

Success Story

The Open University—Distance learning through cutting-edge technology

Organization

The Open University (U.K.) offers distance learning, including undergraduate and postgraduate courses, to around 200,000 part-time students. Learning and Teaching Services (LTS) is responsible for computing services for academic and research staff and for the support of students using computing as part of their

"We chose FirstClass because of its good scalability, low marginal cost per user, and because the cross-platform client runs on fairly basic computers."

Geoff Aldridge,
FirstClass System Administrator,
The Open University

courses. The Online Applications Team supports students and staff in their use of network applications, particularly computer conferencing and internet access.

Situation

FirstClass® was first used by The Open University in 1992. It was pioneered by the Technology Faculty's Electronic Media in Education Research Group (EMERG), now one of the world's foremost experts on FirstClass. LTS has been

running a FirstClass system for students and staff since 1994. FirstClass was the choice of messaging system because of its flexible and customizable conferencing environment, an easily accessible network of asynchronous forums for data exchange and knowledge sharing. In the words of Geoff Aldridge, the FirstClass System Administrator at The Open University: "FirstClass is easy to use, with good remote connectivity and powerful administration tools."

Solution

FirstClass is currently used in over 150 courses, with more than 16,000 conferences in operation using around 500 conference moderators. On average, over 16,000 connections are made per day by more than 8,000 different users. In addition, 20,000 mail messages are sent and more than 150,000 conference messages are read every day. An increasing number of courses integrate online tutorials via FirstClass whereby students and tutors have to work together in teams.

Scale of use

The number of FirstClass users at The Open University site has increased significantly since 1994:

Year	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Users	1200	2500	15000	24000	35000	56000	105000+

Benefits

"Asynchronous computer conferencing such as FirstClass is particularly useful for The Open University because our students are spread all over the country and the world! Students need to fit their studies around their other commitments," says Geoff Aldridge. "FirstClass helps them academically by enabling them to discuss their course material, have queries answered and deepen their understanding through meeting other perspectives and it can provide vital mutual support and a feeling of community through social conferences."

Industry

Education

Customer



The Open University

Business Challenges

- Independent learning schedules
- Geographical boundaries

Business Solution

- FirstClass®

Business Benefits

- Asynchronous conferencing
- Graphical enhancements for email
- Integrated online tutorials

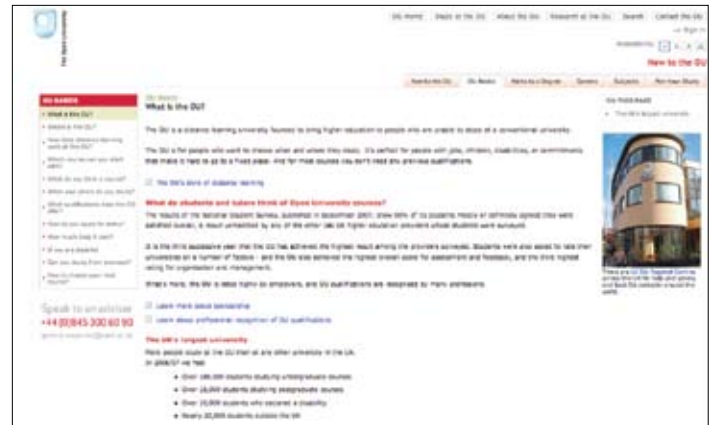
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As one student explained, “FirstClass takes the distance out of distance learning.” In 1999, LTS upgraded to FirstClass Gold, increased its number of FirstClass Servers to seven and purchased additional user licensing, which will enable them to have over 125,000 FirstClass users in the year 2001.

According to Geoff Aldridge, “the new calendaring, audio mail and compound document editor features will be welcomed by students and staff. The compound document editor which allows users to drop graphics directly in the body of email messages will be especially useful in a learning environment as it will allow text messages to be enriched using pictures and video.”

Some academic areas in The Open University put a high priority on open systems and so favor web-based conferencing. Others are keen on the additional functionality of the FirstClass Client. FirstClass provides both. The Internet Services module of FirstClass enables students to log in from any computer and from any location via web browser.

The LTS has an extensive Common Room area run by The Open University Students' Association, containing hundreds of busy and lively conferences on a vast range of subjects.



The Technology Foundation Course (T171 – 'You, Your Computer and the Net') is now taught entirely online, with FirstClass conferencing as an integral component of the course. The Business School's MBA foundation course runs an electronic business game and student teams plan their game submissions through FirstClass conferences.

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