UNSW Sydney (The University of New South Wales) Deploys Leading-Edge Technology for Course Surveys

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Rachel Abel,
General Manager in the Office of the Deputy
Vice-Chancellor Education at UNSW

CLIENT:
UNSW Sydney (The University of New South Wales)

MAIN CAMPUS LOCATION:
Sydney, Australia

NO. STUDENTS:
50,000+

CHALLENGE:
The Go8 university needed better quality institutional- and faculty-level course and teaching survey data to support key decision-making at all levels.

SOLUTION:
Blue® from eXplorance, including Data Integrity Gateway (DIG), Blue/Surveys, Blue Portal Integrator (BPI), Data Sync Tool, Bluepulse, Blue Text Analytics (BTA), Blue/Evaluations, Blue/360, and hosting (test and production).

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BENEFITS

- Increased response rates from the year prior by 22%

- Centralised the course survey process university-wide

- Deployed best practices in implementing and administering online course survey systems

- Completely paper-free course surveys

The University of New South Wales (UNSW Sydney) has an ambitious goal. By 2025, they want to be Australia's Global university, and they're pulling out all the stops to get there.

Their ten-year engagement plan encompasses a broad range of goals, including implementing a new educational model that is teaching-intensive as well as research-intensive and that emphasises student engagement.

More student engagement requires, of course, more student feedback and greater dialogue within the academic community. But in an institution that comprises over 50,000 students and 6,000 staff members, that's no small feat. Ongoing data gathering efforts had produced lots of data, but not necessarily information that could be analysed or understood on a broader scale.

DISPARATE DATA

The Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Education at UNSW took on the task of improving the quality of data from course and teaching surveys. Before then, as what happens at many large institutions, different faculties were using different methods to conduct course surveys. Some surveys were still on paper — a laborious, time-consuming and resource-intensive process — while others were using a custom-built online system. The online system had several advantages over paper, but the lack of consistency in processes meant much of the data couldn't be used for institutional-level, faculty-level, or even school-level analysis.

The Office launched a project to implement a centralised, more consistent survey system that would capture student feedback and relay meaningful data to various stakeholders across the community.

"We knew we had an ambitious goal and we also understood the importance of it," said Rachel Abel, General Manager in the Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Education at UNSW. "We simply could not reach our higher goals without a deeper understanding of our student experience of learning and teaching."

CHOOSING THE RIGHT PARTNER

The Office steered a project team and reference group, putting together a rigorous set of criteria to meet their specific needs. Their main goals were to improve the quality and consistency of the data, streamline processes and improve the experience for students. Reporting was also a key component: they needed better, faster reports to Deans, Academic Departments, Faculty Supervisors, School Supervisors and Heads of Schools so they could access information and implement change.

To add to their challenges, the Office had a very short timeline to work within. A rigorous procurement process followed, considering several of the world's leading survey software providers, before eventually selecting Blue from eXplorance.

"eXplorance demonstrated their commitment from the outset," said Abel. "They came on site for the first and subsequent demonstrations. And they offer a unified suite products for gathering feedback in an academic setting, including leading-edge tools such as Bluepulse for instant feedback and Blue Text Analytics for large-scale analysis of open-ended comments."

In addition to the tools, eXplorance also offered valuable professional services for best practice implementation.

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BUILDING CONSENSUS BY BUILDING THE RIGHT TEAM

The Office knew they had to get buy-in from all key stakeholders if this project was going to be a success. They put together a project reference group early on in the project, which included representatives from faculties, central service areas, and the business intelligence team.

Executive support particularly from the newly appointed Deputy Vice-Chancellor Education Professor Merlin Crossley, as well as their new Pro-Vice Chancellor (Education), Professor Geoffrey Crisp, were also critical to their success. "Having these senior executives cheering for our team at various Boards, Committees, and Town Hall meetings was invaluable," she said.

Software provider eXplorance made up the last vital part of the team. "eXplorance provided great support and a flexible approach," she said. "They shared best practices from other institutions, which not only made sure we had a good implementation but also reassured our community about their credibility. They really were our 'coach' throughout this initiative."

SMART STRATEGIES

UNSW deployed a number of effective strategies to ensure the success of the rollout. This included starting with a small "soft launch" with only a few schools — those that were most enthusiastic about the new technology.

"Starting small gave us the proof of concept we needed" she said. From the outset, the project had a strong emphasis on communications. Setting up appropriate lines of communication based on the organisational structure was a key strategy.

When direct communication wasn't possible, such as with faculty, the Office created information documents, such as "For-your-information" memos, "Frequently-asked questions" web pages, and video messages from executives.

Some of the most important communications happened with professional staff based in schools. "Our survey administrators are the critical change agent who promote the survey in the school," Abel said. "Constant communications with these key staff members made a big difference. We made sure they got extensive training, that we responded to their questions promptly, and held one-on-one meetings with them during the changeover."

RAISING RESPONSE RATES

The Office also worked extensively with students. They developed a new brand, with new materials that were circulated through student networks. Student leaders were recruited to develop their own video materials and distribute attention-getting perks such as free food. "Our roaming gelato cart was a great talking point and did wonders for raising awareness," she said.

They also listened to the students. Students had complained about too many emails from previous survey campaigns, so they integrated Blue surveys into their learning management system for easier access, and reduced the number of email reminders.

"Many of these initiatives paid off, as is borne out by their excellent response rates. The university saw a higher response rate in the second semester of 2016, a 22% increase over the year prior. "Of course, there is always more work to do in this area, and there are many contributing factors," she said. "But given the speed and turnaround of our implementation, we were pleased."

Future plans for the university include even greater academic engagement from both faculty and students in the survey processes. Further ahead, they have plans for some exciting tools such as Bluepulse, which allows instructors to make course corrections well before the end of semester, thanks to near real-time feedback from students.

Clearly, UNSW is committed to continued improvement in the quality of their teaching, courses and programs — which all shows great promise for their 2025 goals.

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