Bolton College

Improve your service platform (May 2016)

Summary

When the FELTAG recommendations were published Bolton College's learning environment was already in good shape to deliver much of what was required. This is a web-based solution that enables the college to develop, run and manage complex applications that benefit learners, teachers and support teams. But the publication of the report spurred the college’s senior management team to take a fresh look at its information and learning technology (ILT) strategy and sparked ambitions to develop the platform further, to enable the college to deliver services that are increasingly personalised and contextualised to suit individual needs.

In November 2013 they recruited learning technology lead Aftab Hussain with a brief to undertake a wide-ranging review of the existing systems. Over more than two years, Aftab and his team have introduced a series of developments that support the college in delivering all the recommendations made in the FELTAG report and they are driving a series of innovations. Data, analytics and business intelligence tools are being used to transform services; information about learners is gathered and processed to provide targeted information and services and it is delivering improved pastoral care for each learner through the college’s learning development mentor scheme. Learning analytics is driving rapid improvements in the way that individual learners experience life at college.

The challenge

Bolton College delivers around 800 FE and HE programmes to 14,000 college-based students and around 4,500 apprentices and work-based learners. It is located in the town on a purpose-built campus alongside the University of Bolton, UTC (University Technical College) Bolton and Bolton Sixth Form College.

Providing a reliable platform that supports robust, flexible services for learners across such a complex organisation is a huge challenge.
The solution

From the start, the use of data was identified as the key to unlocking improvements.

Now when learners join the college they create their own editable profile that includes information on their learning and career ambitions, interests and even their dietary preferences. This data enables the college to personalise their experience; two students who open the same interactive online tutorial will often find that it moves in completely different directions for each. A session looking at employability skills, for example, will start with the same basic introduction and then move on to look at interview techniques that are specific to a learner’s specialism and career aspirations. Other departments use the information in a learner’s profile to load information about careers, training or social events that students might be interested in. The learning and development mentoring team routinely monitor data about a learner’s attendance and performance so that they can offer appropriate pastoral support if a student looks to be disengaged or struggling.

In spring 2016, using learning analytics, the college implemented changes to Moodle to make it adaptive, giving teachers the ability to deliver differentiated, contextualised and personalised learning, as well as adaptive assessment. Bolton College has coupled Moodle SCORM packages with the wider dataset at the college. Now, when a learner accesses a SCORM package, Moodle interrogates the student’s dataset, which includes information such as learner ID, course title, previous assessment scores, entry qualifications and more, and determines the most appropriate learning and assessment material to present to each learner.

The use of the wider dataset has enabled the college to deliver personalised and contextualised services in a manner that Aftab says is relatively new to the FE sector. For instance, selected television and radio programme recordings are presented to the learner on his or her home page based on parameters such as course name or departmental name. In this way, learners see content that is pertinent to them - for example, science students will see science documentaries on their home page and computing students will see documentaries on the internet.

The ILT team has made mobile a crucial focus.

“Everything we’ve been working on can be done on mobile devices. Students expect to do everything on the move so, if it can’t be supported on phones or tablets, it is a non-starter.”
“The proof of that comes when you look at usage statistics. Pages that used to get five or six hits a day now get hundreds and hundreds, simply because they can be accessed from any device, anywhere.”

Aftab Hussain, learning technology lead, Bolton College

Bolton College uses a variety of collaboration tools, especially Office 365. Other tools are mainly open source, including BigBlueButton for videoconferencing, which enables teachers and learners to share a screen, annotate and chat online even when learning remotely, flipping control of the screen between themselves if they want to.

Students have taken to the new, bespoke services enthusiastically, consistently giving the college’s IT provision and support satisfaction ratings in the high 90s. Staff have also been enthusiastic, largely because services integrate seamlessly and because regular training sessions are easing teachers into using new technology and services. Teachers do, however, have the final say in how and when they use them in their teaching practice; their use is not mandated.

“Don’t water down the value of the teacher and student relationship, it’s the heart of everything we do”

Aftab Hussain, learning technology lead, Bolton College

Impact

» Learners enjoy bespoke services that support their learning and their experience of life at college
» Increasingly sophisticated use of learning analytics is enabling ongoing development of services
» The college has a renewed ‘top down’ focus on the potential of digital technologies to support excellence
» Staff development programmes are scalable and now are now being provided by the ILT team to support the local authority’s own CPD programmes

Key points

Aftab Hussain’s tips for transforming your service platform:
» Open source tools should provide most of what you need, but a hosted service could be a safer bet if you haven’t got the technical skills available in-house; however, hosted services might be less flexible
» When you introduce new technology or services, don’t neglect training for both staff and learners
» Explore how data and analytics can drive service excellence
» Remember that online learning can never replace classroom interaction and teacher insight

More information

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Email: Aftab.Hussain@boltoncc.ac.uk
Read Aftab’s blog
Find out more about the college’s work on adaptive learning