MidKent College: Achievement takes off with custom-developed PLP and Student Flight Plan

Summary

Finding the perfect electronic personal learning plan (ePLP) that does everything your organisation requires plus combines value-added student data into a ‘one-stop shop’ is the Holy Grail for most learning providers – and just as hard to find. That is why MidKent College took the brave decision to take an existing Moodle-based core developed by the University of London Computing Centre (ULCC) and commit itself to developing the ideal system for its own needs. The combination of internal expertise, full backing from senior management and dedicated staff training has resulted in the highly innovative MidKent Personal Learning Plan and Student Flight Plan, affectionately known as ‘The PLP’.

About MidKent College

As one of Kent's largest colleges of higher and further education, MidKent College has been providing top-quality education and training in the county for around 100 years. With excellent links with employers, local authorities, and industrial, commercial and educational organisations, the College offers a very broad spectrum of courses suitable for students who want to train for work, gain an academic qualification or learn new skills. The College boasts two main centres in Gillingham and Maidstone with provision at the Universities at Medway site (Chatham Maritime), providing full-time, part-time and evening courses in the heart of the Medway and Maidstone areas. In September 2009, the College moved into a new £86 million campus in Gillingham, combining two previous sites in Rochester and Chatham.

The challenge

Before the introduction of the new personal learning plan system, the College relied on a paper-based system in combination with Plan-it, a bespoke PLP system widely used in schools and adopted by MidKent to maintain continuity. Although useful to a point, Plan-it was not flexible enough to provide the College with all the features that were required. In November 2009, the organisation decided to look for an alternative option to overcome some of the following issues:
• Time consuming for staff
• Inefficiencies of manual input
• Inability to combine stand-alone PLP with pastoral data
• Lack of scope for development

After looking at a number of other proprietary stand-alone alternatives, the College decided to run with the Moodle-based ULCC system that now forms the heart of 'The PLP'. In April 2010, Mike Burridge, Assistant Principal (Projects), was brought in on seconmdent to lead this and other projects. A team of eight personal tutors and curriculum staff trialled the PLP core and their feedback proved pivotal in developing the initial system.

The activity

The MidKent Personal Learning Plan and Student Flight Plan is a comprehensive custom-developed online tool that is part PLP, part tracker and part risk-assessment. Well aware of its unwieldy full title, the College is running a student competition to come up with a more succinct name; so for now the system is affectionately known within the organisation simply as ‘The PLP’.

At the end of the Summer term of 2010, ‘The PLP’ was launched at a whole College staff development day where it was presented by senior management and the e-Learning team. Staff training then began in earnest. Rosie Douglas, MidKent’s e-Learning Manager recollects: “During the two-week staff-training period at the end of term, the system was rolled out and staff training commenced. It was important to show colleagues how to use the PLP, why to use the system and the outcomes required by the College. This then created a wish list of features for Dan Attwood, our Moodle Developer, which dictated the next stages of development for ‘The PLP’.”

The initial training was backed up with bookable top-up sessions which ran throughout the Autumn term of 2010, in addition to practical workshops to support staff through the first review period using the new system.

‘The PLP’ interface comprises: a photograph of the student; a traffic light icon indicating red, amber or green; a graphical representation of their ‘flight plan’ showing whether a student is above, below or on track to meet targets; and minimum target grades and attendance figures which are prominently displayed. Beneath this are two ‘accordion’ section lists that can be expanded to reveal all the student information required. These sections include:

• Student Info
• Student Targets
• Cast SMART Targets
• Student’s Progress
• Cast Reviews
• Subject Report
• Badges
The Student Flight Plan is one of the best innovations of this new system. Tutors evaluate how well a student is working towards their target grades. This data is then amalgamated with attendance information to create a graph. With each subsequent evaluation, a pictorial diagram builds up clearly showing whether the student is above, on or below the ‘target flight path’.

The traffic light symbol also provides instant feedback regarding the student’s situation. Rosie recalls: “We had quite a debate on whether to let the traffic light symbol change automatically according to pre-determined thresholds. However, we decided in the end to keep it manual, allowing professional judgement to be used to determine whether a student has a green, amber or red light.”

The outcomes

Having only completed one review period under the new system at the time writing, evaluation of ‘The PLP’ is subjective. However, attendance is 3% better over the same time in the previous year and retention has improved by 2%. The student response has been extremely strong and, for the first time, all the relevant information is now in one place. Rosie adds: “Just having data such as attendance, targets, achievements and student support requirements available is a bonus, but having it all in one convenient online location has revolutionised everything and made a big impact. This really is ‘one-stop’ shopping when it comes to reporting.”
Students can print off the PLP and seem to be responding really well to the new system. Rosie observes: “The PLP’ is motivating a large proportion of the middle group of learners and not just being used as a tool to enforce discipline or spot problem areas. Since the roll out of the new system, I have overheard many conversations between students where they are comparing traffic light signals. So it is certainly making the students think.”

Parental involvement is a high priority at MidKent, so ‘The PLP’ offers Guardian Access, allowing carers to access student information online. Parents have been really positive about this, but they must first sign the College Parental Agreement. Interestingly, students can turn off Guardian Access at any time and it seems that this level of permission control has increased their ‘buy in’ to the system.

The expanded screen provides easy access to a wealth of data

Some areas of the College are using ‘The PLP’ well and for many staff this has now become their first port of call for all student-related issues. While initially it was envisaged that ‘The PLP’ would be used during review periods, it quickly became apparent that it was a useful tool for staff, students and guardians to monitor progress much more regularly. Although not all staff are using it that way, it is now envisaged that ‘The PLP’ will be used as an ongoing monitoring tool and can effectively highlight when a student becomes at risk of dropping out or failing to achieve.

“There has also been an upsurge in the use of our Moodle VLE by our staff; regular users seemed to have found renewed enthusiasm and it has encouraged many colleagues to come back and revisit our learning platform. I received more requests for Moodle training in the Autumn term of 2010 than ever before - and the heavy snowfalls just before Christmas also boosted the utilisation of the VLE.”
The impact

The new system has brought major benefits to the Curriculum Access Support Team (CAST), which used to create paper-based reports then manually extract parts of this lengthy and complicated form into the old-style PLPs. Until the introduction of ‘The PLP’, staff could wait ages to receive this technical and complex CAST information. Now the CAST team simply complete an in-depth form online which includes one field designated ‘Relevant Information’, and it is this ‘summary’ section alone that is automatically transferred to the PLP allowing staff to assimilate essential information quickly.

The combination of features seems to be going down well with staff and students alike. One tutor comments: “For the first time, I feel that a piece of technology is going to give me back more than I will have to put in.”

Tutor Caroline Lee-Abraham relates some of the positive feedback that she has received from both students and parents: “During my discussions with parents at Parents’ evening, most were excited that ‘The PLP’ encouraged students to record what they want to achieve on their learning journey, such as their goals and progression options. They reported that, prior to their parent’s evening, they had been accessing students’ PLPs and having family discussion about learning targets with outcomes and timescales, and details of how success will be determined. I am mesmerised with the level of parental involvement with students’ learning as a result of ‘The PLP’.”

In terms of ongoing and future developments, Rosie says: “Dan is currently writing more Group Working scripts to streamline the input and output of group-wide data to overcome the tedium of having to open each PLP. Although the heart of ‘The PLP’ is personal to each student, much of the data (such as targets) are course-wide, so it makes sense to allow for bulk editing. This will save a lot of time when, say, a tutor wishes to issue a Community Badge for charity work completed for a whole teaching group. We have already completed Group Working scripts for target setting and are now moving on to other areas.”

The College is also building a custom reporting script to measure student performance against objective metrics as well as organising a project to evaluate the impact of the PLP on retention. There are also plans to develop a section to support the College’s ‘Looked After Children and Care Leavers’, as well as designing a custom-built tracking system in case ULCC’s Assessment Manager isn’t able to address all of MidKent’s requirements.

MidKent College is justifiably proud of ‘The PLP’ but knows there is much more to come. Rosie sums things up: “This will never be a finished product. The PLP will always be constantly developed as needs change, innovations surface and new methods are adopted.”
Useful links

MidKent College

University of London Computer Centre (ULCC)

ULCC Assessment Manager

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