Planet eStream - Enhancing University of Eastern Finland’s Digital Learning Agenda

University of Eastern Finland (UEF) is one of the country’s largest universities, home to approximately 15,000 students and 2,800 members of staff across three campuses in Joensuu, Kuopio and Savonlinna.

UEF is a multidisciplinary university, offering teaching in over 100 subjects through four faculties: Philosophical Faculty; Faculty of Science and Forestry; Faculty of Health Sciences and the Faculty of Social Sciences and Business Studies. Student wellbeing is a high priority, and the university invests continually in providing a modern study environment for students.

The university aims to be recognised as Finland’s number one academic learning environment, and its goals include being ranked among the leading 200 research universities in the world and top 50 in its specialist research fields. Those fields are built around key global challenges: ageing; lifestyles and health; learning in a digitised society; cultural encounters, mobility and borders; and environmental change.

It is in the digital learning field at UEF where Planet eStream is currently helping to deliver a research programme designed to assess the impact of digital technologies on learning. But its use is extending beyond this project into other aspects of teaching and general learning environments at the university, too.

Planet eStream - The Complete Package

Juha Eskelinen, chief information officer at University of Eastern Finland, discovered Planet eStream at the UK education technology trade show, Bett, in 2015. Originally looking for video on demand and digital signage systems, Juha was immediately impressed by Planet eStream’s ability to deliver both – and more besides – in a single solution:

“Video creation and the ability to upload, edit, live stream and archive content were our core requirements, but we were simultaneously looking for a digital signage solution for the university, too,” he says. “We looked at a couple of other digital signage systems before discovering Planet eStream, but choosing eStream was an easy decision. It gave us the video on demand, video management, live streaming and lecture capture capabilities we were looking for, as well as easy integration with our Moodle VLE and a full digital signage solution in a single, cost effective package.”
The University of Eastern Finland was formed following the merger of two universities, and now it operates across three campuses, located 140km apart. Video conferencing plays a huge role in everyday life at UEF, with many lectures delivered virtually.

Juha says, “The ability to deliver lectures virtually but also to record these sessions is invaluable, and Planet eStream enables us to do this with ease. It is also straightforward for teaching staff to create chapters within video footage, and quickly edit content to create concise clips that can be embedded into the Moodle VLE very easily. This was previously cumbersome and time consuming to do.

“We have found Planet eStream to be a very intuitive system. Everything is HTML-based and easy to use both via existing desktop browsers and on mobile devices. Encoding and distributing content is straightforward and effective, and it’s helping us deliver teaching concurrently to students located on different university campuses.

“For example, we have up to 500 medical students in a variety of locations attending one class. The lecturer needs to be able to present live to them all and control several different rooms. Planet eStream’s live encoder is proving to be a vital part of successful learning delivery in this environment.”

Following a web meeting shortly after the Bett event in 2015, Juha signed up for a hosted trial that included integration with the university’s Moodle VLE. Throughout the trial he and others at the university liaised with the Planet eStream support team to try out different aspects of the product and reached the decision that it was exactly the right solution for UEF. Juha says, “The support from the Planet eStream team was excellent throughout, and we always received quick answers to our questions.”

During the initial Planet eStream trial in spring 2015 two UEF researchers, Dr. Erkko Sointu and Dr. Teemu Valtonen, were exploring options for producing short online instructional videos for their learning environments development project. Erkko and Teemu joined the team at UEF who were responsible for developing Planet eStream at the university and contributed to the work involved in customising the service to suit UEF requirements. They also tested several different video-based pedagogies, but found that Planet eStream provided the most comprehensive and user friendly learning tool.

Lecture Capture and Live Streaming - Bringing Three Campuses Together

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Delivering to UEF’s Digital Learning Agenda

Beyond live streaming and lecture capture, Juha says that Planet eStream is playing a crucial role in a research programme focused largely on the university’s teaching programmes.

“UEF is leading a flipped classroom research programme into the impact of video on learning, looking specifically at the effects of incorporating video technology into learning environments,” he says. “This is one of a number of digital learning studies we are running as part of our ‘digital readiness’ agenda, focusing specifically on how best to give student teachers the skills they need to reach tomorrow’s learners.

“Planet eStream is being widely used by the 40 lecturers involved in the flipped classroom programme. They are all regularly preparing lectures using eStream to embed video clips into our Moodle VLE as well as into Office 365 applications. Planet eStream makes this process very easy.”

The programme researchers Dr. Erkko Sointu and Dr. Teemu Valtonen have continued to be involved in the flipped classroom programme. They say, “The 40 lecturers in the flipped classroom programme are teaching around 4,000 UEF students. Discovering how pedagogical tools such as Planet eStream influence teaching and learning processes is both extremely interesting and very important.”

Enhancing Student Learning

It isn’t just the teaching staff at UEF who are benefiting from Planet eStream. Juha says that students on its teaching programmes are also embracing the video capabilities the system brings: “Many of our teacher training students are using eStream to produce coursework, and also to evaluate their teaching performance individually by recording their lesson delivery in a classroom environment and analysing it with their peers,” he says.

First Rate Support

“The support we have had from the Planet eStream team has been superb,” Juha says. “From our first meeting at Bett to the system being installed a matter of months later, the team has been very quick to reply. Often, their response is almost instant!

“Perhaps the most valuable benefit to us of working with such a proactive team has been that they are open to development ideas. They have taken on board our suggestions for specific functionality, and accelerated the creation of their ‘picture in picture’ customisable offset timing functionality for the live encoder, which – for example – enables our lecturers to capture a screen, overlay footage of them explaining a concept to students and embed it into the VLE.”
The Future for Planet eStream at UEF

Juha’s vision is to see the majority of UEF teaching staff converting teaching materials to video-based tutorials and embracing flipped learning across the university as a whole.

“The researchers leading the flipped learning programme are excited about the capabilities and benefits Planet eStream brings, and their feedback on the system has been very positive. They have also praised its ease of use across a range of different devices: PCs, Macs, tablets and smartphones.

“We are keen to roll Planet eStream out more widely across all three campuses following the research programme, and we also plan to launch digital signage across all faculties soon. Every faculty will have their own signage screens for their key messaging, which will see its use increase significantly across the university.”

Another interesting feature for future development could be the capability to develop an online blended learning tool, recording and including participants from a distance in authentic teaching and learning situations using Planet eStream. This could take teaching and learning to another level and give people the option to learn in their own time and environment,” Erkko says.

Juha says that the upcoming launch of Planet eStream’s new translation tool is an interesting development, which will enable the translation of the user interface into a selection of 100 pre-configured languages, which can be applied globally or on an individual user basis: “The system is very easy to use in English, but it is our policy to offer services in Finnish too, where possible, so this development may well be of interest.”

The partnership between Planet eStream and UEF looks set to go from strength to strength. The teams met again at Bett in 2016, when Juha attended a product launch party hosted by Planet eStream, and invited them to exhibit at an education technology event in Finland. He believes that seeing Planet eStream at the Interactive Technology in Education (ITK) exhibition in April will help other education organisations in the country to see the benefits and cost effective workflows that Planet eStream offers.

The two organisations are also partnering on a project to help higher education institutions in Eritrea overcome the issue of poor connectivity while wireless infrastructures are installed in the country. The project involves creating a non-commercial national educational network with a shared fast internet connection. The first phase will see the construction of a wireless backbone with a single satellite internet connection. Eritrea Institute of Technology will initially act as a service provider to other higher education and research institutions, and UEF will provide online services through EIT and the existing local and national network. Planet eStream will be installed to enable the delivery of video lectures to EIT’s 6000 students, which will extend to other universities as the network expands.

Wendy Robinson, Planet DV managing director says, “Through our customers across the UK and Europe, we are seeing the benefits that flipped and blended learning techniques provide. To extend this capability to other countries and help enhance learning as they develop more solid infrastructures is a fantastic opportunity, and we are very happy to be partnering with UEF on this project.”