

HE learning gets a boost

Competition for students and the need to improve teaching and learning has led City University to spend heavily on a-v facilities

London's City University has spent £1.2m equipping 85 teaching spaces on its Northampton Square campus with a-v devices. Installed as a single project, the campus-wide system is based on TeamMate modular, pre-built units, which are linked to the university's central a-v and IT department using Crestron RoomView devices.

The roll-out, says City University vice chancellor Professor Malcolm Gillies, 'is part of a broader investment by the university in teaching, learning and making sure that our student experience is as good as possible.'

'This equipment prompts us to be more responsive in the way we teach, how our students work and, ultimately, the quality of their educational qualifications. What we are seeing is part of a bigger picture of the repositioning of the university as high up as it can be, in terms of our quality of student service and education,' he said.

'This was one of the largest instant roll outs of a-v equipment in British higher-education history. Doing it all together, rather than as a piecemeal dribble, has had huge advantages.'

The university's a-v services team admit that the investment was long overdue, saying that 'a lot of the equipment we had was old, it wasn't standardised and it was based around the technology, rather than the needs of teaching and learning.'

The a-v project, Gillies insists, is just one of 'the big investments in learning [we] are making'. But it's also significant that it was funded out of the university's own resources.

The build up

However, the project didn't come out of the blue. The university's Cass Business School – located on a different site in the city's Bunhill Row – had installed state of the art a-v facilities when it opened in 2002, so the university had first-hand experience of the benefits that new systems could bring.

'We realised that there was a growing gap between what our postgraduate students were getting in the business school and what our

undergraduates were getting,' says Clive Holtham, professor of information management at the business school. 'So, we shifted our interest from our core building to up here.'

'It is competitive at undergraduate level in business studies and it is vital the teaching and learning facilities match the calibre of the students. Therefore, from 2003 onwards we were pushing to improve the quality on the main campus,' he says.

And it wasn't doing this on its own. At the same time, the school of social sciences was moving to a new building on the campus. So, it too was pushing for better a-v facilities and set up a working party that prepared the business case.

'I am talking about this like a business school professor would because it is a business change case study,' says Holtham. 'We are not talking about this being a technological adventure, it is how you can get a series of events to get together to create a strategic change.'

'Cass and Social Sciences had the experience and we had prepared the business case behind the scenes, but we didn't have the money then to implement it.'

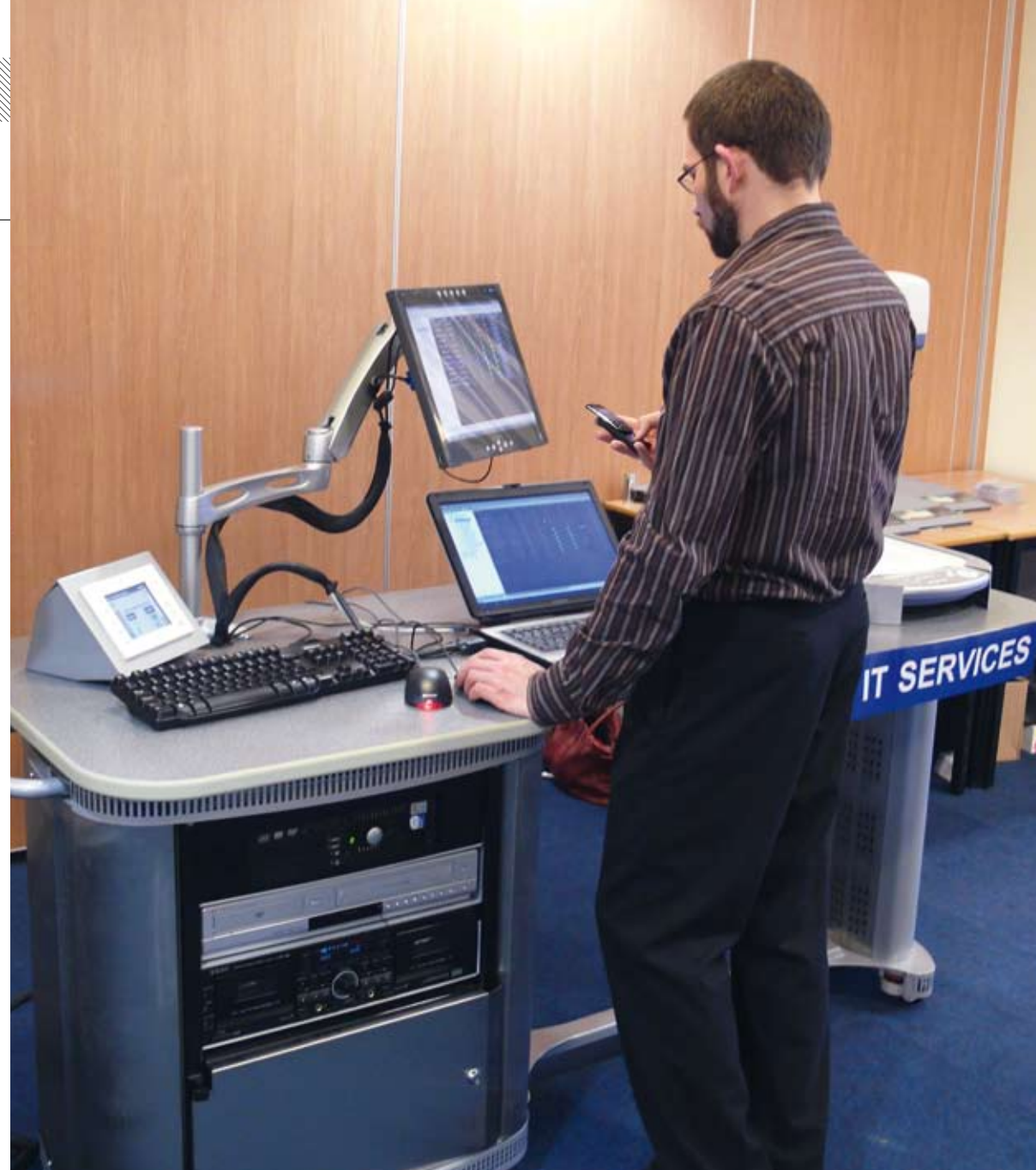
'At the start of the 2006-2007 academic year, there were a lot of problems with the a-v and that created a sense of crisis. We were either going to address that incrementally or in a radical way, and I'm pleased it was decided to take the radical route. There was a genuine feeling that by going for a big bang, by doing all 85 rooms at once, we would get economies of scale, not only in the procurement, but in the roll out with academics.'

Supporting the users

In any change process, that link to the user is vital. In the City University situation, where more than 1,000 full-time and part-time lecturers use the rooms and the equipment, making sure they were trained, encouraged to use the systems and had access to support was essential.

'I wanted to fund a proposal called the classroom experience initiative,' says Holtham. 'I argued that we should spend 10 per cent of the budget on training and development.'

That initiative, CEI, is now in place and includes a mix of online materials and information, a credit



One of the TeamMate units on display when City University set up an internal launch of its learning technology

THE EQUIPMENT

It was possible to carry out the project in the time frame available largely because the a-v systems were pre-built into TeamMate modules. According to the room size, each module was kitted out differently, but they were all pre-loaded with 8in Crestron touch panels and control processors, Smart Sympodium LCD tablet and Elmo P30 visualisers. Other inputs included Samsung combo DVD/VDR units, Toshiba DVD recorders, Tunks Wallview PTZ camera systems and Teach twin audio cassette players.

Switching was via a mix of Extron IN1508 switcher/scalers and Extron DAs; True Colours MultiView UTx transmitter/receivers; Kramer FC10 transcoders and Kramer VP727 seamless switchers.

Audio reinforcement is via Denon surround sound receivers, Leisuretech speakers, amps and mixers; Tannoy and Yamaha speakers; Shure gooseneck mics; Sennheiser RF mics and Ampetronic induction loop amplifiers.

KEY FACTS

London's City University has spent £1.2m equipping 85 teaching spaces on its Northampton Square campus with a-v systems.

The equipment installed by Reflex and TeamMate includes 20 TeamMate Trainers, 63 Tutors for medium and large rooms and two Podium's for the lecture theatres. More than 1,000 lecturers use the systems, which are linked to the university centralised IT and a-v facilities by Crestron RoomView.

- * www.city.ac.uk
- * www.reflex.co.uk
- * www.teammate.co.uk



Clive Holtham: 'I said we should spend 10 per cent of the budget on training and development'



Malcolm Gillies: 'This is one of the largest instant roll-outs of a-v equipment in HE history'

card-sized helpline call and 'basics' reminder, and clear and informative information posted on the equipment kits. There's also a helpful, single-page a-v 'survival guide' for full-time and visiting lecturers, which tells them everything they need to know. CEI also has a sales dimension, reminding lecturers that the university's technology investment underpins seven basic priorities for good practice in undergraduate education – such as encouraging student/faculty contact, developing co-operation, using active learning, providing feedback, communicating high expectations and respecting diverse talents and ways of learning.

Supply and project management

The main external suppliers to the project, Reflex and TeamMate, were involved in the initiative from an early stage. TeamMate helped the university conduct an a-v communication audit and proposed a system based on TeamMate units, which were fitted with similar components to provide a common delivery platform. The manufacturer also put in a pilot unit to get feedback from academic



As part of its CEI (Classroom Experience Initiative), City University produced a survival guide for lecturers that tells them how to use the equipment and get more information

users and, eventually, carried out the manufacture, systems design, programming and factory integration of the 85 units which were delivered. This included 20 TeamMate Trainers, 63 Tutors for medium and large rooms and two Podiums for the main Oliver Thompson and Great Hall lecture theatres.

Reflex, meanwhile, had been awarded the a-v contract and it was responsible for on-site installation and project management. Reflex was also responsible for the programming work and had to ensure the units all interfaced with the central control and resource management system. This had to be implemented in just three months and at a time when the university's facilities were in use for summer schools and conferences.

'The big lesson for us was the importance of project management,' says Reflex MD Roland Dreesden. 'You can't skimp on it and as a result of this experience, we are expanding that function in our own business.'

Reflex senior account manager Yag Depala says 'We have had a lot of positive comments from the lecturers. They have really embraced the new technology.'

The suppliers, however, didn't do all the work. The university's a-v and IT services department were heavily involved in scheduling and making sure that the wiring structure was in place. Now it's up and running, they are taking it forward, manning help lines, monitoring the system's performance and intervening – via RoomView – when a lecturer has a problem. 'Phase one', they admit, 'was getting the installation done. Now we are updating software and watching which buttons they press'. ■