



University of the West of England has its 'Appetite for Collaborative Software' Satisfied by Wimba

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-Manuel Frutos-Perez, Deputy Manager, E-learning Development Unit, University of the West of England, Bristol

The University of the West of England (UWE) is a forward-looking university and is ranked fifth out of 83 English Higher Education institutions in a Teaching Quality Assessment league table from the Times Higher Educational Supplement. With more than 30,000 students and 3,000 staff, UWE is also the largest provider of higher education in the southwest of England, attracting students from all parts of the UK and from more than 50 countries worldwide. The University offers more than 600 programmes at undergraduate, postgraduate, professional and short-course levels.

UWE prides itself on giving its students the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in their chosen careers. Steve West, Vice-Chancellor of the University, believes that UWE's emphasis on equipping students for the real world of work sets them apart. UWE doesn't see employers as just a source of jobs at graduation. The University has strong links with major employers, and provides excellent placement opportunities for students. In addition, many UWE instructors are practising professionals in areas such as healthcare, law, architecture, education, and the creative arts.

UWE sees learning technology as pivotal to delivering this high-quality learning and teaching experience. The University has more than 1,500 courses in its Virtual Learning Environment, Blackboard 7, and an estimated 75% of its academic modular provision is now supported online.

Manuel Frutos-Perez, Deputy Manager of UWE's E-learning Development Unit, says that UWE wanted to go further and to give its instructors the ability to start creating and broadcasting audio and mixed-media learning materials over the Internet. They consulted widely and concluded that UWE needed a robust and flexible set of user-friendly tools (ranging from basic to advanced) that would put minimal strain on the load on its systems and would require only moderate support and maintenance. Enter Wimba!

"The Wimba Collaboration Suite fits very well within our model and needs," Frutos-Perez says. The Wimba Collaboration Suite is cross-platform compatible and can be accessed either via UWE's VLE (Blackboard) or its own unique server. This makes Wimba "very easy to use and easy to access."



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WIMBA PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

- Wimba Classroom
- Wimba Voice

KEY BENEFITS

- Enlivens online courses
- Enhances Blackboard
- Ease-of-use fosters quick uptake

Manuel Frutos-Perez

Deputy Manager, E-learning Development Unit, University of the West of England, Bristol





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WHAT THEY'RE SAYING

"Our virtual learning environment, Blackboard, can often become a bit two-dimensional in the sense that it's very text-heavy, but the beauty with Wimba is that [our faculty] can liven up their courses with almost no effort."

-Manuel Frutos-Perez, Deputy Manager,
E-learning Development Unit

UWE implemented the Wimba Collaboration Suite across a range of disciplines in September 2007. In just a few short months, Wimba Classroom, Wimba Voice, and Wimba Create were all quickly adopted and became an integral part of many courses - from computing and architecture, to business and law. UWE instructors also used Wimba tools to add a more collaborative approach to Blackboard and, as a result, found students to be more engaged.

The Wimba Collaboration Suite is used in a variety of ways, including:

- Wimba Podcaster to deliver weekly updates and to record lectures on courses
- Wimba Voice E-mail to develop formal telephone conversational skills
- Wimba Voice Presentation to describe the operation of online resources and databases; to provide course introductions and case study discussion
- Wimba Voice Recorder to voice-annotate the course
- Wimba Voice Boards for foreign language practice
- Wimba Classroom for peer-assisted learning sessions
- Wimba Create for course content creation

One lecturer used the tools to help address copyright issues of PDF case study materials for Business Studies. The materials were lengthy and he wanted to annotate them to help students engage with the content, but was unable to do so because of copyright restrictions. Using the Wimba Voice Presentation tool, he recorded several accompanying voice files that explained the key sections of each case study. His students even made their own vocal postings and were involved with a very interactive learning experience.

"Uptake of the Suite has far exceeded our expectations," says Frutos-Perez. "In less than a year, more than 1,000 voice postings have been created and we have started to use the Wimba Podcaster for purposes other than formal VLE-based learning. We've embedded it in a Careers resource website that we are developing at the moment and we are also working on a Simulated Learning project with our School of Law where we are planning to use the Wimba tools to add functionality. The tools have enabled us very quickly to deploy a voice suite that will serve the needs of our academic staff - regardless of their level of engagement with online learning, and regardless of the level of their technical expertise. Wimba has definitely helped to bolster the multi-media capabilities of our VLE, enriching the online learning experience of students across all faculties."

Though UWE is just beginning its second year with the Wimba Collaboration Suite, the positive reception and steady uptake suggests that students and staff consider the Suite to be invaluable. UWE is encouraged by the high uptake of the Wimba Collaboration Suite, and points to two key factors for this success: One, the tools were needed. There was an "appetite among academic staff" for collaborative software. Second, Wimba is "so easy to use." Because of Wimba's ease-of-use, the central E-Learning Development Unit didn't have to implement a big training program.

When a faculty member approaches Frutos-Perez to inquire about Wimba, he starts by explaining the benefits.

"The first thing I normally tell faculty is that they can really bring their courses to life with Wimba," he says with a smile. "Our virtual learning environment, Blackboard, can often become a bit two-dimensional in the sense that it's very text-heavy,



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ENRICHING ONLINE COURSES

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"We can infer from this that the continued increase in the number of tool instances reflects the perceived usefulness of the tools by academic staff

and the positive feedback provided to them by students," he adds. "We have found that the flexibility that the Wimba tools provides is extremely useful. It is a suite of tools that can cater effectively to different needs and abilities."

About Wimba

Wimba develops web-based collaboration software designed for online education, language learning and live interactive communications. Our collaborative applications enable learning professionals to fully embrace the new wave of teaching and learning opportunities afforded by the Internet; regardless of geographic location, bandwidth or operating system. Our classroom collaboration solutions enable educators to conduct live, online classes, meetings, office hours and other collaborations, and our language learning tools add oral interaction directly into course content, webpages, study groups and assessments. With simplicity and power, Wimba adds new dimensions to online, accessible education, enhancing the learning experience for both students and instructors.

