

A Customer Success Story

# LifeSize® Results

LifeSize Video Collaboration Technology  
 Brings New Subjects and Languages to  
 Rural Schools in Ireland

LifeSize solutions enable schools to offer a broader range of subjects

## Organization

County Offaly VEC (Vocational Education Committee) is the local education authority for Offaly County in the country of Ireland. Located in the Irish Midlands, one hour from Dublin, it is responsible for five secondary schools and is the largest provider of adult education in the county.



CEO of Co Offaly VEC Edward McEvoy and the CEO of NIS Gerry Buckley

### Challenge

 The challenge for County Offaly VEC was enabling students in rural areas to have access to important additional subjects and cross-border cultural interactions.

### Solution

 After looking at a number of competitors VEC introduced LifeSize® Team 220™ HD video conferencing units with twin cameras into every school in the county.

### Results

 Students are now studying applied maths twice a week, a course vital to their future studies, and schools are having regular face-to-face contact with schools in the U.S. and Germany.

## Challenge



Offaly VEC has five secondary schools and four Adult Education Centres spread across a large geographical area. The distant location and small size of the rural schools gives rise to challenges when it comes to the provision and breadth of curricular choices. For example, in Ireland it is a recognised advantage if secondary school students who are seeking physics and computing degrees at university take 'Applied Mathematics' in their senior year. Though the subject, a mix of physics and advanced mathematics, is not part of the core curriculum, it does put students at a distinct advantage if it is their chosen academic path in college. Unfortunately, the subject only interests a small number of students so many schools cannot afford to provide such classes.

"We saw these challenges as a great opportunity", explained Edward McEvoy, CEO at Offaly VEC. "There was an excellent case for certain subjects, such as applied maths, but we didn't have resources to provide them to just a small number of students. We knew if we could address this specific need it could be hugely beneficial to students in their last crucial year before university."

One final hurdle the school faced was connectivity. Many of Offaly VEC's schools had trouble accessing high-speed Internet due to their geographical



Minister for Education and Skills Mr Ruairi Quinn, CEO of Offaly VEC Mr Edward McEvoy and Senator John Whelan

location. Fortunately, County Offaly was one of the earliest recipients of the Irish Government's National Broadband scheme, which aims to deliver 100MB broadband to all secondary schools. Now that the school system was equipped with high-speed Internet connections, they just needed a technology solution to bring specialised teachers into the classroom.

**"Suddenly we can offer our students a much wider variety of subjects which will give them a vital advantage before heading off to university."**

- Edward McEvoy, CEO at Offaly VEC

## Solution



Six months ago, Offaly VEC introduced LifeSize Team 220 HD video conferencing units with twin cameras into every school in the county. A unit was also installed which is shared between the Administrative Head Office and the Tullamore Adult and Further Education Centre. The project, called ConnectEd, was launched at Tullamore College by the Irish Minister for Education and Skills Mr. Ruairi Quinn.

ConnectEd incorporates two initiatives. The first strand, 'Beyond the Walls,' takes advantage of the fact that specialised subjects became economically viable when taught via video. A specialist teacher in one school can broadcast a lesson, such as Applied Mathematics, to five other schools in real time. This means that students can still ask questions and interact like they would in a normal classroom.

"Suddenly we can offer our students a much wider variety of subjects which will give them a vital advantage before heading off to university," said McEvoy.

"It is a major boost to rural schools who previously could only offer a limited choice of course options. This is particularly important in the science area where students would often only have the choice of doing one science option at senior level."

The second initiative, 'Across the Globe,' links LifeSize HD video conferencing systems in local schools with partner locations across the world.

For example, Árdcoil Chiaráin Naofa in Clara, Co. Offaly linked up with Ware County High School in Georgia through the VEC's relationship with Georgia Tech University.

One of the first joint science projects between the schools was based on local geography. Offaly is in a bog area while its partner in Georgia, more than 6,000 kilometers away, was based in a swamp area. The students presented their research on the ecologies

of their local areas over LifeSize collaboration technology.

"The aim was to compare and contrast the differences between the two areas, but interestingly they found that the ecologies of the bog and the swamp were actually very similar," added McEvoy. "The one major difference was that there were no predators living in the Offaly bog, whereas alligators lurked in the Georgia swamp."

"We are committed to encouraging a love of science, and this platform offers the students an incredible way to engage with subjects and with other students from different countries and different cultures."

The video conferencing solutions were initially set up with the help of significant sponsorship from benefactors including LifeSize and Network & Infrastructure Support Limited (NIS Ltd). NIS worked with County Offaly VEC, helping support its IT implementation.

"We'd done trials with a number of different video conferencing options, but LifeSize was the clear favourite. It also came in at a reasonable price point, as well," explained Gerry Buckley, CEO of NIS Ltd.

"We've had excellent interaction with LifeSize throughout the process, which I believe has been the key to the project's success."



## Results



Students that previously had no access to applied mathematics are now studying it twice a week. Additionally, classes in rural Ireland are having regular face-to-face interaction with a school in the United States. The school's faculty couldn't be happier with the technology and the advantages it has afforded the students.

One Offaly school, Tullamore College, has also teamed up with a partner school Georgius Agricola Gymnasium Chemnitz in Germany, with students having regular face-to-face contact with their German counterparts, enabling both sets of students to practise their foreign language skills. This program has really taken off, with a visit from staff from Chemnitz to Tullamore College. The two schools have arranged an exchange of students next year.

"Everybody was so excited about the project, but to make it a reality and encourage involvement from staff, it needed to work without glitches," said McEvoy.

"Thanks to the quality of equipment from LifeSize and the help from NIS we have had no issues whatsoever. Students and staff are absolutely delighted with it."

Access to university in Ireland is done through a points system. For students with a talent for science and math, Offaly's ability to offer Applied Mathematics will enable them to gain more points. This will be crucial in helping them to get in their course of choice at university.

While the steps they have already taken are significant, Offaly is only at the beginning of its video journey. There are big plans for the future. The next science project between Georgia and Offaly will see the children design telepresence robots that the other class will be able to operate remotely.



Applied Maths Class being taught by Ms Camille King

There is also a much larger expansion of the network planned, with more partnership schools in Germany and France. The hope is that the video conferencing systems will get used even more often, for instance, adult students being able to take Third Level courses on an outreach basis. There is also the ability to record classes, which means that even if students miss a class they can catch up.

Additionally, there is a plan to increase the number of specialised subjects that are available in rural areas and the schools will be holding extra tutoring classes before exams, through the video conferencing system.

There can be many motives for introducing new technology but for Edward McEvoy and Offaly VEC it is clear that providing the very best educational facilities to students is the only one that matters.

"For us, it is about opportunities. The ConnectEd Video Conferencing Project offers huge opportunities for our schools, our students and our teachers," he concluded. "I am deeply committed to the promotion of science and languages, and video conferencing has given us a great tool to stimulate an interest in these subjects and give students a fuller, more rounded education."



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