VLE Project Case Study

Welcome Site for Department of Biology

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Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Department of Biology Welcome Site (Autumn Term 2007)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogic theme</td>
<td>Easing the transition to higher education for incoming Biology and Biochemistry students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Keywords</td>
<td>Transition into higher education, flow of information</td>
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<td>Subject area</td>
<td>Admissions Support for Biology and Biochemistry Students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student level &amp; profile</td>
<td>Pre-University</td>
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<tr>
<td>No. of students</td>
<td>150 Biology and Biochemistry students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Key conclusions</td>
<td>This VLE-hosted admissions site proved to be highly valuable in familiarising and orientating a new cohort of students to HE. The site successfully communicated important orientation information to in-coming students, and linked through to the new on-line registration process. In addition, it provided an environment in which students could make contact with new classmates before actually arriving on campus. The students used this site as a starting point in getting to know peers, before opting to use non-University tools such as Facebook and other social networking sites to build relationships prior to arrival on campus.</td>
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Background

Students arriving at the University are faced with a large range of information sources, which they must get to grips with in the first few weeks of term. This includes information about the University, the Department, the course, accommodation, clubs and societies to name but a few. One former student described this volume of information as so overwhelming that it was hard to remember anything and another commented that the new information arrived when he was trying to come to terms with difficulties in finding his way around the campus and even the Department! Staff also routinely observe that even though the students are given the information, they clearly do not remember the administrative essentials that they require for their study activities. Many students, for example, are not aware of some of the basic University rules and regulations, despite the fact that they receive one-to-one orientation meetings with supervisors.

The front page provides technical information as well as providing tools for navigating the site.

As a leading department in the use of the VLE in its pilot phase, we decided to address some of the issues relating to the overwhelming amount of information that students are given, by providing them with the option to access at least some of the information prior to their arrival on campus. Therefore in order to ease the transition to university, we took advantage of this relatively newly acquired tool and developed a pilot Welcome Site. This site was developed during the months of June-August 2007 and was ready for deployment by mid-August when the A-level results were released. Once students were in possession of confirmed / unconditional offers, they were enrolled on to the site. They were then informed of the Welcome site’s existence by a letter from the Head of the Department, which was included in their welcome package. The site was designed so that it explicitly connected admissions support with the online registration process which had just been launched, and the
students had over a month of access to the material in the site before they arrived on campus in October.

The project was led by Dr. Setareh Chong, however it was developed in collaboration with the E-Learning Development Team, the Admissions Office, Computing Services, and Student Services.

Evaluation of the impact of the site on the student experience was conducted using a variety of methods. A focus group interview was held with students and an exit survey was designed to gauge students’ perception of the site and how they used it.

The presentation of a high volume of information to new students is not a problem unique to Life Sciences and therefore it is hoped that the successful completion of this pilot will encourage other departments within the University to develop similar sites.

Description of approach

The Welcome Site was developed in order to provide a source of useful supporting information for Biology and Biochemistry students, once they have been formally accepted by the University. Specifically, it was developed to provide incoming students with information about the University, the Department and the undergraduate study programme. It also aimed to provide access to catch-up material, which students could use to brush up on specific subject areas such as Chemistry and Mathematics before arriving at the University, and to give access to a “blog” where the new cohort of students could meet virtually.

The structure of the site was reflected in the categories of information that needed to be delivered to students. Therefore the site was divided into five major pages, namely:

1. Need to know
2. Need to do
3. What’s happening
4. Find out more
5. Blog

Students were given access to the VLE once they had been accepted by the University, after confirmation of exam results (in August). They were informed about the existence of the site through a letter that was included in their welcome package and sent out in early September by the Department. The welcome pack also included technical information about how to log into the site. The site was accessible only to students who had registered at the University first and had received a University ID (username and password). The information about registration was also provided in the welcome pack.
The use of this site was not mandatory. The site was merely designed to give information to incoming students, prior to their arrival at the University. It was hoped that the site would serve as a useful support tool, making their transition to university as easy and stress-free as possible. It was also hoped that the site could enhance communication between the incoming students and the Department.

This site is a rare example of a distance learning activity in the Biology Department and as such it was entirely reliant on the VLE for its success. Whilst some of the information contained within the Welcome Site (such as a reading list) had been previously sent to the students by post, some aspects such as the 'blog' feature of the VLE provided an opportunity to build a sense of community across the cohort before students physically arrived on campus. It is worth pointing out that many of the students who arrive at the University use social networking tools such as "Facebook". However, different students may use different social networks and some may not use these networks at all. This may be particularly relevant for our international students. The blog gave uniform access to the entire cohort, regardless of previous experience.

An electronic textbook containing catch-up material (see figure above) to review A-level Chemistry, Maths and Statistics and Biology was also provided through this site, which was also only possible by using the VLE to host the material. This textbook is free to the students, although the Department pays about £500/annum fee for its licence.

A key aspect of this site (and in a way the biggest challenge) was how to raise awareness of the site so that students reviewed the information and study resources. This was the logic behind sending the information in the Welcome package and having it mentioned by the Head of the Department in his letter of welcome.
The VLE site was designed with the following content areas:

- **Need to Know:** Information about the course and study material (including “Catch-up Material” - above), links to the timetable were provided as were external links to useful sites providing student support, including tips about how to be organised and how to study at university.

- **Need to Do:** Important information about what the students needed to/could do online, prior to arrival at the University (such as links to online registration). A list of tasks to be completed within the Department when the students arrived in October was also included.

- **What’s Happening?:** This section included links to the student Biosciences Society, University Magazine, Student Union and also contained some videos made to demonstrate some of the technical aspects of studying micro-organisms.

- **Find out more:** Provided links to York City and Undergraduate Admissions Office websites.

- **Blog:** This provided a social interaction tool for all the incoming cohort of Biology and Biochemistry students.

Note that a Blog is basically an online communications tool that works in the manner of a journal. Entries are displayed in reverse chronological order. ‘Blog’ is an abbreviation for the term ‘Web Log’.
The catch-up material and videos were loaded up into the VLE’s Content Management System and a link was generated to the Welcome Site on the VLE.

In addition to the above, each page included a section offering comments from current students on their experiences in the department and at university. This section was designed to make the site more personal and give insight into what to expect at university.

**Student profile**

An online questionnaire was completed by 30% of the students (total of 150 students) by the end of the autumn term.

**Experience with computers**

The online questionnaire results revealed that pre-arrival students were established users of computers for information search activities, with all respondents accessing information from the web on a frequent basis. All those taking part in the survey reported having access to computers and there were no reports of technical problems in accessing the VLE and support site.

**Outcomes of the pilot**

The site was launched in August 2007. The bulk of student online activity within the site was targeted to take place from September until mid-October. This was the period in which the students received their Welcome packs and prepared for the start of their courses at York. Feedback was collected from students on their use of the site at the end of the autumn term via an online questionnaire and a focus group in early March 2008.
Activity statistics

Student log-ins were most frequent from mid-September until mid-October. Information regarding the use of each area and the statistics relating to the months of August and September were lost due to routine network/system updates carried out in the summer. This usually is not a problem as most VLE sites are not active during these months, but affected the Welcome site. How to avoid this problem needs to be considered next year. However the focus group interview revealed that log-in frequency varied between students. One student reported that he spent a long time on the site on his first visit and then visited weekly to check for anything new. Another student remarked that she logged in every two days because she was excited about starting University. However, as York was not the only university site they had access to, they reported having limited time for each institution.

One student found that he did not immediately know how to go to the module site after logging in.

Awareness of the site

Students were made aware of the site via the information pack which they received on being accepted to the University. They were given access to similar sites by other universities earlier in the admissions process and compared sites with their peers.

Manchester is one institution which provides prospective students with access to an admissions website. The website was deemed to be useful, because it enabled students to track their applications online; however it contained much less useful information than the York site.

Students felt that the welcome pack arrived late – early/late September – and they would have benefited from receiving the information earlier on. Other universities sent information earlier on to applicants, leaving prospective students uncertain about what to expect if they chose York. This is due to the limitation of only being able to give access to the VLE to those who are officially registered with the University.

Most found the purpose of the site was clear, although one student commented that it should have been clearer, and that it should be mentioned more to encourage people to make greater use of it.
Lay-out of the site

Feedback was positive on the division of the site into four main sections: Need to know; Need to do; What’s happening?; Find out more. But not all students found it easy to navigate through the site at first. One student found the social blog but then had difficulty finding it a second time. One suggestion was that the sections should have clearer headings.

One student reported that there were a lot of buttons and tabs that were not explained: ‘I had no idea what PDP was and if it was important at the time’.

Students also added that YorkWeb was difficult to navigate.

Table 1 summarises the number of students in the exit survey who found different information areas useful. These results indicate that students found the area that gave most relevant information about the induction at university most useful.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content area</th>
<th>Students</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Need to Know:</strong> Reading lists; SI units; Catch-up material</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Need to Do:</strong> Timetables; Link to University Student Network Site</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What’s Happening:</strong> Information on the Biosciences Society and video clips</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Find out More:</strong> Links to City of York and University Admissions Site</td>
<td>2</td>
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Participation and usefulness of the blog

Feedback was positive on the provision of a blog for prospective students to communicate before arriving on campus. One International student reported that she was pleased to have met another student from her home country online. Not all students posted to the blog, although they read the posts. A main topic of conversation was which colleges students would be living in, with students looking for others who would be living near to them. One student said that the accommodation pack arrived very late and so had nothing to post online until he knew where he would be living.
‘The blog was one of my favourite parts of the site and I found it very helpful before I came here. I think it’s a really good idea to meet the people you’re going to be working with before you come because it helps you to feel like you’re going to fit in and it eases anxieties about moving away from home and into university’

In the exit survey some students indicated that although they did not post on the blog themselves, they checked the blog regularly for other postings.

I did not use it at all, but I did read through some of the comments from other students to see what some of the other students were like.

A few students expressed their preference for other social networking sites such as Facebook.

‘Didn’t use (blog). Use of social networking site Facebook more common and easier to use. Also Facebook linked in with Colleges, YUSU etc. and obviously VLE did not.’

‘Perhaps a bit intimidating because it’s an official university site rather than being able to chat more informally on general websites.’

Overall the feedback was positive with more students in the exit survey expressing that they found the blog useful.

‘It is nice to be able to meet new people before coming to university particularly if you do not know anyone coming to the same university. It makes the experience less daunting.’
Relevance of the information contained in the site

In the exit survey, many students found the “Catch-up” material and the “Need to know” area most useful.

‘The need to know was very useful, because during the holidays we forget some of the things we did during our ‘A-level’ so the catch-up material was excellent.’

The “Need to Do” area provided both the reassurance to some students that they had completed the essential administrative tasks involved in registering and gave other students the information that they needed, though one commented that it would have been clearer if it had been listed rather than in narrative format.

Students indicated that they would like to see information about tutorials, assessments and learning approaches.

‘Some information on examinations and the learning style (what tutorials are, how practicals are assessed etc.) could be useful as well as an overview of the modules that are to be taken in the course.’

Also in wider discussions about the University web site during the focus group interview, one student said that she was keenly interested in the course structure and that this was difficult to find online an illustrative example of a course model. In fact she still finds it difficult to locate.

Although some information on learning about Biology at York was provided in the form of short written pieces by current students, accompanied by a photo, a few respondents requested a Blog facility to enable them to communicate directly with such students.

‘More in depth information/tips written by current students would be nice to get a Biology specific reference for how to cope with the first few weeks.’

Also a few requests were made by students for more pictures of the Department, to help students to become more familiar with it.

Relevance of the site once you arrive on campus

Students had not accessed the site since arriving on campus. They reported that other sources of information were readily available once they arrived in York, such as the handbook and international orientation.

When asked about use of the site after starting their degree, most students talked about the VLE more generally, suggesting the Welcome site was not of continuing relevance.
Actions for further development

The Welcome site appears to have been successful in its intention to provide information that is both practical and supportive to Biology and Biochemistry students who are coming to York. All the categories of information provided were used by incoming students.

The student comments received concerning the future development of the site indicated that the site had potential and should be better advertised in the letters sent to new students before they arrive so that they are more aware that this source of information is available to them in their transition to studying at university. Through out the year, the site has been advertised to UCAS visitors. Next year the site will be also be advertised via email. Also, the site should ideally be further developed to give more specific information about the course including information about tutorials, and practicals. A brief explanation of different methods of examination and feedback will be included. It would be good to coordinate information about housing, colleges and direct contact with the student union. Next year, other university organisations such as the Student Support Office and York Award will have a presence on this site.

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