League Football Education: Tackling the football apprenticeship programme online through Moodle

Summary

Faced with the challenging task of organising education for football apprentices across 74 English Football League clubs, League Football Education (LFE) has implemented Moodle as a key part of its strategy to meet the requirements for this geographically dispersed set of learners and educators.

Developments currently focus on administrative processes, including the creation of learner accounts at pre-programme enrolment, initial literacy and numeracy assessments, undertaking reviews and tracking progress.

About League Football Education

League Football Education (LFE) has been in existence since 2004.

The Apprenticeship in Sporting Excellence (ASE) programme was introduced in the same year to formalise the delivery of education in Sport. For football, the programme is important because between only 30% to 40% of apprentices will be offered professional contracts at the end of the two year scheme; in addition, contracts for the majority will not involve large wages, and may be on a month-by-month basis.

All of the 74 participating Football League clubs must put each of their apprentices (a maximum of eighteen at each club at any time) through the scheme, providing a qualification to fall back on, and routes into other sport related careers such as fitness training.

The challenge

The challenge for LFE was to develop a strategy which would enable it to move away from its existing paper-based processes, utilising technology to be more effective and efficient in meeting the needs of the ASE programme. Mike Robinson, MIS/IT Manager, and one of LFE’s Regional Officers were tasked with leading on strategy and implementation of the new processes.
Introducing technology would require a change of ways for Regional Officers who were responsible for reviewing progress of the apprentices. Developments were complicated further by the fact that apprentices were based across the country in 74 clubs. Each club functions differently and timeframes for running the ASE programme varies; learning delivery is just as complex, with NVQs delivered at the clubs by tutor/assessors, and technical certificates delivered at local FE colleges or at the clubs by private training providers.

**The activity**

Moodle had been used at LFE to deliver basic online testing, and the team recognised they could build on these initial Moodle developments. Utilising LIG funding, LFE worked with a third party company (ForSkills) to develop and host Moodle because they did not have the necessary resources in-house. They opted to streamline administrative processes first rather than teaching and learning processes, initially focusing on three (previously paper-based) developments, as follows:

**Creation of learner accounts and pre-programme enrolment**

Basic information on prospective apprentices (most of whom have been progressing through ‘Schools of Excellence’ with clubs since the age of 9 or 10) is provided by the clubs when they are close to finishing their secondary education prompting the creation of accounts on Moodle. Receipt of this information initiates an email from LFE to the apprentices’ parents and schools, who are given logins to provide information online, such as predicted GCSE grades, career aspirations, barriers to learning, and part-time jobs. This information helps Regional Officers build a picture of the apprentices prior to meeting them.

**Assessing literacy and numeracy**

By the time of initial meetings, apprentices are registered in Moodle and able to login to undertake online literacy and numeracy assessments. Based on these assessments and the pre-enrolment information, Regional Officers can gauge what level each apprentice should be working to and where support might be necessary. Individual learning plans (ILPs) are then developed, including setting targets for each apprentice.

**Undertaking reviews and tracking progress**

Regional Officers go to the clubs to undertake twelve-weekly reviews with the apprentices. The progress of each apprentice is highlighted in Moodle; it can be tracked at unit level, and against targets set since the last review. This online process has removed the need for paper in the review altogether, apart from one document which requires a physical signature for auditing purposes.

Mike has used six-weekly staff meetings, where Regional Officers come together, to set aside at least an hour for the Moodle developments, including feedback on what’s working well and suggestions for improvements. In addition, he has spent
time with Regional Officers at the clubs, getting feedback from apprentices and the learning providers.

‘Aide memoirs’ have also been written, and Regional Officers now all have a fairly good grasp of using Moodle; they are competent enough to also deliver training, but the majority of their ‘net generation’ apprentices are already skilled in their use of technology.

**The outcomes**

The previous paper-based administration processes, which Mike describes as “nothing short of a paper-chase” have been significantly streamlined using Moodle. In the paper-based system tracking the progress of each apprentice was problematic, relying on contact with Regional Officers and an enormous amount of paper sifting following the twelve-weekly review meetings. The review meetings would involve at least five paper documents per apprentice.

Recording the reviews and progress online enables all relevant parties – apprentices, Regional Officers, LFE and learning providers - to monitor progress at any time. It allows Regional Officers and apprentices to check progress easily prior to review meetings, and enables them to complete parts of the review in preparation for the meeting.

However, there is still a tendency for apprentices and learning providers to use the online review system as they did the paper-based version, completing details immediately before review meetings. While the face-to-face meetings every twelve weeks remain critical, Mike has been encouraging use of the review system at any time during the twelve week period, thus providing information when it is current and enabling, for example, the timely setting of new targets. He is convinced this will help to provide “the overall picture of an apprentice, not just a snapshot in time”.

Developments to date have been very easy for all users to master, and have therefore been an excellent introduction to using Moodle. Mike acknowledges that currently it is not used by apprentices as much as they would like; however, there are plans to develop the use of calendars, communication tools and online registration which will make their use of the system more mainstream. The introduction of online registration will also benefit club administrators, who need to track information in order to allocate wages and travel expenses.
The impact

Eighteen months on from introduction of administrative processes in Moodle, initial resistance from Regional Officers has largely disappeared. Early into the development, Mike had accompanied a sceptical Regional Officer to two clubs to deliver Moodle training; since then, the Officer has done all remaining training sessions and now has all the clubs he looks after using Moodle.

At one point this Regional Officer had to fill in for a colleague who was still working paper-based, and was able to make a direct comparison between the two systems; as a result he is ‘sang the praises’ of Moodle, not just in how effective it was, but also how it had saved time and made him much more efficient.

Another Regional Officer has been particularly impressed with being able to take his laptop (with 3G internet access) to review meetings, where apprentices can input directly into Moodle. He says this has been much more effective than asking them to handwrite on forms; in addition, the Quality Manager noted at review observations that this resulted in apprentices engaging more with the review process.

Not everything has gone as smoothly as Mike would have liked and he acknowledges that, driven by time constraints, they tried to introduce one element of the development before it was thoroughly tested. Some negative responses received from Regional Officers highlighted to him that they “can’t just switch things on and expect everyone to be using them”.

Image representing the apprentice journey
With hindsight, Mike says he would have wanted to engage with their users much more at planning stages, and thinks that this would probably have encouraged more initial ‘buy-in’ to the developments. However, he notes that there is always a fine balance between not allowing enough input from others into developments, and engaging so much that it delays progress or makes it difficult to come to a decision.

LFE is currently looking for a club to volunteer as a pilot to run the ASE programme using the full capacity of their Moodle developments to date, as a model to roll out to the other clubs. But they are not standing still, and various other developments are on-going or in planning, ranging from putting the apprentice induction processes online through to developing and integrating a bespoke e-Portfolio tool.

The ultimate aim is to take all stages of the ‘apprentice journey’, including teaching and learning elements, and integrate them online where the processes are appropriate.

Mike Robinson, MIS/IT Manager explains: "What we’ve got is by no means a finished product, but we’ve got a system now that is really starting to meet our requirements."

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**Case study update**

Paul Bartlett, Regional Officer, was instrumental in bringing Moodle to LFE and has continued to work with LFE staff to enhance and develop the system. Virtually all key processes are now on the VLE: teaching and learning as well as administrative

One of the big additions was to create a new induction suite made up of eight trackable modules which every learner completes. This includes subjects such as Employment Responsibilities and Rights, Health and Safety, Equality and Diversity, Safeguarding etc.

This suite ensures that every learner gets a quality induction at a certain standard as it is run online with exactly the same resources and materials for each person - it doesn’t matter when they start on the programme or who delivers the induction. As they are all online the learners can complete these modules as soon as they have a login and wherever they want. So theoretically this means they could complete all eight modules before starting the programme which would give a fantastic basic knowledge in these areas before starting at the club. The Regional Officers can also see at a glance that all areas of induction have been completed through the tracking part of the VLE. It is so easy to prove to an inspector every single learner has had a full induction. Inspectors are very complimentary about the VLE and the live information they can get from it.

All assignments and resources are now embedded into the VLE. So once modules have been assigned, the learner can theoretically start work immediately and do units (including additional ones) in their own time.

Tracking used to be a bit of an issue but it is now all done on the VLE. Inspectors picked up on this problem a few years ago but they now love the fact that they can
look at any club in any area of the country and identify where all the learners are at for every part of the programme. Regional Officers can see at a glance for every learner in one club, which units they are doing, which ones they still have left to do and which are complete. For each module, planned start and end dates can be seen so it is really easy to track who is ahead, on and behind target. If someone is behind it can be identified really early and the reason why identified so it is easier to get the learner back on track before anything has gone wrong. This can also be used on a National scale.

Another new development which is a fantastic management tool for Regional Officers is a page which helps to calculate value added to the learner. It looks at the learners’ GCSE results, initial assessment results, learning styles and which qualifications they are doing. It calculates what grade it would expect the learner to get at any normal college. There is then a higher target grade for being at LFE and a record of what the current progress is. From this it is really easy to see what value added there has been for each individual learner. It is a really useful way of setting targets and making sure that targets are met. If a learner is falling below their target it can be spotted very early and investigated to figure out why. It is an excellent management tool to show clubs and education providers why they should use LFE. Inspectors particularly like this page as you can see really easily how each learner is performing with a summary of their details and learning styles.

All of the club courses have a page with all the required resources available. There is a course tutor section, Regional Officer’s toolkit and club administrator’s section: everyone has a section they can see with resources that support them in the club. The resources range from policies and procedures to key documents and templates. They also create screen captures with voice overs to demonstrate key functions on the VLE and how to use them. This stops the need for having to go out and do one-to-one training: saving huge amounts of time and money. There are also forums so administrators in different clubs can speak to each other about what they are doing and any problems they have.

Greg Fearon, Data/IT Manager manages a team of three people responsible for maintaining the VLE and ensuring the data in it is accurate and updated regularly. They put documents on the VLE and support stakeholders with any problems they may have. Greg has developed an online report suite which pulls off information from the VLE for performance management and to pick up errors that have been entered into the system.

Moodle has helped LFE to go from getting all 2s in their inspections to getting all 1s (1=outstanding). The statistics for the last four years have been amazing – they have achieved between 92-94% framework achievement and stayed at that level.

The lead inspector from their last visit told them: “It is a fantastic tool to manage what is a disparate difficult programme; you can manage it down to a micro level which means you can be proactive with keeping learners happy. It helps with retention and achievement.”

Paul Bartlett, Regional Officer explains: “It hasn’t cost a great deal to develop the VLE. ForSkills, our development partner has been absolutely fantastic. We have
developed a VLE that covers virtually every part of the programme at a very cost effective price. We haven’t spent a great deal on it at all. When we were setting up the VLE we had quotes which were over £100,000 which were quite scary! It is impossible to say exactly what we have spent as there are on-going development costs but with them we get a very competitive rate for every new development that we want to undergo. They use some of the development work that they do with us with their other customers and spread the cost between us all."

Paul and Greg are still not standing still – they have more plans for the future including:

- improving their e-portfolio
- creating more resources
- creating better assessment templates with better functionality and resources
- creating more enrichment modules
- creating an under 16 VLE for clubs to track the progress of their learners who are in academies
- developing read-only access for the learners’ parents so they can be more involved in their children’s education and progress.

Alan Sykes, Chief Executive and Sarah Stephen, Finance Director have been very supportive of the VLE’s development and backed everything Paul and Greg have done. Having that level of support from board level gives great confidence in taking it forward. They feel it is valued and of worth.

Paul continues: "We attend the Jisc events, especially the Northwest ones. We pick the best of what we see at the events and use them as networking opportunities. They have been really good for us. We have even presented about our VLE after our inspection at one of them."

For enquiries relating to this case study, contact Paul Bartlett, Regional Officer at LFE.

**Useful links**

- [Jisc RSC Northwest](#)
- [League Football Education](#)
- [Moodle](#)
- [For Skills](#)
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