

Open Universities Australia drives student registrations with IBM® WebSphere® Portal Enable

Overview

■ **The Challenge**

Open Universities Australia (OUA) wanted to improve its online presence as a way of communicating better with its existing online student community and promoting new student registrations. It wanted a highly available website that was easy to use. It was looking for a platform based on open standards, in order to reduce development and maintenance costs.

■ **The Solution**

In early 2005, OUA engaged IBM Premier Business Partner[†] Synergy Plus to replace its learning platform. The organisations selected IBM WebSphere Portal Enable, including IBM's Web Content Management and Tivoli[®] Directory Server products to deliver this solution. The system was built as a highly available cluster and deployed on Red Hat Enterprise Linux[™].

■ **The Benefits**

IBM WebSphere Portal Enable addressed security, accessibility and functionality issues and ensured future development would be easier and more cost effective. Students using the system say the registration process is reliable and intuitive. The new portal has helped OUA's marketing efforts to increase new student registrations.



About Open Universities Australia

Open Universities Australia is a not-for-profit organisation owned by a consortium of seven Australian universities – Curtin University of Technology, Griffith University, Macquarie University, Monash University, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology and the University of South Australia. It offers students an online alternative to on-campus study by delivering a wide range of courses provided by its member universities. The qualifications achieved by students enrolled through OUA are identical to those awarded to on-campus students.

To visit OUA's student portal, go to www.open.edu.au.

Online learning allows greater flexibility for study

Open Universities Australia (OUA) offers online enrolment and learning for a wide range of courses provided by its member universities, which include Curtin University of Technology, Griffith University, Macquarie University, Monash University, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology and the University of South Australia.

Students enrolled in the OUA network participate in their chosen courses by correspondence, with online resources provided for many units. The partner universities and colleges provide course materials and academic support, conduct assessments and award qualifications.

Studying for a degree through an open learning arrangement such as that offered by OUA lets students choose their own pace, participation schedule and study location, with no limit on course places.

Until the end of 2004, OUA had been relying on a custom open learning system to promote the organisation, manage student registration and maintain course-related content. This platform was designed to work with learning management systems such as WebCT, Web Blackboard and Mentor. However, OUA considered that the system was segmented and it was affected by some ongoing maintenance and usability issues. OUA considered that browser compatibility, accessibility and security were all major concerns.

The vendor that had developed the online learning system was unable to continue to support it and only a few OUA IT personnel were trained in developing and maintaining the application. This put the OUA at risk if these staff left the organisation.

Open Universities Australia decided to replace its open learning platform early in 2005. The IT department wanted limit the costs relating to installation, management and expansion of the new system.

IBM WebSphere Portal Enable to drive online marketing and enrolments

OUA engaged IBM Premium Business Partner† Synergy Plus to design and implement an open standards-based portal platform in March 2005.

According to Masters, OUA chose to invest in an open system so that the organisation could have greater control and flexibility of its development and future expansion, rather than having to go back to the market with very specific requirements.

“We wanted to be able to take advantage of future developments in the space that we didn’t have to invest in to develop products,” he said. “The cost of integrating applications with the older platform was high and we realised that a standards-based platform would reduce those costs.”

Synergy Plus based the new open learning Portal on IBM WebSphere Portal Enable, which included IBM Workplace Web Content Management and WebSphere Portal Document Manager functionality. The system also used IBM Tivoli Server Directory for user authentication and password management.

The project was one of the first public web site implementations of WebSphere Portal running on Red Hat Linux and an Oracle database. The portal architecture used clustering to reduce the risk of failure and improve site reliability.

“Synergy Plus knows how robust WebSphere is and we were confident it had all the functionality Open Universities Australia needed,” said Greg Webbe, Account Manager, Synergy Plus.

IBM offers a comprehensive portfolio of more than 360 middleware products running on Linux. Together, IBM middleware and Linux provide an integrated technology infrastructure that delivers immediate value and business benefits. The open-source operating system and IBM’s comprehensive range of software over multiple hardware platforms allows organisations to respond quickly to market changes with flexible, reliable, secure and cost-effective solutions.

“As the company no longer supported the system we couldn’t take advantage of features of new platforms, particularly those developed to open standards. The business model upon which the old system was based was no longer relevant for Open Universities Australia in 2005. We wanted to go for a more robust ebusiness platform and be able to secure resources from a broader base of companies.”

– David Masters, General Manager, Operations, OUA

Each of the business objectives set out by OUA were addressed in the eight months of implementation from March to December 2005. Key functional requirements included an improved online student registration process, streamlined content management, stronger security and accessibility from a broader range of browsers.

“We wanted to reduce the overall costs of support. So we looked at ways to achieve more effective identification and password management, including self-service for forgotten passwords.”

– David Masters, General Manager, Operations, OUA

“The WebSphere solution is much more reliable than the one it replaced. It has completely reduced administration requirements, is more reliable and less labour intensive to work with.”

Reliable and highly functional system improves the student experience

A combined team effort by Synergy Plus and IBM saw the new OUA portal go live in the first week of December 2005. Synergy Plus staff completed the portal according to the agreed schedule and worked with IBM to ensure the implementation ran smoothly.

“IBM and Synergy Plus worked together extremely well to meet a very tight deadline,” reported Masters. “OUA is a very small company, but IBM treated us like a Tier-1 client and looked after us every step of the way.”

Masters said that students who accessed the portal over the busy summer registration period responded positively to the new site, particularly regarding the improved interface and more reliable registration platform. Tivoli Directory has also reduced support costs for user ID and password management.

“We’re no longer limited by accessibility to our site,” said Masters. “We have more users visiting the site and have seen a much higher number of online registrations – a key part of our business.”

Now that the student registration system works the way it should, OUA is able to focus more on using the portal as a promotional vehicle. New online marketing campaigns not only promote the benefits of open learning, they also actively encourage potential students to explore a wider range of course information.

“Potential students can build a wish list of the units they are interested in studying. They can plan a full course carefully and complete enrolment on the site.”

– David Masters, General Manager, Operations, OUA

Students can also receive guidance on planning their course options in the new Jive-based forums where they can discuss course options, academic progress and issues around study with their peers and academic staff.

Future plans for the portal include enhanced search capabilities and ensuring people with disabilities have better access.

For more information

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