Weston College: Tech Genius IT helpdesk run by students for students

Summary
Students at Weston College are benefitting from a unique opportunity to run their own IT helpdesk within the library, providing assistance for students and staff on IT related issues. The Tech Genius project has enabled students to improve their confidence and communication skills. Students have developed their own bespoke call logging software and have utilised iPads for on the fly report finding.

About Weston College
With over 3500 FE and HE students, Weston College has transformed itself in the last eleven years and has maintained its position as one of the top performing colleges in the West of England for the last four years. It has achieved significant success with examination achievement rates at 99.8% for A Level and 100% for vocational courses. The latest Ofsted report is exceptional with recognition of high quality teaching and learning and praise for a rich and varied curriculum describing the support given to students as “outstanding”.

Weston College offers more than 100 vocational courses, 27 A Levels and an ever increasing range of very popular Apprenticeships and Degree courses in partnership with Bath Spa University and UWE. In 2007 the College opened the 'state-of-the-art' University Campus which houses Arts, Media, Design, Music and a Sixth Form Centre. Weston College’s Knightstone Campus also includes the latest technologies and state-of-the-art facilities with an industry standard fitness suite and gym, world-class training kitchens, a top restaurant and a Higher Education Centre. Both sites benefit from the innovative LibraryPlus facilities and service. A third campus - the South West Skills Campus houses the Construction and Engineering Centre of Excellence and the bespoke Business Enterprise Centre.

The challenge
The main challenge for the project was to undertake a CRB check for each student involved in running the helpdesk. This was something that the college felt was important, because the IT helpdesk was setup to function like a working, professional service. So the project had to be delayed by a term in order for all the CRB checks to be completed. Due to insurance issues the library had to limit the activities that the students were involved in. For example they were not allowed to assist with hardware repairs.

As this was a new concept, the students involved in running the helpdesk had the biggest challenges in terms of providing a professional service for the college. This was an area that involved the students using their knowledge to provide support and also producing the types of support systems that they would expect to have for a real business.
The activity
Louise Hutson, who is the Learning Technologist at the library had an idea to develop a new project, which was inspired by a concept called ‘Tech Buddies’ that she saw at an e-learning conference.

This new project was about developing a helpdesk run by students for students. The original concept was also to provide students with valuable work experience, so the vision was that the helpdesk would operate like a real business or support service.

The library had a meeting with their IT department and ascertained what they would be allowed to do in terms of providing technical support for students.

The main project activities included:

- Keeping records of student (and staff) queries on call logging specifically designed for the Tech Genius helpdesk
- Analysing call logs to identify common trends and underlying problems
- Updating self-help documents so customers/employees could try to fix problems themselves
- Reporting more serious problems to the I.T. Department
- Testing and reporting (and if insurance permits) repairing faulty equipment
- Extending the support service ‘after hours’ by developing a helpdesk contact point on Second Life
- Developing a mobile fault logging and tracking system compatible with iPads so that equipment could be checked and faults reported throughout the College
- Conducting a digital survey into Moodle use at Weston College (to assist the LibraryPlus team with Moodle course improvement and development)

During the setup of the helpdesk, the library worked closely with their marketing department and produced a campaign to advertise the project throughout the Knightstone campus. As part of the campaign they had uniquely branded USB sticks, t-shirts and a dedicated poster campaign.
Once the helpdesk had been established the library organised 4 teams, comprising of 4 students in each team. These teams were assigned a rota of shifts running the “Tech Genius” Helpdesk, located in the Knightstone LibraryPlus library on days when the students attended their course. Each group was assigned with their own student supervisor to encourage competition between the groups to see who could produce the best service and support materials/resources. This enabled the supervisor to gain experience of managing a team, so organising their own shifts and tasks.

“The competition has worked really well and it’s been quite motivational because the students did not want to let anyone in their group down,” Louise stated. “One of the most useful things in the library for us was its function as an information gathering desk.”

Students were asked to design and develop their own bespoke call logging software for logging faults and IT related issues and well as develop their own business website to promote their services. Students also created a web-based system, which they accessed through their iPads, to log issues with computers on the fly as they visited different departments in the college.
The outcomes

The Tech Genius project has been a great success, providing students with useful work experience and enabling them to gain a valuable insight into how a business operates.

The students have been able to develop their overall skills set across many areas, including:

- Customer care and fault-finding skills
- Accurate call logging and record keeping
- Managing difficult situations or customers
- Develop their knowledge of support systems and equipment
- Analytical and problem-solving skills
- Assessment and diagnostic skills
- Software/website development
- Team building and organisational skills

The library has seen a rise in the number of staff who are now using the helpdesk and they have future plans to introduce the scheme across further campuses. Students have really enjoyed the experience and it is something that the college anticipates will have a considerable take up and demand.

The strong branding has certainly helped to promote the service and create something that is now well known throughout the college.
Louise Hutson noted, “there were worries that students would lack confidence in providing advice from other students and be reluctant to use the Helpdesk as a result. This has not been the case. The expertise and helpfulness of our Computing students has quickly gained them a loyal customer base.”

Customers that have used the service have provided some excellent feedback including that “the team were AMAZING!” and “Polite, well-mannered and professional.”

**The impact**

Tech Genius has already generated some very positive feedback from both staff and students.

In fact the ‘Tech Genii’s’ were on hand to fix a critical issue for one member of staff, as Tech Genii at Weston College student Daniel Fay explains, “the best part was when my team was able to fix a memory stick that had 5 years’ worth of work on it for a teacher. We had to take the memory stick apart to be able to copy over the files.

As soon as we had managed to do this it failed completely, so it was just in the nick of time. Fixing 5 years’ worth of work and saving someone’s career. That’s a very good feeling.”

There has also been some excellent and very positive feedback from other students involved in the project:

Josh Worth, Tech Genii and student stated, “I think it’s a great idea because we are helping other people, and what I’ve taken from it is that my personal skills have definitely progressed. I have a customer facing role and I’ve learned how to deal with problem customers. So I work through people’s problems rather than just a purely technical approach to things.” He also added, “It’s been a great experience working on the Genius project, we’ve had customers come in and we’ve repaired their laptops and other things, which has really helped them to work through problems that they’ve had.”

Another Tech Genii and student Daniel Fay explained, “I have been able to take out of the project enhanced technical skills as well as a sense of leadership and being able to work on a helpdesk properly, which is also how it’s helped me to realise that the customer is in fact another person, so be empathetic rather than just applying IT skills.”

Louise has certainly noticed how beneficial the Tech Genius experience has been for the students. “I was amazed at just how much the students could take on and I think they also surprised themselves. They’ve had that experience now of dealing with customers, so when they go into their first job they can be better prepared. I don’t think that our students would have had the opportunities to create their own programs, websites and mobile applications had they had work experience outside of the college.”

**The lessons learned**

Next year the college is planning to start Tech Genius earlier and organise the CRB checks at the start of term as part of the students’ induction. This would significantly speed up the process and enable the library to start the project earlier.
Louise is also keen to now extend the project and make it available throughout the opening hours of the college and reduce the size of the teams to ensure that the helpdesk will be of benefit throughout the term. They also want to make the helpdesk available on all campuses; such has been the success of the project.

Louise wants to organise suitable insurance next year to enable the students to get involved in more advanced hardware support and maintenance. “Definitely do it, it depends on the way your college is organised and the facilities that you have. It’s proven to be highly successful for our college,” she explains, “Make it quite clear what the students can and can’t do and be on hand to support them and let them know, be aware of the boundaries to customer service.”

**Useful links**

* Jisc RSC South West website
* Weston College website
* South Devon College’s Tech Buddy project

**Disclaimer**

_Jisc Regional Support Centres work with more than 2,000 UK learning providers helping them to improve performance and efficiency through the use of technology. Case studies may refer to specific products, processes or services. Such references are examples and are not endorsements or recommendations and should not be used for product endorsement purposes._