Summary

Slough Borough Council (SBC) Lifelong Learning has developed an Excel-based electronic register that streamlines and integrates induction, initial assessment, Individual Learning Plans (ILPs), withdrawn/retained statistics, learning outcomes and all necessary data into a single, easy-to-use spreadsheet, thus greatly reducing workload for tutors and practically eliminating data-entry errors. Oh and by the way, it also takes the register.

About Slough Borough Council Lifelong Learning

Slough Council is a small unitary authority in Berkshire which has the highest proportion of resident workforce in the South East with no qualifications and a high percentage with poor literacy and numeracy levels. Slough lifelong learning operates a mixed economy delivery model: while sub-contracting some of its provision, it delivers courses directly through a network of neighbourhood learning centres located across Slough, prioritising the most disadvantaged areas. The curriculum encompasses ESOL, family learning, ICT and a wide range of vocational programmes. There is an increasing focus on offering programmes leading to a qualification. Through external funding there has been a high investment in technology with all the main training rooms equipped with interactive white boards with learner access to computers.

The challenge

Most providers are only too aware of the constant headache of evaluating the cost-effectiveness of IT tools, e-learning software and ILT technology. Will it do the job? What are the benefits? How much will it cost? How difficult is it to use? What extra training needs to be given? These are questions that have to be answered satisfactorily before a manager can confidently proceed with any purchase. That is why it makes a refreshing change to see an organisation develop a sophisticated and invaluable e-learning tool using a software application found on almost everyone’s PC or laptop.

Three years ago, information and statistics captured for the adult and community learning (ACL) classes being taught at the Thomas Gray Centre and other neighbourhood centres in Slough used to be paper based. To begin with, this was
simply ‘present’ and ‘absent’ marks in a register. However, service requirements changed and the workload for tutors soared as they needed to record a whole raft of additional information including:

- Induction
- Initial assessment
- Individual Learning Plans (ILPs)
- Learning outcomes
- Withdrawn/retained figures
- Dates of entry for accredited courses
- Achievement dates for accredited courses

**The activity**

Mukul Gupta is the MIS Officer and Sessional Tutor for SBC Lifelong Learning. When he first had to grapple with the burden of all this additional recorded information, he decided to make things easier for himself by using Excel to design an electronic register. Over the last three years, this e-Register has been developed into a highly sophisticated tool and has been adopted by the service. The e-Register not only cuts down the amount of repetitive data-entry needed for each course being taught, but automatically generates most of the percentages required for each class, including: average course attendance, retention and achievement.

The e-Register was continually refined and developed by Mukul with the addition of achievement levels for Individual Learning Goals (full and partial) for non-accredited learners. Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) were then added to the spreadsheet in order to streamline the relevant data collection and integrate this information into other sections of the spreadsheet. At present, blank ILP forms generated by the spreadsheet are printed out and filled in by hand by learners. The tutor then enters the learner data back into the ILP section of the e-Register, which then automatically updates the master register.
Each copy of the e-Register serves one course and can accommodate up to 20 learners and 30 time slots (lesson dates). Data validation is used throughout the e-Register in order to minimise mistakes. It also incorporates several innovative macros, including one that prevents three consecutive authorised absences being entered for a particular student (the third entry automatically becomes an unauthorised absence).

The most recent additions to the e-Register have included the integration of a Sign-In Sheet for each course (which is signed by all the learners present at each lesson throughout the course as proof of their attendance). This can now be generated automatically from the course and student data, which means that data only needs to be entered once via the Data Entry worksheet. Mukul would like this to be developed further so that the Sign-In Sheet can be scanned back into the spreadsheet at the end of each course.
Mukul Gupta demonstrates the custom-designed e-Register

Mukul has also added a Course Information Sheet (a summary of the course for students) that draws all its content from other parts of the e-Register so that it can be printed out without any additional work on the part of the tutor. Likewise, the e-Register now includes a Tutor Course Review which is a summary sheet for tutors to complete that now includes a large quantity of data that is automatically generated from the rest of the e-Register. The whole thing has been capped off with an Initial Assessment Sheet and a front-end menu allowing tutors to access the various sections of the e-Register from a single worksheet.

The outcomes

Before the development and introduction of the e-Register, tutors had to collate all the data on paper and calculate the percentage statistics by hand. This was a repetitive and time-consuming process and very prone to errors. As a result, tutors felt overburdened and tasks were sometimes not completed. Philip Wright, Head of Lifelong Learning, is delighted with the spreadsheet: “The e-Register now ensures uniformity throughout the service as the same definitions and calculations are being used right across the board. This is particularly useful for new tutors as they don’t have to keep figuring out what figures go where. It also provides tutors with immediate information for their course reviews.”

According to Mukul, take-up of the e-register has been very good: “A year ago, only one or two tutors had the confidence to use the e-Register. Now approximately 80% of staff are making some use of the spreadsheet, whether simply as an electronic register for those with novice IT skills to highly computer literate tutors who are making full use of all the facilities offered.”

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Feedback from managers and tutors has been positive. Safia Mohamud, Vocational Curriculum Manager, observes: “The e-Register facilitates the process of collecting accurate data for Self-Assessment Reviews (SARs).”

Khalil Rehman, Neighbourhood Learning Centre Coordinator, found the transition very easy: “I’ve been using the e-Register nine months now. I have found it easy to use and it saves me a huge amount of work. This means that I have much more time for the students.”

Anand Sinha, ICT Programme Leader, sees real strategic value in the adoption of the e-Register: “This spreadsheet, and the way that tutors are increasingly adopting it, could represent a significant step in the development of our e-maturity with a real focus on staff support and development.”

Mike Maydell, ESOL Tutor says: “The electronic register has evolved from being just a simple document to record attendance into a very sophisticated data processing system which eliminates a lot of the duplication that exists in the variety of documents that a tutor has to produce each term. By completing the basic course information I can produce four different documents – a register, a sign-in sheet, a course information sheet and a two-page Individual Learning Plan for each learner. At the end of the term, the completed register allows me to produce automatically the statistics on retention and learner achievement. I like to use this register because it has been developed by a fellow tutor, using his knowledge of what tutors have to do, and the time it takes. I estimate that this saves me about ten hours per class per term.” Simon Crossley, Lifelong Learning Manager, sums it up succinctly: “It works!”
The impact

Philip evaluates the impact of the e-Register for the SBC Lifelong Learning: “We have made a concerted effort to improve the e-learning skills of all our sessional tutors and we now have an interactive whiteboard in every classroom in all our main centres. Getting tutors to use the e-Register represents a significant step forward in our ongoing e-learning development.”

In terms of future developments for the e-Register, the Lifelong Learning team would like to see the following:

- The incorporation of up and coming changes in Borough and National definitions
- Linking the register to the Lifelong Learning Management Information System (MIS)
- The incorporation of Course Outline and Session Plans into the e-Register system
- The incorporation of usability changes recommended by the tutors
- ILPs to be updated online allowing students to upload data from home
- Sign-In Sheets to be scanned in at the end of each course in order to eliminate another manual data-entry stage

Philip summarises his vision of a paperless office: “Instead of seeing boxes and boxes of files that no-one knows what to do with; our aim is to have this whole process paperless within three years!”

Useful links

Slough Borough Council

Slough Borough Council Adult and Community Learning

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