Burton and South Derbyshire College: Independent ILT review drives progress forward

Summary

With the arrival of a new principal in 2008, and a recognised need to review the college’s core infrastructure, staff from Burton and South Derbyshire College invited the JISC RSC West Midlands to carry out an independent review of the college’s ILT provision and strategy. The outcome of the review led to a greatly improved IT infrastructure, a clearly defined ILT strategy and an increase in staff and student confidence in using technology for teaching and learning.

About Burton and South Derbyshire College

The College attracts around 13,000 students per year and offers over 500 courses from entry level to degree. Serving Burton-upon-Trent, East Staffordshire and South Derbyshire, it enjoys excellent results including a 99% pass rate for A-level results for the past two years and a 100% pass rate in 21 subjects.
The college has a strong learner voice ethos which reflects the college's core value of 'placing the learner at the heart of everything we do.'

The challenge

Mike Parker, Learning Resource Centre Manager says, “Some of the key challenges for us included a lack of IT infrastructure development and expertise. Parts of the infrastructure were outsourced and it was not clear who was responsible for what. There was no clear hierarchy and no opportunities for progression within the IT department, coupled with a lack of awareness amongst the college staff about the ILT strategy. Staff and students lacked confidence in using ILT as the systems were unreliable. As a result, many of the students saved their work to memory sticks and teaching staff were reluctant to use the Smartboards.”

The activity

In November 2008, the college appointed a new Principal who, after carrying out an assessment of the college's overall position, wanted to improve ILT and the college’s IT infrastructure. Having benefitted on numerous occasions from the expertise and services of the JISC Regional Support Centre West Midlands (RSC), Mike approached the team to carry out an e-learning progress review. The impartial review helps learning providers to assess their current e-learning position and focuses on;

- IT infrastructure and systems
- ILT Management and planning
- Learning resources and learning spaces

The review highlights the main strengths, emerging good practice, areas for development and key recommendations summarized in a report and subsequent action plan.

Mike says, “The college has had a lot of invaluable help from the RSC over the years, including a review a few years ago which helped us prior to an inspection. I knew that their input would help us to move forward once again.”

The outcomes

The review served as useful leverage among senior management to get things moving. Following the review in April 2009, the college took immediate steps to take on board the RSCs suggestions. Initial decisions included giving curriculum staff responsibility for ILT, where Moodle is used extensively and seen as best practice for dissemination across the college. Another key development involved the recruitment of three new posts including a Head of IT resulting in a more clearly defined IT department.

Vaughan Dyche (Head of IT) says, “I received a copy of the review report when I was appointed. It was really useful to confirm what needed to be done. I also used the report as a basis to build upon the suggestions made by adding some of my own ideas.”

During a 2-year period following the review, the college has made the following significant changes, some of which were a direct result of the RSC review:

**IT infrastructure and systems;**

- IT infrastructure is now handled internally
• Replacement PC strategy implemented. Consistent approach to software versions (standard images across all PCs) and an implementation policy now in place
• Moodle administered by a permanent member of staff (previously managed by students on a temporary basis)
• Staff development opportunities for technicians and sharing of skill sets and expertise
• Full implementation of e-registers, timetabling, lesson observation and student monitoring software

Learning resources;
• More informal learning spaces created across the college with limited amount of teaching carried out in these areas
• Integration of LRC staff roles for example with re-setting passwords, changing printers. This has lead to the development of new skills

ILT strategy
• Improved communication through an ILT strategic group chaired by a member of SMT but involving curriculum staff and the Sabbatical President (who has responsibility for learner voice)
• Programme Area Managers given an initial budget for ILT
• Dedicated room set aside for staff training
• Shared approach to disseminating best practice amongst Programme Area Managers

Vaughan says, “We have also made some improvements to Moodle. This has been a result of student feedback which myself and the web developer have gathered through student council meetings. There is now a really good dialogue between heads of departments and the students.”

The impact

The review provided the catalyst that the college needed which in turn, has led to some key changes which have made a big impact on teaching and learning and the overall effectiveness of the college.

Vaughan comments, “Staff are now much more confident in the IT infrastructure and therefore now use IT much more in classroom. The helpdesk turnaround is also much quicker as we have implemented a procedure which means that staff no longer have to wait for hours for issues to be resolved.”

Similarly, the students now also have more trust in the core infrastructure.

Vaughan adds, “We no longer have anywhere near as many students using memory sticks to back up their work which shows a real change in attitude and confidence towards the IT systems. The only issue we tend to hear about from the students now is lack of PC access which proves that they want to, and do actually use the college PCs a lot more than they used to.”
Communication is another key area of improvement which the college has seen since implementing the changes.

Vaughan says, “There is a better understanding now of the college’s ILT strategy and staff and students are kept informed of future projects. Through the student councils meetings, staff and students also understand how the processes work, for example procurement going through a tender process, and so they appreciate the timescales involved.”

The impact of the changes, and evidence of this impact, are reflected through both learner and staff voice through meetings and regular surveys.

Rachel Jones, Vice Principal says, “If we look at the staff surveys, before and after these changes, Vaughan’s area is the most significantly improved in the college. Heads of Learning have commented that the IT department is one of the best areas in the college and this demonstrates how well curriculum and IT now work together. The service has vastly improved, the systems are more reliable and equipment is of much better quality.”

The college is not resting on its laurels and still has a number of projects in the pipeline for the future.

Vaughan says, “The next big thing is the installation of a wireless network – this will mean that students can use their own devices to access college resources. We are also going ahead with implementing Moodle 2.0 and will be looking at remote access solutions.”

Other future plans include the implementation of Shibboleth to provide single sign on across the college, the development of an enrolment plugin for Moodle, and reducing power usage by upgrading the existing virtualisation platform.
The lessons learned

Rachel Jones, Vice Principal advises, “You have to invest when it comes to infrastructure and resources – it’s impossible to make progress without it. If the core infrastructure and the investment is flawed, people give up trying to use technology which was certainly the case a few years ago.”

Vaughan adds, “I would definitely recommend inviting people in, like the JISC Regional Support Centre, for a critical friend approach to help you to formulate a plan. If you close yourself off to problems, you won’t get anywhere. It’s important to be open and honest about what you have and what you want to achieve.”

Useful links

Burton and South Derbyshire College

Jisc RSC West Midlands

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