

Chartered cyber course

ABEL's eCampus is an example of the integration of e-learning into the delivery of a professional accounting education programme.

By Philip Keeling and Dan Randow



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ADVANCED Business Education Ltd (ABEL), the Institute's 100%-owned subsidiary, develops, delivers and manages the Professional Competence Programmes (PCP) for all provisional Institute members seeking full membership of the AT or CA Colleges (www.abel.ac.nz).

ABEL currently offers two programmes:

1. Professional Competence Examination 1 (PCE 1)

A short part-time programme of approximately a month for all provisional members seeking AT and CA membership. Offered three times a year, engaging approximately 300 participants per offering

2. Professional Accounting School/ Professional Competence Examination 2 (PAS/PCE 2)

A part-time programme over the course of a year, with a roll of approximately 600 participants seeking membership of the CA College. Aims to develop higher-level professional competencies now required of all Chartered Accountants and is very case-study based. Involves significant self-study, along with six two-day face-to-face workshops where team work is an essential element.

Challenge: offering a campus for table teams

PAS/PCE 2 encourages collaborative learning to give participants the opportunity to enhance their subject-specific skills and develop the higher-level

competencies now required of Chartered Accountants: professional collaboration, effective team participation and leadership.

Each of the six face-to-face workshops consists of no more than 25 participants, who are further divided into table teams of four to five participants each. Each table team works together, both at and in-between the workshop meetings, often on assessed activities such as preparing a

presentation to be delivered at a subsequent workshop session.

As most PAS/PCE 2 participants work full-time, intense table-team collaboration between workshops is not always simple. ABEL therefore realised back in 1999 that it needed to find an online alternative to regular face-to-face meetings to enable its PAS/PCE 2 participants to meet the learning outcomes prescribed in the programme.

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Solution: an online eCampus

GroupSense, a Christchurch-based company specialising in online collaboration, assisted ABEL with the design and deployment of an eCampus for PAS/PCE 2.

Prototype for learning and testing

An experimental eCampus was based on Yahoo! Groups (email-based, with searchable web archives) from 2000-02, with a front-end website offering personalised links to appropriate resources.

Production eCampus with greater integration

A production eCampus was built by GroupSense, IOPEN (a software engineering company) and ZYPE (an interface design company) during November 2002 and February 2003. The underlying product is called GroupServer. It uses various open-source technologies (e.g. the Zope web-application server), and XML-based formatting and display options. The eCampus is hosted by IOPEN.

GroupSense offers phone and email-based support for ABEL staff, programme participants and workshop facilitators, and encourages effective participation through launch processes and support offerings.

Workshop and table team online groups

PAS/PCE 2 participants in any one year are assigned to online eWorkshop Groups that are set up for collaboration outside of the face-to-face workshop meetings. The eWorkshop Groups run for the duration of the year, their membership being the workshop groups of up to 25 participants who attend the six face-to-face workshop meetings and the two workshop programme facilitators.

Participants are then placed into eTable Teams that mirror the membership of their face-to-face workshop table teams. The membership of these table/eTable Teams is changed once, during the programme's mid-point.

Each online group enables:

- *Postings by email.* Members can send messages to their groups via a group email address
- *Searchable web archive.* All messages to the group are stored in a password-protected archive, accessible by group members via a web browser. The web archive groups messages by subject, enabling concurrent conversations to proceed in an orderly fashion

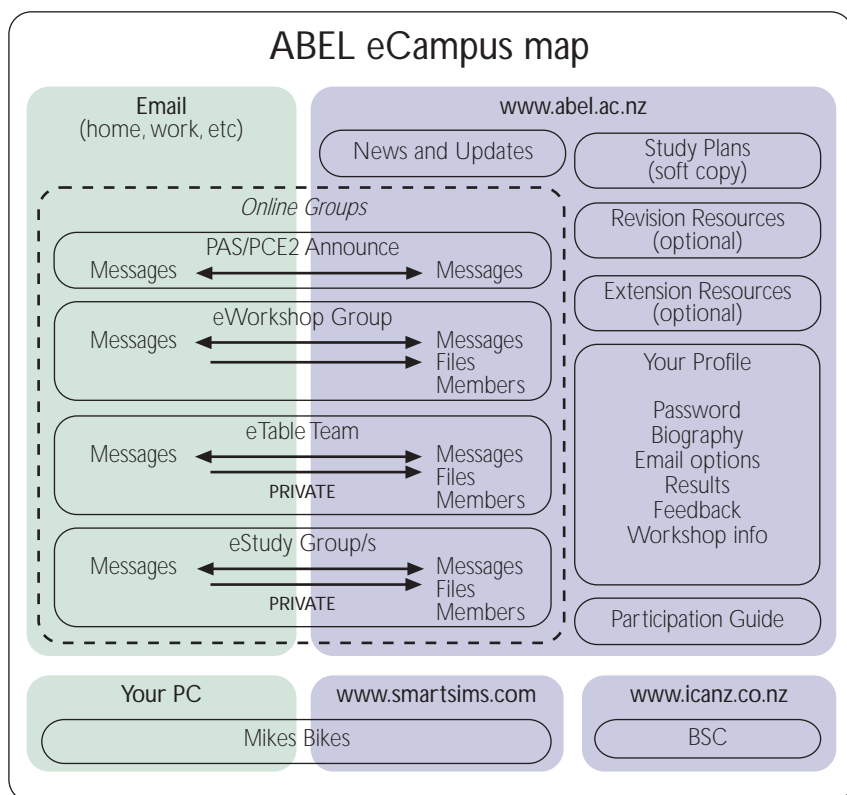
- *Shared files.* Members can upload current work-in-progress documents to the online group and organise these in folder hierarchies. Other group members can access these files and subsequently upload revisions for sharing
- *Member profile.* A page lists group members, along with a photo and brief biography.

While the eCampus platform is actively serving hundreds of groups at any one time, PAS participants can only see and access groups to which they belong. Privacy over group content is maintained. ABEL management, for instance, does not access the eTable Team group forums.

Additional eCampus capabilities

In addition to online groups, the eCampus provides online access to:

- *Supplementary resources.* Most of the PAS study material is provided to participants by ABEL as printed material. Supplementary readings, including a full-text journal database provided to Institute members, can be accessed online, as well as content updates, activity templates and other optional resources
- *Shared files.* Large files can be published to the eCampus, enabling participants to decide when they want to download them
- *News, information and results.* News and information, assessment results (result certificates can be dynamically generated as PDF files on the site), and workshop and exam information is published on the eCampus
- *Participant feedback.* Online forms are used to collect feedback from participants for ABEL. Feedback is collected at the end of each face-to-face workshop, either online via the eCampus or through printed ranking sheets. The result set can be merged with qualitative feedback entered online and aggregated into formatted PDF reports



Feedback from participants indicated that the eCampus produced more collaboration in their teams which in turn reflected positively on their assessment results

- *Workshop facilitator resources.* Workshop facilitators gain access to photo sheets of participants, assessment results and participant feedback on the workshop programme.

Impact

The eCampus has delivered solid results to ABEL and the participants on its PCPs. It has:

- *Enabled a streamlined operation.* The eCampus has helped ABEL minimise its overhead, coordination and some publication costs. It has been an important factor in enabling ABEL to remain quick-footed and responsive to the needs of participants. Website activity during 2004 generated 1.3 million

web-page views and more than 51 gigabytes of download traffic. Participants reported that the eCampus played a key part in supporting them to achieve their goals

- *Increased collaboration between participants.* The number of posts per year increased from 13,000 in 2001 to 26,000 in 2004. While participants were working in an online business simulation activity, 25% of the eTable Teams were making more than 20 posts per day. Aside from the hard numbers, feedback from participants indicated that the eCampus produced more collaboration in their teams, which in turn reflected positively on their assessment results.

Future directions

ABEL will enhance its eCampus during 2005 in the following ways:

- *Integration with ABEL's programme management system*
eMinerva will be the core programme management system at ABEL. By mid-2005, it will be possible to publish participant information, group membership and result data in eMinerva directly to the eCampus via web services technologies
- *Tighter integration with PAS*
The eCampus will be used to deliver more value to participants in the PAS programme during 2005. Changes to the eCampus, and programme material and activities are being planned
- *Other enhancements from GroupSense*
GroupServe is used to support online collaboration in virtual teams and communities at Landcare Research, Lincoln University, and an e-Democracy project in the UK and US. Enhancements made as a result of these engagements are provided free to ABEL. ■

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