to the corresponding Blackboard module,” says Katsifli. To this end, Kingston will take advantage of several enterprise-oriented capabilities available in Blackboard 5 Level Three. First, the University will integrate its student records system, Strategic Information Technology Services Ltd., (SITS), with the Blackboard learning and teaching environment to enable the automated flow of information between the student records system and Blackboard. This integration will enhance the learning environment by providing a customized experience for all users and will decrease administrative functions for academic staff. For example, advanced integration will allow for the import of student data from SITS to populate each module. This data will create email lists and gradebooks, allowing instructors to focus on their core function—learning and teaching.

Second, the University will capitalize on the Blackboard Building Blocks (B2) initiative, which will allow Kingston to use the Blackboard platform as an institution-wide operating system and to meet the unique needs of its academic staff and students. The operating system will power a variety of tools, user interfaces, and configurations to enhance the customisation of the learning and teaching experience. The Blackboard B2 initiative will enable instructors to download supplemental educational content such as course cartridges (publisher content in digital format) academic staff can then tailor the content to meet objectives and upload it into modules or communities. Academic staff can also customise assessment, gradebook, and collaboration tools to meet their diverse pedagogical needs.

“Blackboard is an integral part of our IT infrastructure, and clearly is a value-added means for improving the student experience”

Demetra Katsifli, Head of ICT Customer Services
and alumni.* For example, Kingston can provide prospective applicants with a preview of life at Kingston by creating academic modules specially designed for them and providing access to student organisations and community sites. Kingston can also employ the portal to transform alumni into life-time campus citizens by providing discussion groups especially for alumni or by building customised views of relevant information, such as alumni events, career counseling and postings, or graduate course offerings.

Streamlined Resource-Sharing Among Schools and Academic Staff

Kingston will also leverage the Blackboard platform to enhance the administrative environment by simplifying and streamlining shared resources. Like most institutions, Kingston has a number of committees and taskforces that require frequent communication and information sharing. To simplify the administration of agendas, meeting minutes, and group communication for teams such as the University Executive Group or the Board of Governors, Kingston will create specialised modules within the Communities section of Blackboard. Members of a specific group can send emails, post documents, and participate in discussions without leaving the Blackboard environment. Through predefined rights and permissions, access to these communities is limited to members of the group or committee.

Simplified User Experience by Eliminating Multiple Log-Ins

Finally, Kingston intends to integrate the Blackboard course and portal environment with its Lightweight Directory Access Protocol (LDAP) server to enable a seamless user experience when inside the Blackboard platform. LDAP integration will allow users to access multiple applications such as the student records system with just one log-in name and password, thus increasing convenience and security for all users and reducing the number of inquiries about forgotten passwords.

BRINGING ACADEMIC STAFF ONLINE WITH BLACKBOARD

To encourage adoption and provide a taste of what Blackboard can contribute to the traditional classroom, Linsey encourages academic staff to peruse “exemplar sites” created by their peers. The exemplar sites cover academic disciplines across the University, including modules such as Development and Change in Africa, Internet Marketing, Ethnicity in American Literature, and Information and Project Management. "Our first step is to raise awareness that this tool is available and peer groups are exceptionally important in this process," says Linsey. These sites have helped demonstrate the pedagogical application of Blackboard by providing examples that are relevant to each member of the academic staff. Students have responded very positively to using Blackboard and have demonstrated that they are ready to be supported by an integrated online learning and teaching environment.

In addition to exemplar modules, Kingston is rolling out a comprehensive training programme for academic staff. The programme starts

* The Blackboard portal allows Kingston to customise up to seven user roles including students, prospective students, academic staff, and administrators.
with Blackboard basics such as uploading existing documents and using key tools such as bulletin boards, chat, and discussion groups. Once instructors become accustomed to incorporating existing documents into their teaching, they can receive advanced training in development and customisation of materials and online pedagogy. “Blackboard is flexible enough to accommodate academic staff with any level of technical expertise,” says Linsey, who believes that academic staff will quickly master the basics and will be pushing the online teaching envelope within weeks of first using Blackboard.

Blackboard is also the ideal platform for academic staff who wish to incorporate third-party tools such as assessment engines, virtual chat, and streaming media into their Blackboard modules. This modular approach to development will enable more technologically advanced instructors to leverage the Blackboard platform as an “academic operating system” and deliver sophisticated end-products to their students. The academic operating system is made possible through the Blackboard Building Blocks (B²) initiative, which enables the integration of third-party Blackboard-enabled tools within the course environment. [For more information on the B² initiative, see the sidebar Maximizing the Learning Environment at Kingston University].

With training programmes well under way and clear objectives in mind, Kingston University has yet again reinforced its commitment to world-class learning and teaching. As the University prepares to integrate Blackboard with its LDAP server and student records system, Saville sees Blackboard as the cornerstone of the institution’s IT infrastructure. He says, “Blackboard has become one of the key components in our integrated information strategy, which will improve and streamline our communication channels and administrative processes.” The institution’s firm foundation in learning and teaching ensures that Kingston is well on its way to achieving its expected outcomes, and Saville, Katsifli, and Linsey are confident that Blackboard is the right VLE partner to help them accomplish these goals.

“The singular chalk and talk model is no longer applicable for HE institutions. The University required a VLE that would enhance—not replace—the existing pedagogical models.”

John Saville, Director of Information & Communication Technology (ICT) Services