Furness Collaborative Learner Management System
Furness College

LSIS LEARNING AND SKILLS IMPROVEMENT SERVICE

Project Synopsis

The project aim was to develop of the Vital VME to facilitate the sharing of learner information with partner schools and apprentice employers. The scope of the project was focussed on the provision of on-line live attendance information, assessment monitoring and learner progress reporting.

The most important feature of the project was the ongoing involvement of users in development of the final version of the software. Plans are now in place to further develop the Vital system to add more features.

Project Aims

The main objective of the project was to provide partner organisations with accurate and timely information relating their learners' attendance and progress toward achieving their learning outcomes and qualifications. Furness College has already been working on the development of a Virtual Management Environment (VME) for some time and the project was to further develop and extend the use of the VME and replace the inefficient and time intensive system whereby different partners were presented with information in a variety of formats that could vary even between partners and programmes of study.

The project was also to meet the Furness partnership strategic priorities as follows:

- Providing an individualised learning approach
- Meeting the needs of employers for learner information
- Providing triangulation of learner information for safeguarding purposes
- Supporting collaborative delivery
- Responsive to the needs of learners

Project Delivery

The project was delivered by initial close working between the college, the software developer and the eventual users of the system. In each partner organisation, two key members of staff were identified, one a senior manager and one a lead administrator, to contribute to developments and to receive the necessary training on the use of the system prior to full implementation.

To support the project, the college appointed two project co-ordinators, one who took the lead on software development and the liaising with and training of school staff and one who lead on the development work and training carried out with employers.

Within the college a project steering group was formed for the purpose of ensuring that the project was delivered on time within budget. During the early stages of the project, the focus was on delivery of progress reporting to the employers and managing agents of apprentices as this was the most pressing need from the perspective of existing partnership working. The second stage was to extend the functionality of the system to include live attendance monitoring and this was subsequently delivered to employers. The third phase was to further develop the progress reporting to include the monitoring of summative assessment at module level and the whole resource was then rolled out to partner schools with employers receiving an update to their training.

From an early stage, user requests and suggested improvements were used to inform minor changes to the software. As the project progressed, this invaluable user feedback was used more and more to clarify user requirements of the system, to replicate the functionality of the previous system and in some cases to hide unnecessary functionality from the majority of users. Even now, at the end of the LSIS Flexibility and Innovation Fund project, staff from Furness College are working to improve the user interface and make the system simpler.

Ultimately the project took longer than first anticipated due to staffing and technical issues but the partnership now has a learner information system that has been implemented across the partnership.

Project Outcomes

The outcomes identified for the project were as follows:

Individualised on-line learner progress reporting across the consortium

During the duration of the project, this outcome was wholly achieved with both schools and employers benefitting from access to information on learner progress that is available through an online system. At the outset the project was to provide schools, employers and learners with progress reports that summarised the progress made by learners against the learning outcomes of their programme of study. During the time of the project, the progress reporting has been updated so that information on progress was made available at module/subject level as well as summarising the whole programme of study. Additional developments have made the information available in a variety of written and visual formats and the project team are currently consulting with users over which information should be made available to different user groups.

From an institutional perspective, one of the main benefits has been ability to quality assure feedback and progress reporting to different user groups and to ensure that we continually improve the quality of the service that we offer to users.

Interoperability with existing systems

The Vital system as implemented at consortium level draws information on learners from the college electronic register system, the college finance system, examination registration system, the Individualised Learner Record (ILR), the results of numeracy and literacy assessment, previous learner achievement and is fully interoperable with existing IT systems. In order to run the system, no new information needs to be generated other than that inputted by staff concerning learner progress.

The main challenge over interoperability came not from the progress reporting system but from the provision of live attendance information through the college register system.

To develop a common information and progress reporting system

Through this project, the consortium has been successful in developing a common information and progress reporting system. The system can now be rolled out to an increasing number of employers and is fully deployed in partner schools. The college and the consortium are now in a position to further develop the features of the Vital system to extend its use to greater number of learners and their parents/carers. The only cloud on the horizon is whether schools and colleges will continue to collaborate through 14-19 education and training to the same extent in the future.

Shared experiences and development across Cumbria (5 travel to learn areas)

The role of the Furness 14-19 Area Development Manager was integral to the project and was essential in communicating the project scope progress and outcomes to a variety of groups within the Furness area and across Cumbria. At the meetings of the 14-19 Area Development Managers from the 5 travel to learn areas within Cumbria, progress made and the project outcomes were shared at regular meetings. At the end of the project, the most up-to-date version of the software and the project main findings were shared with the 5 Area Development Managers. Feedback on the final system and shared experiences indicated that individual areas would like the ability to make minor changes to the functionality and the user interface of the software to meet their particular needs. A number of organisations have indicated that they would be looking for a more off the shelf approach to providing shared learner information through the purchase of proprietary software without fully understanding the limitations that such systems currently provide in sharing learner information with partners.

Sustained by informing national developments for collaborative learner information sharing

As indicated in the funding arrangements for the project, the products from the project will be hosted on the Excellence Gateway. The original intention for informing national developments was to be through offering to run a breakout session at the Association of Colleges Conference in November 2010. Insufficient project progress due to a variety of reasons meant that this was not possible and so the intention is to make the offer to the 2011 AoC Conference.

Sharing of Project Findings

As indicated above there is an intention to share the project findings across Cumbria and nationally. The college has also engaged in partnership working with other users of the Vital System and there is now an active network of users across the north of the country. At the network meeting, colleges are able to share the work that they have carried out and which in turn is used to further develop the VME and the features that it is able to offer to a variety of users from across the learning and skills sector. As part of the work of the Vital network the college can offer demonstration and training o other organisations who might be considering implementation of the Vital system through collaborative practice or are looking for a well developed system that supports learner tracking and progress reporting.