

University of Groningen Modernizes Online Course Evaluations with Blue®



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Matthijs De Vries,
Senior Technical Consultant at the University of Groningen

CLIENT:
University of Groningen

LOCATIONS:
Groningen, Netherlands

CHALLENGE
An aging homegrown course evaluation system was slowing down processes around online course evaluations

SOLUTION:
Blue course evaluations

BENEFITS

- Integration with BlackBoard Learning Management System to raise visibility of course evaluation forms
- Able to handle multiple course instructors
- Responsive customer support to develop and provide required reports
- Mobile-ready user interface

Founded in 1614, the University of Groningen is one of the largest universities in the Netherlands and has an international reputation — in 2012-13, the Academic Ranking of World Universities placed them in the top 100.

Advanced in their methodologies, the University has long been using online forms to manage their course evaluations.

“We moved to online course evaluations where we could well over ten years ago,” explains Matthijs De Vries, Senior Technical Consultant at the University of Groningen.

OUTLIVED THEIR HOMEGROWN SYSTEM

To manage course evaluations, the university used to rely on a homegrown system that they had built themselves and added to over the years. After over a decade of enhancements, the system was becoming bulky and less able to respond to the university’s needs.

“A lot of functionality had been added to the system over its lifespan,” says Matthijs. “Different people developed features for different situations. It was taking more and more time to manage it, especially if we wanted it to work with our other systems.”

To save time and resources, the IT team decided to replace their homegrown course evaluations with an off-the-shelf product. They closely assessed the products available today and chose Blue course evaluations from eXplorance.

“Blue was one of the few systems available that was able to integrate multiple instructors in a course evaluation. This was a key functionality for us,” he says.

INTEGRATING WITH BLACKBOARD LEARN

The University of Groningen also wanted to be sure that Blue could integrate with their Learning Management System (LMS).

“Another important reason we chose Blue is because of its integration with Blackboard,” he says. “We think one of the best ways to reach our students is through the Blackboard portal. Portal integration should help us increase our response rates, as students see a reminder every time they visit. Students still use email, but the messages are out of sight within hours.”

eXplorance is a Blackboard Premier Partner and has lengthy experience in integrating with Blackboard Learn through its Blue Portal Integrator (BPI).

The BPI is a semi-independent web application that creates course evaluation Blackboard Building Blocks for incorporation into the Blackboard Learn Community Portal. Administrators adjust course evaluations, and the BPI automatically generates the Building Blocks required for the integration. This dramatically simplifies maintenance since only the Blue-generated Block needs to be verified with every Blackboard update — not each of its contents.

STRAIGHTFORWARD IMPLEMENTATION

The university started by running a pilot project, which encompassed two departments: the Faculty of Economics and Business and the Faculty of Arts.

For implementation, the university integrated their course catalog system and their student information system with Blue. Both are custom systems. Today, the University of Groningen’s student information system is available commercially to other universities.

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The IT team at University of Groningen undertook the task of integrating Blue® to these two systems themselves.

“We had most of the data and the tables already prepared for integration,” he says. “We had no difficulties integrating with Blue.”

The project was launched in the spring semester to a total 1,875 students. All went well save for a minor error during the test phase, which was addressed quickly by the implementation team.

“Everything has gone to plan, and we’ve met our project timelines,” he says.

RAISING RESPONSE RATES

Pleased with how the pilot has proceeded thus far, the IT team is now looking for ways they can improve response rates. They're counting on eXplorance to help them achieve this important goal.

"Emails tend to get forgotten after one or two days," explains Matthijs. "Students login to Blackboard almost every day, where they will see any outstanding course evaluation forms immediately. We think this will help significantly increase response rates."

The university will also be using the Blackboard LMS to disseminate information. "Once the integration work is complete, faculty will be able to obtain their reports from the Blackboard portal," he says.

CLOSING THE LOOP WITH STUDENTS

Another important tactic to raising response rates will be to communicate results back to the students. The university will use the Blue Portal Integrator to make course evaluation results available on the Blackboard portal for students to review.

"Students need to see what is being done with their evaluations. They don't have much incentive to complete the evaluation forms if they believe that nothing is going to come of it," he says.

OUTSTANDING CUSTOMER SERVICE

As experienced users of online course evaluations, the University of Groningen had several requests for eXplorance, which they came through on for the European institute.

"We needed some additional reports that compared the quality of courses or instructor performance. eXplorance listened and is adding some new reports to the next version of Blue that will be enormously helpful to us," he says.

Blue course evaluations allow the university to focus on best practices around data gathering and communications with their students regarding them.

"This has been a positive experience," he concludes. "We're looking forward to our continued work together to improve response rates and to provide a good user experience for students and faculty."