

University of London builds a comprehensive student portal with IBM and Open Logic



Overview

■ The Challenge

The University of London provides administrative services for over 41,000 distance learning students as well as lead college academics and administrators. While some services can be provided online, most are still dependent on the hard-copy production and distribution of documents and study materials – and process improvements have been hampered by outdated and inefficient IT systems. The University also wanted to foster a greater sense of community among distance learners, but lacked the tools to promote collaboration.

■ The Solution

Working with Open Logic (www.openlogic.co.uk), the University is implementing IBM WebSphere Portal to surface SITS:Vision applications and a suite of IBM Lotus software – providing online learning environments, email and administrative support to every student via a simple Web interface. Secure single sign-on to the portal is provided by IBM Tivoli software.

■ The Benefits

Students will be able to access email, collaboration tools, and educational and administrative materials instantly, anywhere in the world – facilitating distance learning and reducing paperwork. The solution is expected to deliver future savings in the region of £300,000 per year in print, courier and administration costs alone. Centralised identity management should simplify the creation and deletion of online student accounts, helping the IT team deal with student management issues in a more effective manner.



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*Craig O’Callaghan
Director of Business Transformation
University of London*

The University of London is one of the oldest, largest and most diverse universities in the UK. The University consists of 19 self-governing Colleges – including UCL, King’s College and the London School of Economics and Political Science – as well as the prestigious School of Advanced Study. In total, over 90,000 people study as internally registered students on campus. In addition there are also more than 41,000 distance learning students, registered by the University of London through the External System.

The University of London’s External System currently employs more than 180 staff, who are engaged in a wide range of administrative and academic activities. These administrative functions encompass the whole student lifecycle, from admission and enrolment through to graduation. The efficient and cost-effective delivery of these services is one of the principal challenges that the External System faces.

Craig O’Callaghan, Director of Business Transformation at the University of London, explains: “For a number of years, the back-end of our administrative processes has been driven by IT systems that have not enabled us to deliver the level of service which we would ideally like to give our students, particularly in the area of online services.

“Many of our processes are still paper-based, and somewhat time consuming to perform – which is not only a heavy burden on our administrative staff, but is also not cost-effective. We are currently spending approximately £2 million per year on print and distribution costs. We decided we needed a new IT infrastructure and software system that could help us

reduce costs and improve our ability to deliver our diverse range of services to students online.”

The University also wanted to foster a greater sense of community in the distance learning programme by providing collaboration tools to help students communicate and exchange ideas – both as an aid to the learning process and to help improve the University’s competitiveness in a global distance learning market.

Choosing a solution

After a comprehensive RFI process, the University of London chose the Tribal SITS product as its student information system.

“The SITS:Vision suite of applications offered excellent functionality as a general student information system, but we felt its portal and Web services capabilities were somewhat lacking,” says Craig O’Callaghan. “On the other hand, we were very impressed with IBM – especially in terms of the quality of the WebSphere Portal product and associated software products, which would enable us to deliver the SITS functionality via a sector-leading portal solution for distance learning students.”

IBM recommended working with Open Logic, an IBM Premier Business Partner, to design and implement a solution based on IBM WebSphere Portal. The portal would surface SITS:Vision and a suite of IBM Lotus applications – IBM Lotus Quickr, IBM Lotus Connections and IBM Lotus Sametime – as well as providing access to an IBM Lotus Domino email account for every student.

“Open Logic helped us draw up a detailed five-phase plan for the implementation, which would deliver

the core functionality as soon as possible without the risks of a 'big bang' approach," says Craig O'Callaghan. "The Open Logic team clearly understand the needs of the educational sector, and we were impressed by their work on a similar project at Cardiff University. Their expertise in IBM software and portal design, matched with our in-house Web and infrastructure knowledge, made a potent combination."

Secure single sign-on

To handle secure access to the new portal, Open Logic is helping the University of London deploy IBM Tivoli Access Manager and Tivoli Identity Manager. These tools are designed to provide a simple, single point of control for IT administrators, helping to deal with the significant student churn.

"With more than 41,000 students, we tend to have around 10,000 new registrations each year, and a similar number of accounts need to be archived as students graduate," explains Craig O'Callaghan.

"With the Tivoli solution, we can provide secure single sign-on access to all our students, delivering a customised view of their resources, which includes integration with the virtual learning environment (VLE). The solution enables students to take greater ownership of their learning experience, while at the same time reducing the administrative burden on the University staff who manage the business process."

Single sign-on provides a single username and password for each student that can be changed regularly, helping to increase security, with the aim of preventing unauthorised access to University resources.

Looking to the future

When the new solution goes live, the University of London will be able to provide its students with a more personalised online experience, with secure access to key administrative services, virtual learning environments and email via a single user-friendly Web interface.

"Above all, the advantage of the WebSphere Portal solution is its extensibility and service-orientation," says Craig O'Callaghan. "There is almost no limit to the range of services we can offer – and with WebSphere Portlet Factory, we can keep adding functionality to improve the student experience."

In financial terms, the outlook is positive. By eventually replacing paper-based administrative processes and reducing workload for staff, the University expects to realise savings of approximately £300,000 per year.

"The reduction in print, distribution and processing costs is going to make a significant difference to our budget, and we expect to see a full return on investment for the project – hardware, software and services included – within the next ten years," says Craig O'Callaghan. "In addition, the reduction in paperwork will help us meet environmental objectives, which are very important for the University as a whole."

He concludes: "Open Logic is helping us use IBM technologies to build a solution that offers significant benefits for the University, its distance learning students and its academic and administrative staff, both now and for the future."

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