Exeter College: MyStudyBar helping to provide inclusivity for all

Summary

Exeter College have significantly enhanced inclusivity at the college through the deployment of MyStudyBar open source software. This assistive technology has helped to give students greater access to accessible software and has been of particular benefit for students with dyslexia. The college has been able to make significant time and cost savings by using this free to use software.

About Exeter College

Exeter College was established in 1970 as the first tertiary college in the UK, providing all post-16 education and training for the city of Exeter, bringing together the former grammar schools' sixth forms and Exeter Technical College.

The college offers:

- 40 A levels
- The international baccalaureate
- A wide range of vocational and industry led courses (entry level to level 3)
- Over 30 university-level courses, including Foundation Degrees, in partnership with Edexcel and the Universities of Plymouth, Exeter, Marjon and Kingston.

The college boasts a number of academies providing specialist training for sports, hospitality and catering, enterprise, journalism, music and academically gifted students. The college has developed very strong employer links with leading local and international employers, such as Flybe, Met Office, Michael Caines and many small and medium enterprises, ensuring vocational courses and apprenticeship training mirrors current industry trends and initiatives.

The challenge

Dyslexia is a big issue within the UK, affecting an estimated 10% of the British population, which is around ¾ of a million people. The NHS estimates that around 375,000 pupils have dyslexia, this presents many challenges as many of those pupils make the step into further education.
The main challenge for Exeter College was to identify how they could enhance their support and access for students with disabilities, particularly dyslexia.

The College places a high importance on making the college ICT access more inclusive. Deborah Reed, Equality and Diversity Coordinator was well aware that in terms of the Equality Act, it is important that public organisations ‘make reasonable adjustments’ to ensure that people with disabilities are able to read information and access it.

The college were already providing licensed inclusivity software for students with specific learning needs at a cost of up to £600 per person, per PC.

But as students leave college they would no longer have access to the licensed software.

**The activity**

Deborah Reed attended a session by Julia Taylor, e-Learning Adviser from the Jisc RSC SW on how technology can support equality. It was this initial meeting that led to Julia presenting to the Equality and Diversity steering group at the college on how free accessible software could be used more effectively in conjunction with the licensed provision.

“I was asked to address the steering group, which includes representatives for the protected characteristics from both the staff and student body. This was an excellent way to engage the whole organisation: management, support, curriculum and technical staff and learners.” – Julia Taylor, e-Learning Adviser, Jisc RSC SW

Following on from this, the steering group created a working party which ran a pilot study. Julia held a staff development session to demonstrate MyStudyBar and explore the different range of features available. The college then implemented a series of CPD sessions.

MyStudyBar is a free to download and uses a suite of assistive software, which can be packaged up to deploy across a college network as well as made available via USB memory sticks.

The MyStudyBar software loads a smart-bar that can be dragged on-screen, featuring an elegantly designed interface which consists of 6 sections, categorised as:

- Planning
- Reading
- Writing
- Vision
- Text reader
- Help
Within each section, students can choose from a selection of assistive software to aid these areas.

The software contained within MyStudyBar includes:

- **Xmind** – Mind mapping
- **Sunbird** – Portable calendar
- **Hott Notes** – Sticky notes
- **T-Bar** – Screen masking
- **RapidSet** – Colour changer
- **Vu-Bar** – Screen reader
- **ssOverlay** – Screen tint
- **LetMeType** – Word prediction
- **Lingoes** – Talking dictionary
- **Balbolka** – Writing support
- **Tinyspell** – Spell checker
- **Rapid Typing** – Touch typing tutor
- **Magnifier** – Screen magnification
- **Sonar** – Cursor ring
- **Thunder** – Screen reader

Through the pilot study, teaching and learning support staff had the opportunity to learn how to use the software effectively and explore the different features available. The working party were then able to analyse any feedback to iron out any technical issues or potential problems before the software was rolled out.

Support Worker, Polly Sloley delivered more targeted staff development sessions on MyStudyBar. She was ideally placed to provide her knowledge and experience as someone who has dyslexia herself and has experience of using a variety of assistive technology successfully. Polly produced some excellent Venn diagrams for writing, vision, memory and organisation to guide staff and students towards which programme can support their needs. She additionally produced 3 different sessions, focusing on key areas, these included:

- Seeing things differently
- Hear my voice
- Organise me
An example of the diagrams that Polly produced to help visualise the different sections of MyStudyBar

“I’m quite passionate about finding help for people with difficulties” – Polly Sloley, Support Worker

Simon Bowler, Learning Media Services Manager wanted to ensure that the process of deployment was quick and effective and they considered different approaches before packaging up MyStudyBar and deploying it across the college network. They realised that it would be a big task to deploy the product at each workstation, so they configured it to be remotely deployed to hundreds of workstations, which was much more effective.

The IT team responsible for deploying MyStudyBar experienced limitations when storing settings configured by the user with some of the packaged programs.

Where this poses significant problems, users are able to use MyStudyBar on memory sticks where the settings will be stored successfully.

The college additionally holds a special event during the national dyslexia week called ‘Specific

www.jiscrsc.ac.uk/case-studies

Students using technology
Learning Difference Week.’ Part of the aim of this is to raise awareness of support available for dyslexic learners throughout the college. This was used to help promote MyStudyBar to students and staff and they had display boards and used the plasma screens to highlight the benefits.

The outcomes

MyStudyBar has already had a big impact at the college with students using it to change the background colours as well as reading the text on-screen, magnifying text and using x-mind to help structure their work.

Example screen shot of the magnifier software at work

Polly Sloley has worked very hard to embed MyStudyBar within the consciousness of both staff and students at the college and has been instrumental in providing staff training and support. She has also put up posters around the college to help students.

“I have dyslexia myself and I’m really interested in finding ways for our students to manage dyslexia, specifically using software like MyStudyBar makes an amazing difference.” - Polly Sloley

“We know that before we introduced MyStudyBar we may have had some quite difficult situations to deal with.” – Chris Petherham, Head of Faculty Foundation Studies.

Right: Example screen shot of one of Polly’s posters

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Another important aspect is the fact the college don’t just give the students the technology, they sit with them and train them how to use it so that they can get the most out of technology and work independently.

MyStudyBar has a real role to play in providing independence for learners, who may not even know they need it, because they can develop their own strategies and use the software wherever they want from a memory stick. – Julia Taylor, e-Learning Adviser, Jisc RSC SW

“By removing the barriers and enabling technology we can help students that have been struggling” - Chris Petherham, Head of Faculty Foundation Studies

“With the range of packages available in comparison to commercial solutions, MyStudyBar really is an obvious choice” - Simon Bowler, Learning Media Services Manager

The impact

MyStudyBar has been very beneficial to the college in terms of being able to provide both staff and students better access to resources.

Polly has been able to make adjustments to significantly improve her own working environment by using MyStudyBar, as she highlights:

“It’s made a massive impact on my work, so now when I use the computer I use blue overlays, so it enables me to read and concentrate on my work and emails, with the screen reader I can focus more easily on what I’m reading.” Polly Sloley

There have been specific examples of how some of the students have been using the software as highlighted below:
“One student said to me that it helped her to think and structure her work and come up with more ideas, which was great because it was very difficult for that particular student to write” – Polly Sloley

“Assistive software is tremendously powerful to the students” – Tim Burnham, Learning Support Manager

“We found the whole process has gone extremely smoothly with minimal overheads, it’s almost zero cost apart from staff time involved in deploying and training staff” – Simon Bowler, Learning Media Services Manager

**The lessons learned**

‘Team work is always the key to implementing a change. Forming a working party of talented individuals gave us the impetus to devise a pilot so that we could test things out in a controlled environment.’ – Deborah Reed, Equality and Diversity Coordinator

‘I would recommend making staff training sessions interesting and eye catching like the titles of my sessions, hear my voice and organise me. So really making the sessions with quite snappy headings was quite useful to engage staff.’ – Polly Sloley, Support Worker

‘It is useful to have awareness raising days and development days to push it as well as a good campaign with posters to make sure everyone knows about it.’ - Tim Burnham, Learning Support Manager

‘For the college there is the chance to provide wider access to assistive software more cheaply and to focus learning support resources where they are most needed.’ – Julia Taylor, e-Learning Adviser, Jisc RSC South West

**Useful links**

- Jisc RSC South West
- Eduapps
- Ning Inclusivity group
- Jisc Techdis

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