

# Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College, Darlington

## Title: Using e-learning to support individualised learning

### Background

Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College (QESFC) in Darlington is a mixed sixth form college catering for approximately 1700 learners, typically aged between 16 and 19 years, a significant proportion of these attending from outside Darlington. Ranked among the top ten colleges in the UK on a results basis by the DfES, the majority of learners are studying full-time on Advanced Level courses, including A/AS-Levels and vocational A-Levels. The College also offers GCSEs and GNVQs and part-time courses that reach out into the local community.

### Challenge

One of the courses adopting the use of e-learning at QESFC is the AVCE Advanced Level in Information and Communications Technology (ICT). This course allows learners to develop skills, knowledge and understanding of ICT, enabling progression to higher education and/or employment. Assessment takes the form of continuous coursework, with some external examinations.

With this course, as with many vocational A-Levels, the learning and teaching is supported through independent work on a series of individual and group assignments. Also, second year double award learners undertake a one-week work placement. This allows learners to apply learning in a practical and realistic way, gaining confidence and developing skills that are valued by employers and universities. These factors mean that much of the learning does not take place in the traditional classroom.

Although the College had previously used an intranet-based system for their e-learning provision, only limited use was made of this by either staff or learners. The main issue identified as limiting its uptake was that the system was difficult to use - a familiar problem in many institutions. In addition, it was only accessible on-site and the College wanted to provide access to learning both on and off-site to giving increased flexibility and independence of study. If e-learning was to be effective it was crucial that both teachers and learners were confident in the chosen solution.

Tim Soron, the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) administrator at QESFC, wanted a system that allowed straightforward content uploading, preferably with a *Microsoft Windows*<sup>®</sup> style interface which the current generation of learners are familiar and comfortable. After evaluating a range of VLEs, QESFC selected *ClassFronter*, developed for the Norwegian education sector.

### What e-learning offers

Jackie Wilson, Assistant Principal, was particularly impressed by the fact that the VLE allows the established pedagogical models of learning and teaching at the College to be applied online. By enabling problem-based learning and group collaboration, rather than just serving as a content repository, it allows knowledge to be developed and shared by learners.

This product uses the analogy of buildings, corridors and classrooms, allowing the face-to-face teaching provision to be mapped easily to the online environment. Importantly, this analogy also gives autonomy to teachers within their own virtual "classroom". This meant that using their own professional judgement on pedagogical decisions was not restricted by the system.

Motivating staff and learners to use e-learning can sometimes prove difficult, especially if the system is not intuitive. This has not proved to be the case at QESFC

where staff have been encouraged and supported in making their own pedagogical decisions. Most curriculum areas have now enthusiastically embraced the VLE and uptake by learners has been high both on and off-site.

All classrooms and computer laboratories at the College are well-equipped, all with digital projectors and some interactive whiteboards. A dedicated suite of computer rooms is also available for teaching ICT and Computing. This allows e-learning to be used effectively as part of a traditional taught class, in addition to having the resources and discussion facilities available to learners off-site.

For example, in one assignment, learners were asked to critically evaluate a web-based resource and post their observations to a discussion board. This activity was initially structured as a taught session in the computer suite, but then extended outside the timetabled classes with learners contributing to the discussion over several days. The teacher then worked through the learner contributions in the next class, providing feedback and stimulating further discussion. The ability to reflect and consolidate in the intervening period, as well as continue to contribute to the discussions, led to increased participation in the classroom sessions.

### **Benefits for Learners**

E-learning has great potential for learners to learn in flexible ways outside the traditional opening hours of the College. Although access from off-site was not required, this proved popular and is particularly relevant to learners of this age group, who are not always able to attend classes.

Access to teaching notes, presentations and assignments anytime and from anywhere is seen as a valuable resource for learners, while the use of bespoke learning materials and archived discussion boards allow for reflection which aids learning.

Learners could concentrate their efforts during the taught sessions on learning, rather than on frantic note-taking, knowing that course materials would be available to download. Learners could also familiarise themselves with the subject of the next class and prepare questions in advance.

The system also fulfils a wider role in supporting extra-curricular and social activities at the College. There is a common room offering an informal discussion forum in which learners can converse in a variety of topic-led activities, bringing a social aspect to e-learning in a similar way to face-to-face learning.

Proof of the positive effect of e-learning at the college can be seen from a recent Ofsted inspection. The VLE was specifically mentioned as a positive aspect of college life by surveyed learners, and the report describes how a "significant number of staff are particularly effective" in their use of the VLE.

(<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/reports/manreports/1496.htm>)

The report also highlights the College's approach to enabling independent learning and effective activity outside of the classroom, both supported and independent. The e-learning activities described strongly support this approach.

### **Key points for effective practice**

Selecting the system which best suits the pedagogical model prevailing in the institution often achieves great success, notably in terms of staff motivation and uptake. However making the decision to embrace e-learning and to change the learning process is difficult, but, as Jackie Wilson says, "You have never invested too much to change".

Giving teaching staff the freedom to use the system in a way that complements their own teaching has also proved to be a great motivating factor. Eric Walker,

Cross College ICT Co-ordinator, believes this approach has led to much greater and more enthusiastic use being made of e-learning than if strict policies for use had been laid down.

Including a social aspect has proved popular and helped embed the VLE into the culture of the College, with corresponding impact on learning.

### **Barriers**

Fear of the unknown or new is always a possible barrier. This can best be overcome through encouragement rather than coercion. Focussing on simple practical facilities that are intuitive, easy to use and of clear practical benefit will stimulate enthusiasm and improve the motivation of both staff and learners.

### **Final word**

The impact of e-learning at QESFC has been beyond the College's expectations in its first year of use and its success has changed the way learners now view learning.

"My learning has increased exponentially and I would expect e-learning to form part of all subsequent courses I attend" comments Ian Waters, a second year learner.

### **Further details**

Jackie Wilson and her team are happy to discuss this approach with interested parties. Contact Jackie at: [jwilson@qeliz.ac.uk](mailto:jwilson@qeliz.ac.uk)

Details of ClassFronter: [www.fronter.com](http://www.fronter.com)