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Monash University's Faculty of Education takes teaching beyond the classroom



INDUSTRY

e-learning

WEBEX APPLICATIONS

Training Center

SUMMARY

The Faculty of Education at Monash University needed an innovative way to connect distance learners to its on-campus classroom. WebEx demonstrates the benefits and adaptability of web conferencing as a training solution. Other faculties at Monash University have expressed a keen interest in using the technology for a range of purposes.

ABOUT MONASH UNIVERSITY

Monash is one of Australia's leading universities. It has eight campuses including one in Malaysia and South Africa, and centres in London, UK and Prato, Italy. An energetic and dynamic university, Monash is committed to quality education and research.

Since its first intake of students in 1961, Monash University has expanded to include six Australian campuses, as well as campuses in Malaysia and South Africa. Monash offers undergraduate, postgraduate and research programs through ten faculties: Arts, Art and Design, Business and Economics, Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences, Pharmacy, Law, Engineering, Science, IT, and Education.

Committed to innovation and excellence in teaching and research, Monash has an international reputation as an energetic and dynamic university. There are over 55,000 students enrolled at Monash, and approximately 16.8% of these students are completing their studies off-campus.

The challenge

In response to a tender from The Department of Education and Training to run a Masters in School Leadership, The Faculty of Education needed an innovative way to connect distance learners to its on-campus classroom.

The solution

The Masters in School Leadership has successfully connected on-campus classes with its 'distance learners', using WebEx Training Centre and Meeting Centre to create an interactive real-time environment. Off-campus students can join and interact with on-campus classes by sharing presentations, collaborating on exercises using the whiteboard feature, and engaging in group discussions.

Initially, Monash's Faculty of Education trialled WebEx for one semester in its Masters in School Leadership program, but feedback

from students and lecturers has been so positive that the faculty has continued the trial period throughout 2005.

The virtual classroom

There are 37 students enrolled in the first cohort of the Masters in School Leadership. At the beginning of each semester, students attend a series of intensive full-day classes, which off-campus students travel into Melbourne to attend. However, throughout the rest of the semester classes are held in the evening, making it difficult for remote students to join the classes in person. Approximately three quarters of the students attend Monash's Clayton campus in Melbourne, while the rest of the students are spread across regional Victoria and attend classes using WebEx.

The Faculty of Education wanted to make sure that off-campus students were able to take part in every class, even if they couldn't physically attend. Brenda Beatty, Director of the project and Senior Lecturer at Monash's Faculty of Education said, "I have worked with remote students before, using methods like online discussion forums. While these sorts of methods can work, and I continue to use them to interact with students after class hours, I find that they don't allow students to really become part of the classroom experience, which can impact their learning.

"I attended an Australian Association for Research in Education lecture that was held as a web conference using WebEx. I realised immediately that WebEx was a valuable tool that could help off-campus students interact and stay engaged with the on-campus class. Consequently, we

“We’ve used WebEx applications in a number of different scenarios and had great results every time. We had one meeting where every student and both of the instructors were off-campus and connected through WebEx. The students were clustered in small groups at 12 different ports and we were able to hold a class as if we were actually in a classroom.”

— Brenda Beatty, senior lecturer, Faculty of Education, Monash University

began a three month trial of WebEx’s technology to see how it would work in a class room environment,” said Dr. Beatty.

Dr. Beatty adapted WebEx’s functionality to benefit both the large on-campus class, and the widely dispersed off-campus students. By connecting her computer to the lecture theatre’s projector and PA system, the on-campus students can see and hear the remote students. Lecturers wear a lapel microphone and on-campus students use a handheld microphone, while an on-campus camera enables the home students to see their classmates during discussions. Remote students who have a webcam are able to stream live video of themselves to their on-campus classmates.

“We’ve experimented a lot to get the most out of the virtual classroom, and we’ve been able to create a significant amount of interaction among on and off-campus students, and their lecturers. WebEx web conferencing has real potential for opening up new national and international markets by connecting the university with remote students. But more importantly, it has greatly improved the educational experience of ‘distance learners’,” said Dr. Beatty.

HIGHLIGHTS

- WebEx has assisted Monash to successfully connect on-campus students with distance learners in response to a tender from The Department of Education and Training
- By creating a ‘virtual classroom’ using WebEx, remote students can interact with on-campus students as if they are in the same room

Now everyone is part of the same class

Feedback from both the on and off-campus students has been positive. Students have commented that they feel like everyone is in the one room together and that the real-time interaction has created a more dynamic class.

“Things like the ‘hands up’ icon for remote students to request audio time, and a virtual white board for collaborating on notes and exercises make WebEx a highly interactive tool. During one class we watched real-time video footage of a student presenter in Mildura who was part of a group presentation. He could operate his part of the group’s slideshow and contribute to the presentation even though the rest of his group was on-campus.

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“We’ve also had a guest lecturer from Florida present while the entire class was on-campus. WebEx gave the lecturer the ability to control her slide presentation while speaking and then engage in a Q and A with the class afterwards. Another evening we had four different guest lecturers give a series of 10 minute presentations, with about 12 distance learners attending via WebEx. After the presentations, the class split into groups and the lecturers rotated around the class spending half an hour with each group, including the off-campus learners,” said Dr. Beatty.

The future

The use of WebEx in the Masters in School Leadership program at Monash University has been a success. Other Faculties such as Law, Pharmacy and Medicine are showing an interest in experimenting with WebEx for a variety of purposes. Monash Information Technology Services department is also supportive of continuing to trial the technology.

“Monash has an international reputation in innovation for both teaching and research, and in the future we want to start using WebEx to collect data for our research programs. We could hold online virtual focus groups which would be automatically recorded and available for analysis. It would simplify our ability to interview subjects and gather data.

“I’d be surprised if technology like WebEx doesn’t become the way of the future in the ‘education industry’. The success we’ve had bringing remote students together with on-campus students, has opened up a host of other possibilities for the technology. It seems that initiatives such as this project are contributing to a building momentum of inquiry into real time interactive distance learning at Monash,” said Dr. Beatty.