Oakham

Having first welcomed Oakham School to a Planet eStream demonstration on our BETT Stand in 2011, we were delighted to be given the opportunity to implement our product at the school in the summer of 2011. The system was rolled out to teaching staff soon after installation and we recently caught up with Carl Wood, Assistant Network Manager to see how things were progressing…

1. Can you provide a brief background on your organisation?

Oakham is a boarding and day school for boys and girls aged 10 to 18, offering a choice of IB or A-levels in the sixth form.   Friendly and unpretentious, Oakham achieves impressive academic results at A Level and GCSE; we are one of the UK's Top Ten IB schools. Our strength lies in challenging every individual to exceed his or her expectations through encouragement, pastoral support and a diversity of opportunity. Our Learning Habits at Oakham initiative develops lifelong learning skills and underpins all our teaching. Founded by Archdeacon Johnson in 1584 Oakham now has some 1,050 pupils.

We adopted the Planet eStream system in the summer of 2011. Using the features made available within Planet eStream we rebranded our system from Planet eStream to OakhamTV, giving it a clear identity to both staff and pupils.

2. What is your/your department's role within your organisation? The role of the information systems

The Information Systems department is responsible for the development and maintenance of Oakham School's computing, network, data systems, websites, audio visual and reprographics facilities. Initially during the early stages both content management and creation was undertaken by myself, acting on all requests for TV recording, or VHS conversion etc. Two years on, 99% of the front end content management of eStream is carried out directly by staff and students. The 1% of administrative back end support is undertaken by myself. The system, from an admin point of view, looks after itself most of the time; when changes need to be made, they are quick and simple.

3. How did you manage your media prior to purchasing Planet eStream and can you provide a brief background on how and when the original concept for the need for a digital media streaming, archiving and off-air recording solution arose?

As a school we had a vast collection of VHS media that was being used in lessons, through VHS players. This scenario presents many problems. Firstly, only one class can use the media at any one time, and the chance of loss and returning the media on time for the next person's use was a recurring issue. Also, the tapes were getting very old and some very good content was being lost due to breaks, degrading quality and physical loss, along with VHS machines becoming obsolete.

To solve this problem, we initially set up an internal Windows media streaming server, and a Media Centre recording system with a web-based user interface. This allowed content to be streamed internally and also staff to record a select few TV channels. This was not a viable long term solution, only system administrators could manage it, the conversion process was slow and time consuming, and transferring content between the two separate systems was a challenge.

This is when we started looking for a streaming product that could catalogue, store and stream media in a simple and manageable fashion. We adopted a system called ClickView, which we used for two years. However, we wanted a system that was capable of not only viewing but also easy managing of content by staff and pupils alike and it became apparent ClickView was no longer a viable long-term solution for us. We also faced the problem that staff had irretrievably lost confidence in the product. We started to look for a new system and discovered Planet eStream at the Bett show. We also came to the conclusion that losing the ClickView subscription content had ceased to be an issue. The Australian Classroom videos and Discovery videos were not used by many staff and we had a collection of our own content that was extensively used, so the new features outweighed the loss of a few videos. Another frustration that occurred was that DRM that could not be removed was applied to some of our videos. We simply re-uploaded these into eStream at a later date from the original source.

Since summer 2011 we have had a system, from Planet eStream, that is fully flexible, tailored to our needs, and that our teaching staff have confidence in.

4. Please can you explain how Planet eStream is used to support both students and staff within your organisation?

One of the main uses for eStream is to provide supporting audio visual material for lessons. Many staff across all departments using the system to show TV recordings, or VHS uploads of material relating to the current topic. The Social Science department, as an example, takes great advantage of the easy to use TV scheduler to record and use current affairs TV and radio programmes.

Staff also use Oakham TV as a tool to enhance homework. Pupils can, from the comfort of their homes or boarding house, access any of the resources available to staff in lessons. This is an invaluable recap tool. Another great use of eStream material is the embedding of content to VLE courses, again enhancing the resources available to a course or subject. This allows for all content to be available within a click. Sport is a massive part of what we do here at Oakham and eStream is heavily integrated into the teaching programme. Most matches are recorded, allowing staff, pupils and also parents to watch and analyse matches from school and home.

We run a course called 'Digital Creator'. The pupils on this course use eStream to share and collaborate on projects, allowing for peer based reviewing, but also central work storage.
We recently opened a new lecture theatre and have taken advantage of eStream's Lecture Capture facility. Staff can now stream all presentations live over the internet, whilst recording for the archive.
Finally, another aspect of eStream utilised by the school Foundation is the ability to archive material in a restricted and secure environment. Planet eStream allows for some material to be managed separately to other school resources with access to only approved individuals.

5. What are the key benefits that you have experienced since implementation?

One of the areas where eStream excels is customer service. We have on many occasions requested features to be added, or bugs to be fixed, and most of the time we had a fix either same day or week. Other larger requests are added in the next major releases. This responsiveness is a breath of fresh air compared to previous experiences. They are truly innovative and their product has and is, always developing. With the recent addition of digital signage (another product we were looking to source) we now have everything we need in one place.

6. Can you explain how the adoption of Planet eStream has evolved since roll out?

We now have a system which had over 9000 video views last academic year. Our staff have added (without aid from an administrator or a dedicated video manager) 1200 of their own videos from VHS or the Freeview recording scheduler, making a total of 3000 videos. All the Planet eStream content is owned by us and managed without the threat of a subscription renewal. We have pupils in IT managing content for their own projects and well over 80 staff as system 'contributors'.

The other area Planet eStream has triumphed is the Freeview recording system. We originally purchased the 6Tb Freeview box, which allowed us to record 32 Channels, 24 hours a day, and keep them for 8 days. To further improve this we increased storage to 12Tb and now record an astonishing 17 days, with room still spare.

7. What features of Planet eStream have you found most useful for your applications?

It was imperative both for staff to have control over content without the need for a dedicated video manager, and for the product to be available online. We operate a school with a worldwide community of pupils, parents and staff. Planet eStream allows our pupils to use the system, any time of day and from anywhere as if they were sitting at school. In order to comply with the ERA+ guidelines, eStream has built in a very simple way of automatically limiting viewing to the UK for any TV recordings, but still allowing video with permitting licenses to be viewed worldwide.

The functionality and flexibility of the Freeview recording system is by far the best I have seen. Staff manage the recording and scheduling of content, from both PC and mobile devices, simply and easily with only a few minutes of user training.

The ability to customise the meta fields to meet our needs directly is extremely useful. We have been able to mould our stored information to work in a way that is best for us, allowing simple but effective searching. We have also included a tick-field that enables us to restrict viewing permission according to form group; an extremely simple way of restricting age sensitive material.

Another nice feature is the ability to capture both the computer screen and a live camera feed in the lecture capture facility, which is then displayed as a side by side, dual display under one video, making the camera and sound follow the screen perfectly.

8. Please explain how our most recently implemented features will assist you? i.e. subtitles, streaming to mobile devices and digital signage functionality. Please also include detail on what further ongoing development you would like to see at some stage.

We are currently setting up 4 digital signage displays, using existing equipment. This has allowed us quickly to create, and at no extra cost, a Planet eSign system. We hope to expand the system in due course, but have been very impressed by how easy signage displays are to setup and manage. This again is something staff will be able to manage independently from an administrator.

The ability to watch, schedule TV recordings and add new media through a mobile device is a testament to how Planet eStream keep their system at the forefront, always innovating and adding new features in line with modern media use. We are moving ever more towards using personal mobile devices and Planet eStream allows this to be implemented with ease, in a simple, convenient manner.

9. Finally, please comment on your experience overall of both the product and your dealings with Planet PC?

Although leaving our previous system and moving content was a slow and at times frustrating process, the final product is worth every effort. The support from eStream staff and developers was, and continues to be, fantastic. I would and have recommended this product to other schools.