Oldham College: on-line initial assessment

Supported by:

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1. Organisation

The Oldham College is a medium-sized further education (FE) college, situated close to the town centre. The College serves the borough of Oldham, which has a population of around 220,000 and also attracts students from the surrounding boroughs of Greater Manchester. Whilst most provision is delivered from the College's main campus, courses are also delivered through a number of community (LINK) learning centres, situated in the most deprived wards in Oldham providing basic skills and IT courses to people aged over 19.

2. Overview

The Learning Resources department within The Oldham College aims to provide learning which is designed to remove the barriers of time and place and to give the individual learner the freedom to select or negotiate the Curriculum. The mission of the Learning Resources Unit is 'to provide resources, support and a learning environment which enables learners to maximise their achievements'.

One contribution towards the realisation of this vision has been the development of an on-line assessment tool that screens learners in the areas of literacy, numeracy, dyslexia and learning styles. The assessments run within the College's virtual learning environment (VLE) and the results are linked to the College's MIS system (EasyOCIS) to allow access for all College staff. The outcome is to produce an individual learning plan for every learner relating to the skills for life curriculum. These results are linked to bite-sized chunks of learning electronically available for access in the classroom, learning resource centres and externally via the Internet.

3. Details

Approach

The assessment tool had to ensure that the questions and results feedback were pedagogically sound and fitted exactly the requirements of the basic skills core curriculum. This meant close collaboration with the College's skills for life unit and the team responsible for assessing and meeting the additional support needs of our learners.

The outcomes had to be presented in a format that was accessible and easy to understand for both academic staff and their learners. One of the project's objectives was for learners to understand fully the initial screening process and the reasons why they were completing the assessments. From a technical standpoint the electronic questions had to be SCORM standards compliant. Initially copies

of old exam papers were used as the source for the assessment questions. However, when the VLE was implemented there were concerns about copyright and therefore the source was changed to the DfES copyright free materials.

To be a success the results were required to be linked automatically into the College's MIS system EasyOCIS to enable the outcomes to be viewed either on an individual or class-by-class basis.

Scale

Operationally by far the biggest challenge was ensuring we met the College's target to identify quickly the additional support needs of our learners. This means that we have to screen all full-time learners and those on part-time courses of six hours a week or more during the first four weeks of their learning programme. With around 3,500 full-time equivalents students (FTEs) enrolled in the College, and the vast majority commencing their courses in September, this presents a logistical operation utilising 150 PCs across three learning resource centres from 9am to 9pm.

Impact

The biggest benefit of delivering the initial screening assessments online has been the completion of all the assessments, including the feedback, in a timely manner meeting College targets and learner needs. This was confirmed by the College's Ofsted/ALI inspection which noted 'Timely and extensive initial assessment used to accurately identify needs'.

In addition the College's at-entry student perceptions (SPOC) survey asked learners about the assessment and established that 100% of learners completed the screening and that 89% knew why they were undertaking the screening.

There was also an unexpected benefit in that it introduced learners to the College's VLE and electronic learning materials as well as highlighting the support available in the learning resource centres. This was something acknowledged during the College's successful CoLRiC (Council for Learning Resources in Colleges) accreditation where the inspectors found 'A well-devised VLE, the structure of which encourages student participation in the Library and Learning Centres'.

From the College's point of view to complete around 20,000 on-line assessments during the month of September is a major improvement on the previous situation when the initial screening was conducted using a mixture of paper-based and off-the-shelf e-learning software packages. This split meant that the co-ordination and analysis of the results was extremely problematic and very time consuming.

Now academic staff receive detailed reports of their learners' individual skill levels and have access to an individual learning plan which is linked to e-learning materials produced in-house, increasingly making use of the National Learning Network (NLN) materials which are linked to the outcomes of the initial assessments.

Costs and benefits

The main cost was that of staff time, as all the hardware and software was already in place and it has been a case of maximising the skills and resources already available. However, a great deal of effort was required from a small team and this effort will need to continue to ensure the success of the on-line screening assessments every year.

A very significant benefit has been that increased additional learning support funding was obtained from the LSC as the college was able to provide statistical evidence of need. Also, in addition to timely assessments being completed, the project has been a catalyst for further e-learning developments within the College. This has led to the development of a dedicated on-line assessment centre where learners can complete formal on-line qualifications at a time to suit themselves.

Feedback from the assessment encouraged learners to want to improve their scores and therefore their skills. Also a top-up campaign, with help from the marketing department, has encouraged 'almost there' learners to top up their skills and then take and pass the test.

It is anticipated that there will be a rise in basic skills achievements during the 2005/06 academic year given the range of additional support provided by the new e-learning materials.

4. Lessons, caveats and implications

The initial screening is probably the second most important annual event that takes place in a further education college (the first being enrolment). It has been a massive undertaking involving every single college department from caretakers, IT support staff all the way through to the governing body. Of course, this total involvement has advantages and disadvantages but the scale of impact did was greater than expected. The biggest implications were the cost in terms of staff time and stress! In hindsight implementing more pilot and testing sessions prior to full college implementation at the beginning of an academic year could have avoided some of this stress. Further advice to other colleges is:

- Senior management involvement and a clear plan, with timescales, which all involved have agreed are important.
- Given the importance to the college of these assessments, producing a full risk assessment, and alternative strategies should the technology fail, is recommended.
- Do not underestimate the size of the project and the importance of it to your organisation but at the same time relish in the challenge.
- Keep your staff fully briefed at all times especially to prevent them from being sidetracked by the e-learning non-believers or the 'we've always done it this way' brigade.
- Set yourself specific milestones which are SMART and remember that 'only performance is reality'.

ICT only seemed to be a barrier for a few older and SLDD (learning difficulty or disability) learners and these needed some extra support. Interestingly, a bigger problem was the learners with higher qualifications who did not want to take the screening tests. However, it was found that not all lecturers understand learning styles well enough to take account of the screening information in their delivery. Further staff development is planned to address this.

The most important future challenge is how to utilise the resources now available in the college to maximise the achievements of learners. This is to be realised by developing a new on-line assessment centre for 2006/07 that will further meet the needs of the individual learner. The college is also discussing with local schools the possibility of scanning learners before they start at the college in order to save time at the beginning of the year.

5. Contact details

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