ADEPT4

IT AS A SERVICE

Now We're Talking:
How Skype for Business is transforming education

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Introduction

What is Skype for Business for? Delivering instruction and updates via videoconferencing? Facilitating interactive debate and discussion through virtual meetings? Bringing together disparate teams from across the country – or the world? All are absolutely true – and all can apply in educational settings as well as corporate ones.

Microsoft has a powerful track record of developing technology to enhance education – from the perspective of both learners and practitioners. The company runs a range of initiatives to support education worldwide, with a particular focus on sustainable development goals. These strategies include the Microsoft Innovative Educator Expert and Microsoft Showcase Schools programs, offering Office 365 for Education on up to five devices for free, and numerous education acts.

In schools around the world, the Skype in the Classroom online community is connecting teachers and enabling them to deliver new ways of learning. There is even a Skype Master Teacher strategy to develop tomorrow's leaders in the field.

But what if we move further up the education chain, to look at further and higher education (FE and HE)?

Why FE and HE institutions are embracing Skype for Business: the background

Colleges and universities, like organisations across many other sectors, are under increasing pressure to deliver cost-effectiveness, process efficiency, productivity and flexibility in everything they do.

Yet simultaneously, it has never been more important for FE and HE institutions to deliver an outstanding learner experience, with opportunities for different ways of learning and innovative uses of technology. After all, with tuition fees reaching tens of thousands of pounds, students expect the best.

Another key factor to consider is the disparate locations and multi-pronged growth that many FE and HE institutions are experiencing. It is becoming increasingly common, for example, for universities to open overseas campuses, or for colleges to build new facilities at locations separate from their headquarters. In doing so, it becomes increasingly important for the organisations in question to be able to facilitate efficient communication and collaboration between staff (and students) at different locations.

Similarly, more and more teaching staff at colleges and universities are taking on multiple roles and working at multiple institutions. Many students also choose to combine their studies with other commitments, whether working alongside a part-time degree or completing an apprenticeship which combines work and study. This kind of flexible working across multiple locations again demands clear communication between sites and technology that can enable collaborative working at times to suit different stakeholders.

'Skype for Business can play a role in meeting all of these challenges.'

Finally, the shift to unified communications (UC) infrastructures is by no means leaving the education sector untouched. Most universities and colleges now have UC migration plans in their sights, recognising that such solutions offer more collaborative, scalable and efficient approaches to communications, whether voice or data led.

Skype for Business can play a role in meeting all of these challenges.

Why FE and HE institutions are embracing Skype for Business: the benefits

Skype for Business forms a single foundation for enterprise voice solutions, combining multiple voice and data communications applications on a unified platform.

As such, it offers a framework for a UC infrastructure. And just as many corporate businesses are embracing Skype for Business as a path to UC, so too can colleges and universities.

More specifically, Skype for Business offers a low-cost, easy-to-use means for individuals within education institutions – whether staff or students – to communicate with each other both individually and in groups. Many users are already familiar with the technology, so there is an extremely low barrier to entry. It also provides a platform for a wide range of learning-specific applications, such as virtual classrooms and enhanced learning methods.

The University of London offers just one example of a higher education institution's digital services department introducing Skype for Business as part of its roster of hardware and software investment. In turn, this was part of a broader strategy to generate more flexibility, productivity and efficiency, to allow staff to work in ways that suit them as well as the wider organisation, and to maximise communication and collaboration.
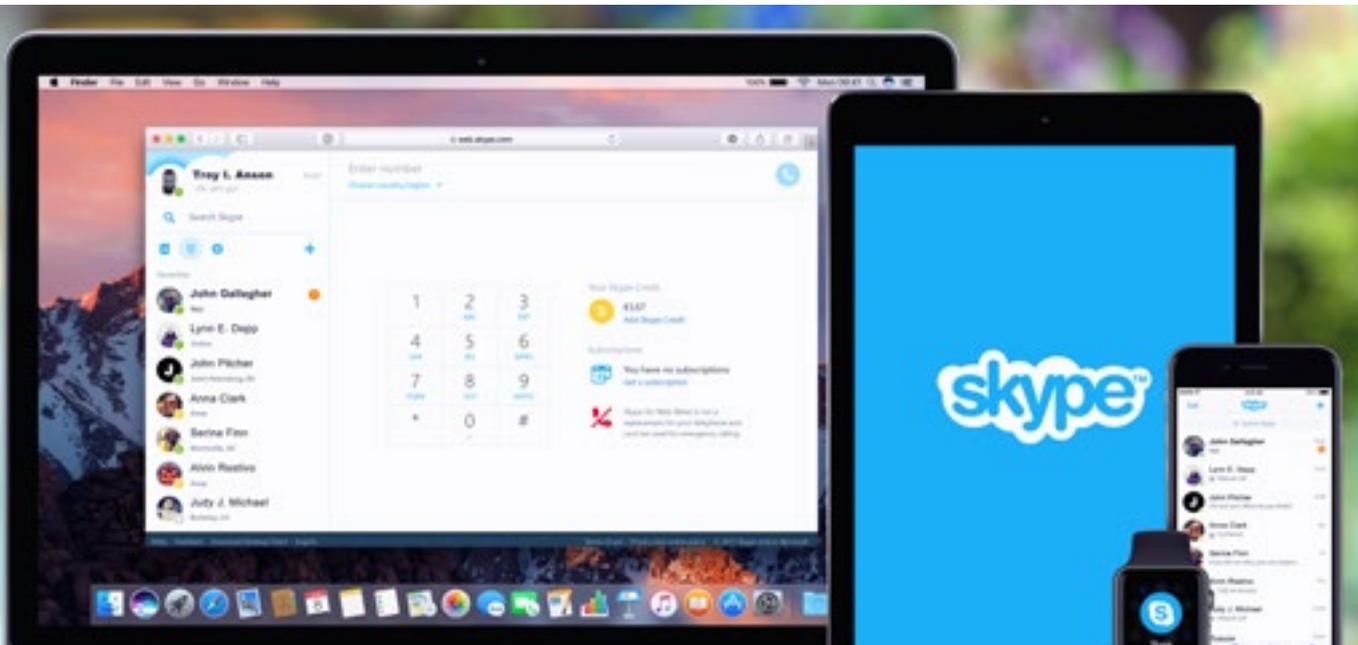
Practical applications

What then are some real-life examples of how Skype can be used in further and higher education settings?

- Virtual field trips: Locations which are too costly or complex to visit physically can instead be explored virtually with the help of Skype for Business. An on-the-ground guide equipped with high-resolution mobile recording equipment can tour landmarks, museums, galleries, sites of scientific or historical interest whilst providing live commentary to a classroom or lecture theatre-based audience.

- Guest lectures: Guest lectures are key calendar features at many universities, enabling students to hear from world-leading experts and figures of influence. Skype for Business enables them to be set up more easily and more cost-effec-tively — ultimately enabling more to take place and more students to engage with each speaker.

- **Expert interviews:** Teachers, lecturers or seminar leaders who wish to draw on external expertise to enhance their course content can use Skype for Business to set up a direct connection with a third-party figure. This can be particularly useful on vocational or creative courses where students can benefit from speaking directly with someone already working in the field.

- **Performance and presentation:** Performing arts students across multiple disciplines can use Skype for Business to showcase their work to remote audiences, including, for example, casting directors and agents. The ability to deliver presentations to remote and disparate audiences, meanwhile, is a useful function for nearly all subjects. Think about technical apprentices being able to present back to their employees from the college grounds, or history students in an archive being able to immediately share their findings with their course mates.

- **Cultural exchange:** Skype for Business doesn't merely form connections between educational institutions and third parties; it can also form connections between educational institutions. Colleges, universities or departments with partner organisations abroad, for example, can use the technology to facilitate virtual exchange programs and shared lectures and presentations.

- **Debate and discussion:** Similarly, Skype for Business can form the perfect platform for students at different educational institutions to carry out debates and discussion with each other. Whilst particularly relevant for students in disciplines such as politics, debating and public speaking is increasingly a core part of many degree and college subjects.

- **Remote and ill students:** Increasing numbers of students are taking on university and college courses part time or on a flexible basis, which may mean them living remotely from the institution in question. Skype for Business, whether used as a tool for setting up face-to-face meetings between student and supervisor, or enabling the student remote access to a lecture, can make such attendance far more cost-effective and easy to manage. Meanwhile, students who are ill may use the same functionality to keep abreast of lectures whilst they cannot attend in person.

Are you ready to embrace Skype for Business?

If you are a college or university seeking a single tool to improve collaboration both internally and externally, to facilitate new ways of both teaching and learning, and to provide a platform for a more unified approach to communications, Skype for Business could be the answer. Why not get in touch with Adept4 today to see how we could help?

About Adept4

Adept4 is a managed services provider.
It enables organisations to become operationally and culturally agile through smart, adaptive cloud based technology strategies that respond effectively to everyday challenges.

Adept4 is a northern based power house delivering hybrid IT, Microsoft cloud and managed services that enable organisations to securely transition, flex and integrate between on premise and cloud-based services.

Adept4 is a market–leader in developing solutions that enable mid-market sized organisations to make faster decisions, improve operational efficiency and gain competitive advantage.

If you're ready to start your journey to the Cloud then book in for a free free Cloud Readiness Assessment with one of our consultants.

Book Assessment

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