Videoconferencing

Enhancing learning and teaching with technology
What is videoconferencing?

Videoconferencing allows individuals or groups in different locations to see and hear each other. Participants in a video call may also be able to show videos or presentation slides or share their computer screens with each other to work together on documents.

There is a wide range of equipment available within the University that you can use for videoconferencing:

There are three sophisticated ‘Access Grid Nodes’ (AGNs) installed in dedicated facilities within the university. These allow groups of people to link up with other AGN installations in universities and research institutions across the world.

Portable systems are also available which connect to television screens and are ideal for individuals or small groups. These are relatively lightweight and can be moved to different locations across the campus. They can connect to similar systems, widely found in businesses, universities and colleges.

Desktop videoconferencing allows individuals to connect to others using low-cost webcams and audio headsets attached to their home or office PC together with freely downloaded software. This is most appropriate for meetings with colleagues or students wherever in the world they are located.
Why use videoconferencing?

Applications for videoconferencing include:

- Interviews with candidates for student places
- Supervision meetings for Masters or Doctoral students
- Guest lectures from external speakers who are unable to come to the campus
- Supporting group work or discussion between students at different institutions
- Meetings with placement students who are working away from the campus
- Encouraging students to support each other independently
- Building a community of learners and reducing isolation, especially for part-time or work-based students

You might wish to consider using videoconferencing in situations where the time and cost of travel is impractical, but there is a need for richer and more personal communication than can be achieved by telephone or email.
Dr Jason Abbott
Political, International and Policy Studies, Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences

The module ‘International Relations and Political Economy of the Asia Pacific’ aims to give students a broad understanding of the real-world political situation in this important region.

Jason designed the module to include an opportunity for students to engage in relevant campaigning on issues of their choice related to the region using social networking tools.

He invited Johnny Chatterton from The Burma Campaign to talk to students about his experiences of online campaigning. As Johnny was not able to come to Surrey in person, he instead linked up via a videoconference from his office. He was able to outline some of the campaigning work that he has undertaken, and also answer students’ questions about their campaign projects.

Jason says:

“Johnny Chatterton is well known in the campaigning world for his online activism for Burma and other causes and he is regularly featured in the national media. Allowing our students to work with such an authentic campaigner gave this module a realism not possible in the classroom alone.”

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Like many courses across the University, the student cohort for these Masters and Doctoral programmes in 2007 has a distinctly international flavour. Vasso supervises students who live in Israel, Lebanon and Switzerland and travel to the university campus for formal meetings only about once a year.

Vasso holds regular research supervision meetings with these students to discuss progress and plan new work. They have all equipped their computers with webcams for video and a headset for clear audio – both readily available in high street shops. They use Skype, a freely available download videoconferencing tool to make the calls.

Vasso says:

“I’m used to talking to our international students over the phone, but this really adds a new dimension to the conversation. I often receive work and send feedback via email, but always hold regular audiol/visual sessions to discuss the feedback. Being able to see emotions and gestures makes the conversation easier and richer, and we also have more fun as a result, as it is not that dissimilar to a face-to-face supervision or tutorial.”
Points to consider

While videoconferencing is straightforward in concept the range of equipment and software means that forward planning is required to ensure a successful session.

You might like to consider the following issues when deciding what equipment to use and where:

- **Availability of equipment** – ensure that the systems used at both (or all) sides of the call will be compatible.
- **The format of your videoconference** – a presentation with questions at the end can work well while a group debate needs to be more carefully managed to ensure that everyone can hear and be heard.
- **The number of participants** – small groups are easier to manage than large ones, especially if you are hoping for a very interactive session.
- **The location** – AGN conferences are installed in dedicated rooms, other equipment can be portable but still requires a quiet space free from interruptions.
- **The support available** – technical support may be required to help set up your call and to resolve any technical problems that occur.
How to get started

We can provide advice about the systems around the university and their suitability for different teaching and learning activities. Together with colleagues in IT Services and SCEPtRE, we can then offer more detailed advice on booking, setting up and using these different systems.

If you wish to discuss using video-conferencing in your teaching, please contact the E-Learning team.

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