SALFORD CITY COLLEGE

Driving Cohesion by Putting Canvas at the Heart of Digital Learning

LEVEL
Further Education

INITIATIVE
Overcoming A
Fragmented System

USERS
12,000

THE CHALLENGE

Salford City College is one of the largest colleges in the North West, with a combined student and academic population of more than 12,000, across six sites. The college is undergoing major changes to its digital learning provision.

"It's a culture shift. The whole college is changing its view on what can be done with digital resources," Deborah Millar, Director for Digital Learning & IT Services, explained. "This time last year Salford City College was like many other institutions in terms of technology. It wasn't used consistently or regulated, staff had access to a host of different online systems, and it was hard for teachers and students to work together. While some of the staff were finding resources online or sharing their own creations with others, others were reluctant or felt left behind."

"The college's goal is to establish itself as an institution that puts digital innovation at the heart of its teaching and learning and the use of leading technology is a crucial way for us to meet this ambition," Deborah continues. "But to enable real change, tech must be embedded and adopted across all areas of learning, at all levels. So, we needed a single VLE that would sit at the heart of lessons, enabling our students to have reliable access to all of their courses, whenever and however they need."

"Retaining students is a particularly stern challenge for the FE sector," Deborah confirmed. "And a new VLE promised to help us address this industry-wide issue, keeping students motivated and engaged throughout their studies."

THE DECISION

Salford City College started its procurement process in December 2015, when Clare Smith, Learning Technologist, researched a number of credible brands offering learning platforms within the FE sector. The contenders were subsequently asked to demonstrate the platforms.

"We involved teaching staff in the decision-making process. They were asked to score and provide feedback on each VLE, and to look for functionality that would facilitate the blended-learning experience that the college was looking for," says Deborah.

The feedback was unanimous: Canvas presented a more flexible and user-friendly system than any of its competitors. "Staff were

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DEBORAH MILLAR
Director for Digital Learning & IT Services

confident that the new platform "would perform better" and be "more user friendly" than the existing systems, where a poor experience and reliability issues caused frustration to staff and students alike," Deborah says.

In addition, the leadership team was convinced that Canvas would also be the most cost-effective solution. "With the systems we already had, any new plugins took resources to implement, and maintaining servers was expensive and time-consuming," Deborah continued. "Canvas does these things automatically, and also takes development requests when we're looking for new features, so it made good financial sense for us."

THE RESULTS

Once Canvas was fully implemented, the team noticed a difference in teaching and learning from the outset and the system gave Salford City College the tools to tackle some key issues.

"Retaining students was one of our big targets. We understand the challenges some of our students are facing, from juggling family commitments to starting careers, and even sensitive issues like bereavements," Deborah said. "Canvas enables our students to stay on course when they otherwise couldn't get into the college and access materials. We've seen hundreds of page views in the early hours from students learning flexibly."

The student-centred experience offered by Canvas was also significantly superior to the college's legacy systems, according to Deborah: "We asked students for feedback. One said she was able to complete her two most recent assignments before others in her class and use the digital resources to expand on her learning. Another student, who had recently come to the UK and was a little shy to talk in class, has been using Canvas resources to prepare for lessons and give herself that little bit of extra time to make sure she has a voice in discussions."

And it's not just students who have reported benefits. "Around three-quarters of our staff have achieved their level-one badge with Canvas over the past few months — its simplicity makes it easier to make change happen. These positive steps are due in part to the fact that teachers are now more comfortable sharing resources. As our staff gain knowledge and get more savvy, they're making better use of the vast amount of information and content out there, rather than pouring all of their energy into creating lessons from scratch alone. This really helps students too, as there is more time to focus on reaching each individual and tailoring their education," Deborah concluded.

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