Using Portfolios to Engage Faculty & Students at Universidad de las Américas

The Challenge
Having established a strong assessment culture and processes to support WSCUC accreditation, the university saw an opportunity to advance its strategic vision of creating a model of academic quality for Ecuador and the region. UDLA wanted to expand its learning outcomes assessment efforts to drive continuous improvements and bolster faculty and student engagement in the process.

The Office of Institutional Effectiveness (OIE) developed an initiative to leverage existing assessment processes that were working well, but which required intensive administrative effort and time that faculty did not always have. At the same time, the OIE wanted to expand faculty professional development activities and showcase student capstone projects — a hallmark of the UDLA experience. UDLA recognized the need to adopt new technology to support its vision and began searching for assessment management systems with the following characteristics:

- Modern platform with user-friendly tools to engage students and faculty in rich learning experiences
- Flexibility to deliver an engaging user experience while capturing course-embedded assessment data
- Reliable reporting on assessment data to track student performance and program effectiveness

The Solution
The OIE decided to implement Via by Watermark through a phased approach. Initially, they utilized the platform to conduct course-level assessment; the following semester, they added customizable portfolios to their assessment activities. The portfolios were designed to support UDLA’s vision for world-class teaching and learning centered on meaningful self-reflection, hands-on experiences, and rich capstone projects.

Learning Outcomes Assessment
To conduct learning outcomes assessment, the OIE leveraged Via by Watermark’s streamlined tools for evaluating authentic, course-based student learning. Features such as rubrics and robust reports provided valuable insight into how students were performing against specific outcomes.

Faculty & Student Portfolios
The OIE first implemented Via by Watermark’s portfolio tools among its teaching staff as part of the institution’s faculty development initiative. The resulting “teaching portfolios” served as self-reflection projects to support their professional growth while enabling them to develop skills to help their students create their own portfolios. Following successful completion of the faculty pilot, the OIE implemented portfolios for the student population.

Universidad de las Américas
Founded in 1995, the Universidad de las Américas (UDLA) is the largest private university in Ecuador, offering 36 undergraduate and 14 graduate programs to more than 15,000 students. In March 2016, UDLA became the first higher education institution in Ecuador to achieve accreditation by the U.S. regional accrediting agency, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC). This accomplishment reinforced UDLA’s position as the premier international university in the country and affirmed its commitment to continuous improvement in teaching and learning.
Looking Ahead
UDLA continues to evolve its culture of assessment to improve teaching and learning in every corner of campus. As part of this evolution, the OIE is expanding its use of Via by Watermark in capstone courses and customizing portfolios to assess co-curricular and service learning initiatives. UDLA is also planning to implement portfolios as a cornerstone of student internships and undergraduate research initiatives, to capture key milestones and promote integrative learning experiences on and off campus.

The Win
Adopting Via by Watermark enabled the OIE to support multiple strategic initiatives by systematically collecting and using data from academic assessment, faculty reflections, and student learning experiences to generate meaningful insights.

Using Better Data to Improve Learning
Applying a more intentional approach to assessment throughout the institution gave the OIE a consistent framework for tracking student performance, gauging program effectiveness, and documenting evidence over time. Built-in reporting and project dashboards enabled the OIE to drill into key demographics for a clearer view of student performance — further supporting UDLA’s ongoing improvement efforts andWSCUC-related accreditation activities.

Supporting Faculty
The OIE’s implementation of teaching portfolios was a very successful component of UDLA’s faculty development initiative. By creating their own portfolios, 50 faculty members from across the disciplines used Via by Watermark to showcase their accomplishments and professional goals in their own voice and style.

Putting faculty squarely in the driver’s seat encouraged deeper engagement and personal reflection. At an awards ceremony celebrating completion of the pilot program, several faculty members cited the experience as a highlight of their professional careers.

Engaging Students
In just the first semester of implementation, students created nearly 4,000 “mini” portfolios as part of the General Education core courses designed to help students develop their written communication, public speaking, and presentation skills. Additionally, graduating students built more than 400 professional portfolios to document their learning experiences and share their accomplishments with faculty, peers, family, and potential employers.

The portfolio gives us the opportunity to express who we are, what we know, and what we want to do at the end of college life, which seemed to me to be useful and fun.”

Ena Lucia Arteaga
Student, Agroindustrial Engineering

About us
Watermark’s mission is to put better data into the hands of administrators, educators, and learners everywhere in order to empower them to connect information and gain insights into learning that will drive meaningful improvements. Through its innovative educational intelligence platform, Watermark supports institutions in developing an intentional approach to learning and development based on data they can trust. For more information, visit www.watermarkinsights.com.