

CASE STUDY: REACH

DELIVERING PERSONALISED ANNOUNCEMENTS TO STUDENTS VIA RSS & SMS

SUMMARY

The Researching Emerging Administration Channels (REACH) project sought to harness emerging communication channels for administrative purposes, providing personalised announcements to students at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU). Open-source software was developed to enable announcements placed on a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to be delivered via RSS feeds and through text messaging to the student's personal mobile device. In addition the project has evaluated both student and staff attitudes to these newer forms of communication channel.

THE CHALLENGE

Prior to the REACH project, 1,200 staff at MMU primarily used the VLE to regularly interact with over 26,000 learners, making use of its announcements feature to communicate administrative information such as reminders of submission deadlines and timetable adjustments. However, when the project commenced, learners could only read these announcements by logging in to the VLE.

Before development work commenced on the project, a survey of students was carried out, highlighting a number of interesting outcomes. Importantly, the survey confirmed that there was interest amongst students in accessing administrative announcements using emergent technologies. However, regarding different types of announcements, many students placed higher value on announcements relating to sudden course changes, such as a room change and assessment information, then they do on regular course announcements, such as preparation for next week's tutorial. Regarding different modes of delivery, many students value the student email system for communicating course changes and over 50% relied on traditional word of mouth methods. Additionally only around 15% of students were aware of RSS as a technology.

Practical challenges also existed before REACH-ing students via text messaging, including the frequency with which students change their mobile number, privacy agreements and the importance of charging mechanisms that fit with institutional cost centres. Furthermore some students see their own mobile phone as their space and not want it utilised by the university.

THE SOLUTION

To meet this challenge, the approach of the REACH project was twofold; first, to research staff, student and institutional responses to emerging communicative channels, and second, to develop and trial an open-source software tool to deliver personalised text messaging and RSS feeds to students. The open source software used news and enrolment information stored within an enterprise Virtual Learning Environment (Blackboard/WebCT Vista), published personalised RSS feeds and integrated with MMU's SMS (text messaging) gateway to push urgent messages to mobile numbers. Additionally, a web-based subscription management service was developed to enable students to opt-in to the REACH service.

RESULTS AND BENEFITS

Results from the REACH project provide important knowledge about the attitudes of different stakeholders towards the use of SMS and RSS as an administration. The vast majority of **students** were happy to use their mobile phones to be contacted by the university, but they valued the privacy of their mobile phone numbers and would expect the university to ask permission before sending messages. Those that signed up for the REACH text messaging pilot service would like to see its more widespread use and would subscribe again in the future. Regarding RSS, the majority of student respondents did not use RSS, either because they were not familiar with the technology, because they were not aware of the service or because the timing was wrong.

Staff were confused by having at least two ways of sending messages to students and would prefer to have messages sent via the VLE. Issues relating to staff roles and responsibilities were also raised; some messages are sent by administrative staff, but they are not familiar with the VLE. A strategy is needed in terms of what information should be sent by text message and what is the unified interface for doing this. As with students, staff are mostly unfamiliar with RSS. If the university wants to use RSS as a channel then a significant educational campaign would be required for both staff and students.

One of the most interesting results was that the university had a number of competing solutions for sending text messages to students. At first glance, it may appear somewhat inefficient that the university is using more than one provider of text messaging software and services. However, the REACH project concluded that it is understandable for an institution to adopt different services for different purposes. The original system was designed to run as a desktop application and did not have an interface which could be called from within a program. The REACH text-messaging system needed an application programming interface (API) to embed the text-messaging facility and had to procure a solution from a different supplier. After all, mobile telephony is a commodity and it is not unusual for organisations or even individuals to use different providers for services.

The open source software developed by the REACH project has been freely released and offers potential benefits for other institutions. Indeed, it has already been trialled at Edinburgh University.

LESSONS LEARNED

Emerging communication channels are not a panacea for future student communication and institutions will have to engage with students in a variety of ways, including traditional word-of-mouth methods. Indeed some of these new technologies such as RSS are not well-understood by students or staff and education on how to use them is still required. Additionally, there remain ethical issues with the use of students personal mobile phones as an administrative communication channel and institutions will have to accept that some students will not want to communicate with universities in this way.

The project concluded that institutions need to be strategic with their adoption of emerging communicative channels. It is also clear that there are a number of areas of university administration which might want to use these channels including administrators, tutors, finance people and librarians. Each audience has subtly different requirements which should be mapped into a clear strategy.

Even apparently simple forms of technology need a strategy driven from the centre of the institution once initial trials are completed. Like any new IT initiative there needs to be a clear institution-wide strategy for the use of emergent technologies in communications if their potential is to be realised fully.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Further REACh project reports, documentation and outputs are available from:

<http://reach.mmu.ac.uk/>

JISC IRET programme

<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/emerggetech.aspx>

JISC IRET supporting studies and synthesis project

<http://jisciret.jiscinvolve.org/>

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[http:// www.jisc.ac.uk/](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/)