



the speed challenge

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Distribution with class

Serving Britain's largest university can be a learning experience in itself, especially considering the distribution challenges encountered by a university with a quarter of a million active students in nearly as many locations.

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST ESTABLISHED distance learning institutions. Since 1969, more than 2 million students in the UK and throughout Europe have received degrees or professional diplomas while studying at home using university-supplied books and materials. To be successful, the university's distribution sites must deliver the materials to students before the start of each course. This requires sophisticated management tools that include a warehouse management system (WMS). However, that was one area where The Open University was not achieving high marks.

"Our old warehouse management system was no longer being supported," explains Doug McNamee, manager of the Wellingborough distribution site north of London, one of two the university operates. "It was very weak in warehousing and control. We also needed a more open system that we could integrate with our corporate systems."

To replace his aging software, McNamee and his team chose the Epicor Enterprise solution that provides warehouse management, forecasting and planning, financial management tools and a manufacturing module that supports kitting operations.

"It also gives us real-time visibility of our stock and activities, which was not the case before," adds McNamee. Academic administrators in the university's nine study areas can now look at course materials in inventory, which helps them in planning the material components of their curricula.

While most of the courses are offered once a year, The Open University is moving to a more variable program where many courses are offered multiple times during the year.

"We wanted software that would also be flexible enough to deal with our changing environment," notes McNamee. "The Epicor system provides that flexibility."

Inside The Open University

More than two-thirds of the items distributed from The Open University consists of course materials. The rest is mostly lab and technical equipment that students use for conducting experiments at home or at residential summer schools. This equipment must be returned after use, which requires a returns processing area in the DC that inspects, cleans and makes repairs. The new WMS and the newfound ability to bar code items have sped up the returns process and made it easier to track individual items.

The kitting operation at Wellingborough brings together printed items, audio and video materials, software and lab equipment needed for particular courses. Student enrollment dictates the number of kits produced, with about 75% prepared early and placed into storage to even out workflow. The visibility and bar-code capabilities of the WMS make the kitting more efficient and provide desired flexibility.

The new Epicor software suite, only in operation since August, has already shown impressive results. Labor has been reduced by two positions, with more savings expected as corporate systems are fully integrated. Supervisors now have real-time visibility into workers' activities, which helps to better manage workflow. Inventory tracking has improved and flexibility has been created.

"We believe the Epicor suite was the right system for us," says McNamee. "We still have much to do to integrate all of our corporate systems, but it is supporting our core operation well."

He adds that he now has the information he needs to make good decisions. That will undoubtedly move The Open University's distribution to the head of the class.

—By David Maloney, Special Projects Editor

For more information on Epicor Enterprise solutions, call 800-997-7528 or visit distribution.epicor.com.



A new enterprise software system at The Open University in Great Britain has provided complete visibility into the educational materials in its inventory.

To watch a three-minute video of operations at The Open University, go to www.dcvelocity.com and click on The SPEED Challenge.