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Digital transformation boosted students' employability skills and confidence

 Pearson | MyLab IT

Student Success

Career Success

Case study from Princess Nourah Bint Abdul Rahman University (PNU) 2018-19

About the university

Princess Nourah Bint Abdul Rahman University (PNU) in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a comprehensive university for women. Established in 2008, the university offers 89 programs across its 18 colleges and institutes, which include business, science, engineering, health sciences, the arts and humanities. There are about 40,000 students of over 60 nationalities studying on undergraduate and postgraduate programs.



Introduction

Dr Paula Kenny is Associate Professor, Head of Quality Assurance & Accreditation CBA at Princess Nourah Bint Abdul Rahman University (PNU). Dr Kenny introduced Pearson's digital platforms – MyLab IT, Student Success and Career Success programs – to their Business Communications courses. Here she shares her experiences:

Key findings

- ✦✦ The culture for working with online learning, teaching and assessment tools, and the core skills to use them, did not exist initially within the faculty. Dr Kenny found that **clear communication** of the benefits, evidence of potential results and practical demonstrations of the programs for the instructors removed resistance.
- ✦✦ Instructors had PNU-provided in-house guidance and help from Pearson's support team. Their **improved digital skills and confidence** made them enthusiastic advocates, encouraging uptake in other faculties. Some have looked at new ways to deliver their coursework, and assessment and grading is now more consistent.
- ✦✦ Getting **students, instructors and parents on board** before the Pearson programs were introduced was vital. A communications exercise to parents specifically explained how the modules were funded (through student direct purchase) and how the system worked. Parents were supportive once they understood the benefits of the digital programs – some wanted to be shown how they worked.
- ✦✦ **Very quickly**, within one semester, **students became confident** in accessing the online module content and working independently. At first, they didn't see the benefits of keeping journals and portfolios but, by adopting these tools, they began to understand their learning styles and could express themselves more easily.
- ✦✦ Students gave very positive feedback on the digital programs, with one student commenting *"The Student Success program is a 'Perfect fit' for my needs in Business school. It has very useful topics that will help me in my personal and professional life."*
- ✦✦ **Employers** from PNU's internship programs **were impressed** with the transferable skills students developed and could see how these would add value to their businesses. Through using MyLab IT, Student Success and Career Success, **students secured higher quality internships** much earlier in their courses.





Motivations to use Student Success, Career Success and MyLab IT

Dr Kenny was looking for course material that would address concerns from industry that students needed to be 'work ready' for today's businesses environment, with fundamental skills including English language, keyboard skills and IT fluency. Dr Kenny discovered Pearson's online MyLab IT, Student Success and Career Success programs could deliver competency-based professional skills development and reflective practice and help students achieve more. The online support tools, plus Pearson's professional development training sessions, help instructors develop their teaching and assessment skills too.

Dr Kenny says *"The task was to design a program that was going to give our students a competitive advantage in the market, so that they could get what they need and also add value. I saw the range of programs and felt straight away that here was something that students would respond well to – and would really benefit them. Students can achieve their potential with MyLab IT, Student Success and Career Success online tools and get excited about what they're learning."*

Students were encouraged to use the daily journal and portfolio modules to reflect their learning pathways, explore levels of understanding, develop skills and demonstrate progress. The Learning Preference module helps students (and their instructors) understand their approaches to class participation, note taking, studying and taking exams.

Dr Kenny was pleased with how well students responded to the digital learning: *"Our students don't want to go back to the old style of just sitting in a classroom and absorbing everything. They want to be involved, to feel more creative and more innovative. To succeed in business today, you have to be able to think that way."*

Overcoming barriers to implementation

Initially some instructors either lacked the IT skills or didn't see the value in the online programs. They were also concerned that marking and grading was going to be complicated and time consuming. A Pearson Learning Consultant was brought in to run live demonstrations of the programs. These sessions convinced faculty that online tools would support and extend teaching, make class planning more exciting and create a more enjoyable learner experience. Instructors were encouraged to use (and design) rubrics and to be tech-ready for each class. They found that the support tools actually made assessment tasks easier.

Dr Kenny says *"In Student Success, the CRI index is excellent as students get a score – a base to work off. When instructors engage with the tools and learn for themselves how rubrics work, how to design one and what a good rubric looks like, they are also further developing their own teaching skills."*

By the end of the semester, student performance was very high and some of the more sceptical instructors had transformed into champions of the digital programs, actively promoting the advantages to other faculty members.

Dr Kenny explains *"You need some instructors who are innovative, who will try new teaching strategies and who understand the need for competency-based education."*

Whilst not every instructor will be on board in the beginning, Dr Kenny's experience shows that with strong leadership you can implement these programs and over time develop faculty commitment to digital.

Positive outcomes for everyone

Students (and parents)

As they worked through the modules, students improved their English language and keyboard skills, developed better concentration and focus, and gained a greater understanding of their learning preferences.

One student reflected *"I used to write a to-do list without prioritizing my tasks and wondered why it didn't work. Now I learned that prioritization is key to successful time management."*

Students took responsibility for their digital devices, their time management and ownership of their learner journey. They gained more from their internships and graduated with a broader set of business, academic and lifelong learning skills. This put them in a strong position to secure better quality postgraduate work placements.

Students appreciated how much they learned through the programs, with one commenting, *"All the topics, including critical thinking, diversity, workplace etiquette, formal and informal communication, business writing (even where to put capital letters!) are very insightful and educating."*

Another added: *"The Student Success program topics give me steps to follow and apply what I've learned. It is practical, easily applied learning."*

Students reported in their journals that their parents looked at the course content with them. Some family members also described benefiting from the knowledge the students gained from their online modules. One father, who runs his own business, gave his daughter more responsibility for his company's accounts because he saw that she had Excel skills that he did not.

Instructors

Instructors noticed that core skills, built at the early stage of a course, impacted positively on how students learn, retain and apply course content later. Using the assessment and marking tools gave greater consistency in their grading and increased their own digital confidence and skills.

The benefit of these fundamental skills programs flows into other subjects too. For example, an accountancy instructor at PNU observed the higher test results of some of the students and asked about online modules for her Accountancy course.

Dr Kenny explains, *"This instructor told me that she can now make her course a little bit more challenging for students because she now knows that they are already going to be able to use Excel."*

Internship Employers

Employers noted that PNU students were more confident and articulate at their internship interviews and had a better understanding of the skills businesses need. The students were professional, focussed and could highlight the strengths they might bring to each role and how they could add value to the business.

Dr Kenny says *"These employers are very impressed with students that have taken the Career Success and Student Success programs. They can see it in the students' attitude, the high standard of their CVs, their level of communication and how they conduct themselves. A number of our students have secured internships at the end of their first year, rather than having to wait until perhaps their third or fourth year of study."*

PNU's plans for the future

They want to support internships for final year students through further use of the programs in the second, third and final year of the course, and they also plan to develop a series of handbooks for instructors and students to outline the learning goals for using these tools.

PNU management is exploring possibilities to maintain and build on Skills 1 and 2 and will change the order so MyLab IT comes after Student Success and Career Success to improve the flow for students. Dr Kenny sums up: *"We are continually reviewing, updating and revising courses, so that we're raising standards for students and they're getting a good degree and a good learning experience that sets them up for life."*

Advice for other institutions, based on Dr Kenny's experience

According to Dr Kenny, it's vital to get students, faculty, instructors and parents on board before you introduce innovative digital programs. Plan a communications exercise to explain how the online learning tools are funded and how the system works. Be prepared that it may take time for some faculty to build confidence in teaching with digital tools and appreciating the benefits for themselves and their students.

Parents are supportive once they understand the benefits. Some may want to be shown how the modules and tools work for themselves so they can better support their children.

Dr Kenny concludes *"The sky is the limit in terms of the potential of MyLab IT, Student Success and Career Success. The students engage with them, work with and respond to them, especially if they're delivered in a way that is encouraging, supportive and positive."*



Want to know more?

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