RMIT Embarks on the Path to True Improvement with the Help of Blue®

RMIT University

www.rmit.edu.au

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CLIENT:
RMIT University

 # STUDENTS:
~82,000

CHALLENGE:
Australia's largest tertiary institution needed reliable, comprehensive student feedback data for strategic learning and teaching initiatives

SOLUTION:
Blue course evaluations software

BENEFITS

- Eliminated need for in excess of 1 million sheets of scannable paper per year

- Distributed online evaluation forms to all students, even in offshore locations

- Created single repository for data collection and analysis

- Established key benchmarks and standards with data

RMIT is a big university. With over 82,000 students and presences in Melbourne, Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia, and Hong Kong, it's one of the largest tertiary education institutes in Australia.

But for all its size, RMIT wants to ensure that no single student is lost in the crowd, which is why they've been steadily growing their teaching and learning survey management over the last few years.

ESTABLISHING A UNIVERSITY-WIDE EVALUATION SYSTEM

The first crucial stage of establishing a comprehensive feedback infrastructure is finding the right technology partner. Originally, RMIT conducted surveys on paper using Teleform, the only feasible method for a university their size, breadth, and scope.

In 2006, RMIT implemented Blue from eXplorance, an online survey and course evaluation system specialized for Higher Education, to replace their paper processes.

"We were the first institution in Australia to commit to using Blue," said Tim Brennan, Senior Manager for the Survey Services Centre at RMIT. "Since then we've moved from being a predominantly paper-based survey institution to moving 100% online, including our offshore locations."

Blue is the cornerstone technology behind eXplorance's Learning Experience Management (LEM) solution. With LEM, higher learning institutes can evolve their course evaluations and surveys beyond a simple software implementation to a total culture of continuous improvement, involving assessment, analysis, benchmarking, and monitoring. Over the last couple of years, RMIT has endeavoured to do just this.

CONSISTENT EXPERIENCE, CONSISTENT DATA

RMIT implemented Blue in phases, refining processes as they went along. They spent a year conducting surveys half online and half on paper before going online at all Melbourne campuses.

The university spent the last year rolling out Blue to all their offshore locations.

"We want students to have the same survey experience, no matter where they are. They can use and become familiar with one survey tool for providing feedback on all their courses," Brennan said. "We also have a mandate to ensure that all student voices are being heard, so it is important that students can readily access the survey."

In addition to a uniform user experience, it's crucial that the single system also ensures consistent, useable data that can be used for current and historical analysis.

"When we had different tools in operation at different locations, we would have to stitch together a number of data sets in order to get the complete university picture," said Brennan. "With the one tool, we're now producing more consistent and timely reports."

Today, Blue easily handles in excess of 1 million records annually for all 82,000+ RMIT students.

"Blue is very scalable and we have leveraged this at our multiple presences. We've had no issues with performance as we've increased coverage," he said.

EASY ONLINE ACCESS

RMIT conducts two major surveys over the academic year: the Course Experience Survey, run in every course at the end of every semester, and the Student Experience Survey, which is run once a year. The Course Experience Survey focuses on the course and instructors while the Student Experience Survey contains questions about students' campus life experience and their programs in general.

Students can access surveys several ways. They receive automatic emails from Blue containing links to the surveys, and they can also login directly from their student portal, leveraging CAS authentication.

"We integrated Blue with our central authentication service, so that students need only login once to access their surveys from the portal," he said. "A dashboard shows all the relevant surveys they need to complete."

Instructors provide time toward the end of the semester for students to complete the survey in class. The forms are accessible online from any computer, laptop, or

mobile device, and provide a user interface that meets the highest accessibility standards, including Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0 Level AA.

BENCHMARKS FOR ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING

With a couple of years of data collected, RMIT proceeded to the next phase of LEM, establishing benchmarks that could serve as guideposts for instructor development for 1500 staff members.

"We took results from the previous year, breaking it down by subject area or field of study, by school, and by college. We worked with the Learning and Teaching Unit worked in conjunction with Mathematical and Geospatial Sciences to conduct a reliability assessment of the data, and then to set a benchmark for acceptable scores."

The university uses these benchmarks to inform improvement initiatives at several levels.

"The university sets benchmarks for two measures derived from the course experience survey: the Good Teaching Scale (GTS) and Overall Satisfaction Index (OSI)," said Brennan. "Student feedback data needs to meet the reliability criteria before it is considered for comparison to the benchmark. We then provide an analysis of whether those benchmarks have been met for the individual teacher, as well as the course as a whole."

"Those benchmarks have been integral to our Teaching and Learning improvement initiatives. The university mobilizes resources to identify best practices, particularly from those courses that are achieving excellent scores. The university can then apply those best practices where suitable."

REPORTS FOR EVERY LEVEL

To communicate results with the academic community, the Survey Services Centre issues detailed reports, for instructors as well as administrators.

"We're now able to identify the lecturer and give an individual score. We send lecturers a PDF report detailing the breakdown of their results," he said. "We couldn't do that before."

"We've noticed an increase in the amount of qualitative responses with Blue," said Brennan. "We now quickly issue reports to relevant staff with the responsibility for improving the student experience."

The Centre creates reports that show aggregated survey results at instructor level, school level, college level, and university level.

"We issue around 4,500 reports every semester. Two of us at the centre handle generation of these reports," he said. "We can now generate these reports within 24 hours".

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT IN LEM

As part of their continuous improvement in survey management, RMIT brought in Professional Services from eXplorance to provide both technical and consulting advice.

"eXplorance helped us with the integration with our student portal, to establish single sign on for our students," he said. "They also provided some consulting advice, such as how best to set up projects within the system. This will be especially important down the road when we start loading data to our business intelligence tool."

eXplorance also introduced their latest cutting-edge technology for surveys and course evaluations, which the institute has slotted for implementation in the coming year. These new features are designed to engage students with social media-like apps and provide smarter analysis of big data with specialized text analytics.

"As a leading institution of Technology and Design, we're expected to be up-to-date in the technology we use to communicate with our staff and students," Brennan said. "We're very excited about a new feature called bluepulse™, which will allow students to provide instant feedback to instructors during a class through their Blackboard LMS. Students will essentially be 'tweeting' feedback to their instructors, so they can make teaching and learning improvements on the spot."

RMIT will also be implementing Blue Text Analytics, a text analysis tool specialized for Higher Education. The tool relies on advanced technology as well as collaboration with leading institutions in the field for developing the most precise and effective word classifications for analysis.

SUPERLATIVE SUPPORT

In terms of support, RMIT couldn't be more pleased with the service they've received from eXplorance.

"I've really got to commend the support from eXplorance," he said. "Even with the vast differences in time zones, we've had excellent support from them."

RMIT's evolution of Learning Experience Management has been a fascinating one to watch for educators interested in teaching and learning strategic development. What began as an initiative to replace paper processes has grown into a complete framework that encompasses data gathering, processes, benchmark establishment and assessment, and analysis. And as a technology and services provider, eXplorance has been there to help, every step of the way.

"We are so pleased to be collaborating with a partner like eXplorance, as we combine efforts to make evidence-based improvements to learning and teaching here at RMIT," he said. "Our centre is now positioned to better support several priorities in our academic plan, and together, we are implementing a framework that elevates the learning experience for everyone."