

The Open University

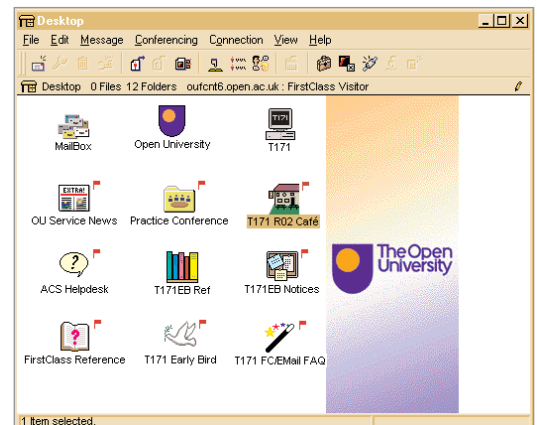
The FirstClass® online learning community takes the distance out of distance learning for students at The Open University

Distance Learning

The Open University offers distance learning, including undergraduate and postgraduate courses, to around 200,000 part-time students. Learning and Teaching Solutions (LTS) is responsible for the production and distribution of all Open University course materials and services. Part of their remit is the administration of the FirstClass system which they began using in 1994 and have since developed into one of the largest and most successful online learning communities in the world. FirstClass is popular with the students because of its fast learning curve combined with good remote connectivity and with the administrators due to its powerful management tools and rock solid reliability.

The FirstClass Desktop

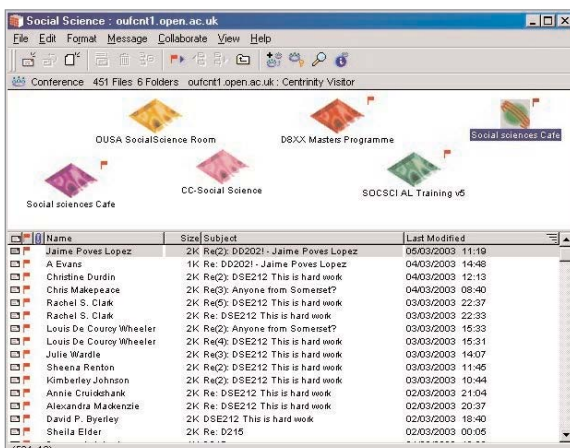
The excellent remote access capabilities of FirstClass mean that every Open University student can login to their complete online learning environment from anywhere at anytime. Once logged in, students are presented with their own FirstClass desktop containing information that is relevant to the courses they are taking. Whether the student logs in via web browser or FirstClass Client, they will have access to the same information and functionality. The flexible remote access capabilities of FirstClass are particularly useful for The Open University because its students are spread all over the country and the world and they need to fit their studies around their other commitments. For these students, FirstClass helps take the distance out of distance learning. The example shows a screenshot of a typical Open University student's desktop.



The Open University's customised FirstClass desktop

The FirstClass online learning environment is characterised by the use of collaborative conferences. Each course has its own set of conferences which are accessible to the students partaking in that particular course. These conferences can be used as:

- discussion forums in which threaded discussions relating to the course can take place between students and tutors
- information sharing areas into which documents and resources can be uploaded by tutors and made available to all students on the course
- announcement areas to which course announcements can be posted
- course-support areas in which students can post questions to their tutors

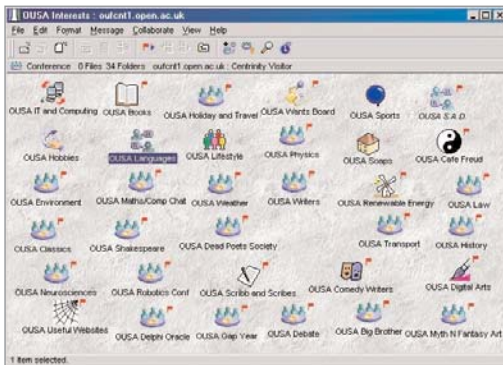


Social Sciences Conference

Collaborative conferences facilitate student-student and tutor-student communication, group collaboration, information exchange, resource sharing and information management and are used by The Open University to enhance and support the distance learning experience. The conference permissions structure in FirstClass means that students will only have access to the conferences that are relevant to their particular course. For example, students partaking in a Business Degree Course would have access to the conferences applicable to that particular course, e.g. Personnel Management, Introduction to Marketing, Financial Management, Economics, etc. The Technology Foundation Course (T171 - 'You, Your Computer and the Net') is now taught entirely online, with FirstClass conferencing as an integral component of the course.

All work and no play makes.....

Many non-academic conferences have also been set up on The Open University's FirstClass system to cater for students' social needs, e.g. there are music, sailing, sporting, gardening, drama, photography, and many more conferences available to students. Below is a screenshot of the Interests conference run by The Open University Students' Association, containing hundreds of busy and lively conferences on a vast range of subjects.



The Open University Students' Association Interests Conference

The online collaboration in FirstClass provides an excellent means for tutors to make information and resources available to students in a structured and user-friendly environment. As Geoff Aldridge, FirstClass Administrator at The Open University explained, "It helps students academically by enabling them to discuss their course material, have queries answered and deepen their understanding through meeting other perspectives and it can provide vital mutual support and a feeling of community through social conferences". The email, calendaring and one-to-one and group chat facilities in FirstClass further facilitate this online collaborative learning environment.

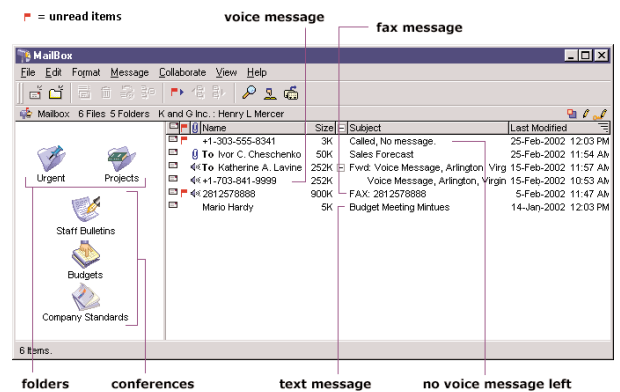
Scalability of FirstClass

FirstClass is currently used in over 425 courses, with more than 16,000 conferences in operation, managed by approximately 500 conference moderators. On average, over 16,000 connections are made per day by more than 8,000 different users. In addition, 20,000 mail messages are sent and more than 150,000 conference messages are read every day. An increasing number of courses integrate online tutorials via FirstClass whereby students and tutors work together in teams. As can be seen from the table below, the number of FirstClass users at The Open University has increased significantly since 1994.

	Scale of Use									
Year	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Users	1,200	2,500	15,000	24,000	35,000	56,000	105,000	160,000	180,000	200,415

FirstClass Unified Communications

Today The Open University is licensed and equipped to expand to 400,000 FirstClass users. They have recently commenced a trial of FirstClass Unified Communications for their staff members which enables staff to receive all of their email, voicemail and faxes into one unified mailbox. Staff can access and respond to these messages from the device of their choice - PC, PDA, phone, laptop - from anywhere at anytime. The new FirstClass Unified Communications add-on provides staff with complete flexibility in accessing, responding and handling all information and incoming messages.



FirstClass UC Mailbox (Client view) featuring Messages, Folders and Conferences (collaborative workspaces)

About FirstClass

FirstClass is a cost effective, feature-rich communications and collaboration solution that works across multiple operating systems. Using FirstClass, it is possible to create a secure and customisable online learning environment that includes a mailbox, shared workspaces, threaded-discussion areas, newsgroups, resource-sharing areas, instant messaging, individual and shared calendars, address books, documents and directories. FirstClass is a suitable forum for teaching staff, students, alumni and administrators to share information and resources. It also provides web publishing and file storage capabilities.

FirstClass Unified Communications is an add-on module to FirstClass collaborative software and combines email, voicemail and faxes into one unified mailbox. Messages and information can be securely accessed via the device of choice including mobile, telephone, computer or handheld from any location, at any time.

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