Singapore University of Social Sciences
Changing Mindsets: How Digital Transformation Encourages Lifelong Learning

With a mission to champion lifelong learning, Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) aims to provide quality education anytime, anywhere to students from all stages of life through a progressive, robust digital infrastructure comprising e-learning materials and other advanced tools.

As a pioneer in online learning, the university has been offering digitised study guides to their students as part of, and in addition to, their provided course materials. "We don't do technology for the sake of technology—we do it to help our students," said Associate Professor Lee Wee Leong, Director, Educational Technology & Production and Online Learning. "We are always looking for ways to enhance our students' learning experience. You should have that first important concept of helping your students and use technology as an enabler."

With that in mind, SUSS started working with publishers to develop eTextbook solutions for their students as part of the university's digital transformation journey. SUSS partnered with six major publishers to deliver textbooks required by their faculty for teaching. The university then began their search for a comprehensive provider who could distribute all the titles that included digital formats to ensure that students would not need to visit multiple places to access their eTextbooks. At the same time, SUSS searched for a common platform that would work both for them and their publishers.

With an extensive library and close partnerships with publishers, VitalSource became a clear choice to aid SUSS in their efforts to provide students with engaging, accessible digital learning resources. Utilising the Bookshelf® eReader platform, SUSS was able to maintain academic freedom for faculty while enhancing the learning experience for students.

Access to materials does not end with each individual student's course selection. Working with the publishers and VitalSource, SUSS was able to create a full library of digital content in order to offer all students access to all adopted eTextbooks—regardless of their course load. VitalSource's technology offers the ability to support a number of business models, which helped SUSS achieve their specific goals for the transition. "Our model is not just giving students their textbooks, but also giving them all the other textbooks that they could possibly access," said Prof. Lee. "The model is something that we think is very interesting for our students—to be able to read in a broader sense, rather than just the very specific topic they are studying at that moment."

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OVERCOMING RESISTANCE

According to Prof. Lee, the switch to fully digitised learning materials met some resistance from their students at first, with some claiming that they could not stare at the computer screen for too long. "I always ask them, 'Do you spend hours on social media? And that's ok?' It's about changing mindsets," he said. While the university received complaints when the programme was first launched, this has scaled back significantly as students become accustomed to the new format. "They discover how quickly they can do a search within a book or across a series of books, and right now they have access to 200 books," said Prof. Lee. "Not just one book or two books—200 books. There are advantages to having eBooks as well as the innovative way we implemented the programme, and we believe the students appreciate it."

For those who prefer to stick with print, the university has provided a facility to purchase hard copies. However, most students have been using the eTextbooks and enjoying the benefits of anytime, anywhere access to both their learning materials and the built-in study tools. Said one student, "It is convenient, especially if the textbook is bulky in physical form. By having it in the electronic format, it helps to reduce my bag's weight and save the environment." For students who need assistance transitioning from print to digital, the university's Technology and Training Support department is available to help them get set up with the new format.

DRIVING STUDENT SUCCESS

One of the biggest advantages is the availability of engagement data through VitalSource Analytics®. By going digital, SUSS is able to capture analytics to make decisions going forward in terms of course content and student learning. "It gives us insights into whether we're driving things in the right direction," said Prof. Lee. "For example, what are the students really learning and what do they really need? And are they using the right textbooks, reading the right content, or are they not even using it? It gives us that perspective." And with more eTextbooks being made available as the program grows, the data can be further analysed in terms of student success and completion rates.

Faculty are discovering the many benefits of transitioning to digital as well, such as students having the necessary course materials on the first day of class. "It's very important to me, as I'd like students to be able to engage with the course before class actually starts," says Ms. Khoo Sim Eng, Head of the Film Studies Minor at the School of Humanities & Behavioural Sciences. "Students get to look through materials, see what interests them, and get a sense of what the course is about." She also believes faculty can help students realise the benefits of digital textbooks—especially if students are using them for the first time. "Access the eTextbook in class and show some of its features," she suggests. "Students are still not entirely used to eBooks, so it's useful to promote the book a bit. Use the videos in the eTextbook for discussion or assessment."

MAKING THE TRANSITION

In today's digital world, students and faculty are comfortable learning and teaching using digital tools. The digitisation of course materials at SUSS will be an ongoing process, but their progress wouldn't have been possible without that initial step to get the programme started. The team at SUSS had strong support from senior management on all aspects of the digitisation of course materials—an important factor when implementing such a model. "That's the key," said Prof. Lee. "You have to get the support—someone high enough has to campaign for this effort and then push it to the different schools. We are privileged at SUSS to be able to get the support of our President, who embraces and champions lifelong learning through technology."