Ulster University Business School:
Improving pass rates and student engagement with MindTap

ABOUT ULSTER UNIVERSITY

Ulster University is ranked within the top 3% of universities in the world and is aiming even higher. Its Business School is one of the largest in the UK and Ireland with over 6,000 students and approximately 140 academic staff.

Economics at Ulster University is taught within the Department of Accounting, Finance and Economics. Degree programmes are offered in Business Economics and Economics alone, along with a mix of major and minor combinations with other subjects such as Accounting, Finance, and Marketing.

An average of 100 students each year take Economics lecturer Dr David Duffy’s module in Microeconomic Principles, comprising 60 Economics students and 40 Finance students studying Introductory Economics as part of other degrees.

THE CHALLENGE – MOTIVATING AND ENGAGING STUDENTS

Dr David Duffy had used Cengage’s Aplia online testing and tutorial system at other universities since 2007, and began using it at Ulster in September 2015.

“Students often find the content of first-year Economics difficult and don’t spend enough time learning, understanding and thinking through Economic models. Class time is fixed and lecturers and tutors are limited by time to provide motivation, guidance and feedback to all students on a regular basis. Moreover, first-year students sometimes need more structure to their learning paths as they transition from school to university.

I particularly needed to motivate and engage first-year students in Introductory Economics. Traditionally, this large first-year course had presented challenges to students and teaching staff and failure rates were high.

The University places a strong emphasis on pastoral care and engagement with students. This requirement to provide a high level of engagement to a large group of students was proving a particular challenge for us in the Economics group as we are a small teaching team of five lecturers, who are also research active. Therefore, given my previous experience with Aplia I thought that students at Ulster University might benefit and enjoy using such an online testing and tutorial system.”

Find out more at cengage.co.uk/mindtap
MindTap combines readings, multimedia, activities, practice assessments and answers into a single customisable learning path, which lecturers can personalise by adding their own content. Within MindTap, Aplia is a tutorial and testing system which significantly improves outcomes and elevates thinking by increasing student effort and engagement.

Developed by Economics professors from Stanford University, Aplia assignments connect concepts to the real world and focus on the unique course challenges facing students so that they come to class more engaged and better prepared.

“I knew about Aplia having used it previously, but MindTap was new to me. MindTap was really easy to set up, especially with the help of the team at Cengage. Once I decided on the content for my course and my teaching schedule, the team at Cengage mapped their resources onto my course. Then I just had to decide which assignments and content students would be required to complete and which were merely recommended. In total, over 12 weeks, I had 10 required assessments for students to complete.”

Dr Duffy surveyed 23 students who took part in an eight week trial of the system. He found;

95% students agreed or strongly agreed that Aplia helped to maximise the effectiveness of study time.

95% students agreed or strongly agreed that Aplia helped them to better understand their course.

82% either agreed or strongly agreed that Aplia was valuable when preparing for tests.
100% students agreed or strongly agreed that Aplia with MindTap was easy to use

THE RESULTS – IMPROVED SUCCESS RATES AND STUDENT RETENTION

“For me the most useful aspect of MindTap is that it gathers resources and problem sets and matches them to my teaching schedule. These are all good quality questions which require students to interact with Economic models. Moreover, I can assign coursework weightings to incentivise and reward students for their independent effort on MindTap. In my first semester course, attendance rates have improved and failure rates have dropped on the module.

Over the last two years we have had much improved success rates, with fewer than 10% failing their first-year Microeconomic course, compared with around 30% previously.

Being able to check students’ progress weekly provides me with information on those who are not progressing as they should, and combined with lecture attendance records gives me useful information to help students improve their study habits well in advance of end of semester exams.

With Aplia I can assign and grade weekly problem sets and provide instantaneous feedback to students. Although some of this can be achieved in seminars by working though problem sets, it is not always possible on an individualised basis. I think the most obvious day-to-day benefit of using Aplia is that students like it – and I say that with certainty. Consistently on end of semester module feedback forms, many students report that the best element of the course is Aplia. For students who answer the question “What did you feel was particularly good about this module?” 70% of the responses mention Aplia.”

The average score for students’ best eight assignments counted towards their coursework grade. 20% of course grades were allocated to these MindTap activities.
“Having used Cengage products for almost 10 years, I always find the quality of service to be excellent. The staff are professional and efficient and always available to help in a timely manner.”

Dr David Duffy, Ulster University

THE RESULTS (CONTINUED)

“From a student perspective, they really like the instantaneous feedback available from MindTap.

Students also like the fact that they can re-take any question up to three times and still be awarded a proportion of the available marks. This is an interesting preference on the part of the students as it indicates that they are using MindTap as a learning and tutorial tool, as opposed to simply a testing tool. The opportunity to re-take questions removes some of the usual stress that comes with an assessment. We now live in a world where we all like to have instant feedback, especially students, and Aplia allows me to provide that.

Specifically attributing quantifiable results to the use of Aplia is difficult as several things have changed on my course, including increased entry requirements, changes to traditional paper and pen assessments, and a new Departmental engagement strategy.

I believe Aplia helps to improve first-year students' knowledge of core Economic concepts and models.

It gives students more confidence to talk about Economic ideas in seminars. Overall, engagement in lectures and seminars has improved and student feedback is strongly positive. There are also savings in terms of my time because I can do more, with less effort. My grading time has been reduced substantially. It frees up my time to focus on discussing and applying the Economic ideas from class, given that students are now better prepared for seminars having worked through Aplia assignments beforehand.

Overall, MindTap is proving to be an important part of our strategy to improve student engagement and performance.”

- Dr David Duffy, Ulster University

If you'd like to find out more about how MindTap can support you and your students, please contact your local Cengage representative through cengage.co.uk/contact-us or email us at emea.edureply@cengage.com

To read more case studies on our digital solutions, go to cengage.co.uk/studentoutcomes