The University of Suffolk uses Brightspace to connect students, tutors and employers

The University of Suffolk is a transformational university, absorbing the best of UK university traditions and aligning them with a twenty-first-century audience and a modern world of employment and entrepreneurship. It is a thriving academic community which makes a clear and immediate impact. Its national and international impact through research and innovation brings recognition and opportunity to the region and supports regional growth and development. Its purpose is to change the lives—of individuals and communities—for the better.

AT A GLANCE

Client: The University of Suffolk
Students: 4584
Staff: 415 FTE
Industry: Higher Education

Challenge:
• Strengthen relationships between the University, students and local businesses
• Use one platform to underpin learning for degree apprenticeship courses run in collaboration with employers
• Develop a more personalised learning experience for all students
• Find a solution that could also support staff development

Solution:
• D2L’s Brightspace platform
• An ongoing training and support plan
• Bespoke templates for degree apprenticeship courses developed in collaboration with D2L’s Creative Services Team

Result:
• A platform that supports all types of learning, wherever that learning takes place
“We can clearly see that this outcomes-based approach to learning is working, with students reading three times as much content and spending twice as much time on it than their traditional degree student counterparts.”

Ellen Buck, Director of Learning & Teaching, University of Suffolk

The Challenge

Suffolk is a large, rural, coastal county with below average numbers entering higher education. The original mission of the University of Suffolk was to encourage more people from across the county to continue with their studies.

One way of doing this has been through building relationships with businesses and the local community to identify skills gaps and potential opportunities for collaboration—fuelling the adoption of vocational courses and producing more ‘work-ready’ candidates to boost the local economy.

These collaborations, with organisations outside of the traditional academic environment, prompted the University of Suffolk to review its existing Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) provider. The need to maintain a close relationship with students who are working remotely as well as with businesses that have different working methods and requirements, meant that the University needed a solution that could facilitate a blended learning approach.

Ellen Buck, Director of Learning and Teaching at the University of Suffolk explains: “We needed to reach people that were out in the field learning but were also still very much part of our university life. To achieve this, we sought a partner that understood the nuances of modern learning and could support our efforts to provide a more personalised learning experience.”

As well as supporting learning, Ellen and her team required a platform that could also be used to enhance staff development: “We wanted a platform that could be used as a continuous personal development (CPD) hub—whether training is being delivered by IT, HR or elsewhere, the solution needed to bring departments together to create an individual learning and development resource.”
The Solution

A panel comprising members of the student body, support staff and tutors was brought into the process to make a collaborative decision on the new provider. The panel was invited to complete tasks within each shortlisted platform that they would normally carry out in their existing roles, as well as considering how the solution could support future learning. The platforms were then scored against specific criteria, with the user experience counting for 40% of the overall weighting.

According to the University, D2L’s Brightspace platform won across the board, for its pedagogical and technical functionality, usability and the ability to evolve with the needs of the University.

The Brightspace platform went live at the University of Suffolk in August 2018. The University developed its Degree Apprenticeship content in parallel with the implementation process. “This meant we were learning about the processes that Brightspace uses for content creation and working with D2L’s Creative Services Team to design templates and structures at the same time as rolling out our Degree Apprenticeship courses. This had its challenges, but it helped us to understand the capabilities of the platform,” adds Ellen Buck.

Training sessions were run with course teams and administrators to ensure they understood the platform’s essential functionality. The next phase was to offer “uplift” services to support course teams in making full use of the system and to help them recognise its potential as a tool for learning delivery, rather than simply as a repository for course materials.
The Result

The Brightspace platform has enabled the University of Suffolk to redefine its pedagogical practices, breaking down barriers and creating one big community, both within the university and more widely. Learning environments have been connected in a way that they never could be previously, with bridges being built between learning, teaching and research.

Students feel supported in their learning wherever they are, from reading notes on the go to working on assignments while at their place of work. Employers can see how their student placements are progressing academically as well as in the workplace and can feed back directly within the platform. Tutors can liaise freely with both students and employers—sharing information on engagement and performance levels and taking remedial action at the first sign of any issues.

“This isn’t just about connecting learning spaces, it’s about connecting people. For example, Brightspace supports the learning tripartite relationship within an NHS Trust as part of our BSc (Hons) Nursing (Degree Apprenticeship)—the personal tutor, the student and the practice educator / employer can all meet together and evaluate progress using the online learning environment as the foundation for that discussion.”

Ellen Buck, Director of Learning & Teaching,
University of Suffolk
Ellen Buck believes the University of Suffolk can derive even more value from Brightspace, with scope to build in new structures that ensure everyone associated with the University can make use of the platform. The team are currently undergoing training on one of Brightspace’s Performance Plus tools—Insights—to gain even greater visibility into patterns of learner behaviour.

For example, initial analysis has shown that engagement levels with course materials that support Degree Apprenticeship programmes are particularly high. On one module of its BSc Nursing degree students are viewing an average of eight pages of content and reading it for an average of 24 hours. For the same module on the Degree Apprenticeship course students are viewing an average of 30 pages for an average of 52 hours. Insight suggests that these students are completing more work, more efficiently so the university is examining how the purposeful use of instructionally designed content within the degree apprenticeship course are easier to consume.

“We acknowledge that while this programme has been designed for online, the other has not. There are still lessons and good practice that we can learn and roll out across more programmes.

“We have built specific templates and checklists within Brightspace for our Degree Apprenticeship courses. Students are required to confirm they have read the content within the platform. We can clearly see that this outcomes-based approach to learning is working, with students reading three times as much content and spending twice as much time on it than their traditional degree student counterparts.

“We know we can glean even more from Brightspace as we continue to delve into the analytics” Ellen concludes. “We have built a true partnership with D2L, and we believe that with Brightspace we have the foundation on which we can build the best possible learning journey for all.”