



## De Montfort University sets its sights on integrated eLearning environment

### Puts a Questionmark Bridge between Blackboard and Perception

#### Introduction to De Montfort

De Montfort University (DMU) is a dynamic organisation, formed from a diverse range of specialist institutions. The university has two campuses, at Leicester and Bedford, and special arrangements with top universities and many colleges in the UK and throughout the world. It has approximately 20,000 students, 3,000 staff, and an annual turnover in the region of £120 million.

#### Moving to integrated eLearning

As a leading institution for professional, creative and vocational education, underpinned by research excellence, it has much to offer. The recent decision to move to a more integrated eLearning platform will surely add to and enhance its students' learning experience.

The process began in June of 2002 when DMU made a conscious decision to integrate all aspects of its technical systems into one central eLearning environment. This started with the selection of a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and the university is currently rolling out Blackboard across its sites. What this offers is a single student portal to all of the university's systems, both academic and administrative. The Blackboard system is, in turn, integrated with all back end systems and databases in order that they can all communicate seamlessly.

#### Adding assessments to the mix

Alongside the VLE development, and a central part of the eLearning environment, is a new and integrated strategy for learning and teaching assessment based on Questionmark's Perception software. This has several key strands that include the embedding of ICT within the university's curriculum, the enhanced support of first year students and the provision of meaningful and informative assessments to all students and staff. It is hoped that this strategy will greatly improve the retention of students by enriching their learning experience.

Although Blackboard is able to offer a number of features for online assessment, its functionality in this area was not comparable with that of Questionmark's Perception. And, since Perception was already being used in pockets around the university where it was implemented and supported locally and in a standalone form, it was a known entity within the institution.

Richard Hall, Computer-Based Learning Co-ordinator at the Centre for Learning and Teaching at DMU, comments, "It was a corporate decision to use Perception as an assessment generator that talks to the databases and to Blackboard. In doing this, we are able to establish one university system for students to use where they can move seamlessly from one area to another without the need for several separate logins."

#### Pilot assessments

"Perception is already being used in two faculties at DMU (Business & Law and Health & Life Sciences) for formative and summative assessments so we have the experience of the software to know that it can deliver the performance and features that we require in our developing eLearning environment," continued Richard Hall.

#### Bridging to Blackboard

In order to play its pivotal role in the university's eLearning environment, Perception must be tightly integrated with Blackboard. This is an area in which Questionmark has placed a great deal of emphasis and has developed the Questionmark Bridge. For DMU the implementation of the Bridge is critical to the eLearning strategy. It provides a seamless connection between Perception and Blackboard and then beyond that to all other university systems.

Richard Hall adds, "The Bridge product is key to our ability to deliver a completely interoperable system. We will begin this implementation in January 2004 and will test the technology during the second semester. The plan is to do an institutional rollout in September 2004. This is a tight deadline and there is much to be achieved before then but we are confident that we will deliver with the help of Questionmark. We will be running sessions on Blackboard and Perception for staff to ensure that they know how the software works and how it can be used to best effect in their individual faculties. All training and development must be in context to be sure that it is meaningful to the various faculties. Only then will our staff be able to see how important the system is in enhancing the students' learning experience."

#### Enhanced reporting features

The integration of Perception and Blackboard is a priority moving forward. However, in addition, DMU will be looking to Perception's reporting facilities to improve the level of feedback that it currently receives on individual student performance, test results and general comments on systems and processes. Although reports are available on existing summative tests and for technical feedback on the Blackboard system, DMU plans to extend use of Perception across all other areas of the university.

This extension of the reporting system begins with a system evaluation with the students. A questionnaire has been devised that includes ten closed questions and three open questions regarding the eLearning environment and Blackboard. This questionnaire is to be supported by a focus group in each faculty. The group will include a range of Perception users. The aim is to gather valuable feedback on the efficiency and applicability of the existing systems and therefore to provide realistic recommendations to the university on how to further develop the systems.

#### In conclusion

Richard Hall concludes, "At DMU we have assumed a blended approach to learning. This means that we are developing an eLearning environment that complements our traditional face-to-face teaching skills. Each approach should be used where it is most appropriate, in a blended way. It is our hope that this will allow us to support the differences in our students and underpin their university experience. Perception is at the heart of this eLearning strategy and the Bridge is fundamental. Between them they deliver secure questions where appropriate and they provide the necessary feedback and reporting to ensure that students receive the correct level of emphasis in their studies. Our eLearning environment centres on Blackboard and Perception and these two technologies will continue to support our Learning and Teaching provision."

#### More information

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