

Making Sharing Easy in an Education Institution at the UHI

Summary

This case study covers the creation and introduction of an online service to facilitate the sharing of resources by staff across the University of the Highlands and Islands. The requirement for sharing resources has become more prominent as the University moves towards greater networked and blended delivery of learning and teaching. Previous experience has highlighted that due to the dispersed nature and the constitution of the University, the service would have to allow easy sharing and discovery of resources. In response to this challenge, a decision was made to develop a UHI Toolkit.

About the Institution

The University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) is the UK's newest and most northerly university. UHI is made up of 13 partner colleges and research centers and has around 50 local learning centers covering a geographical area larger than Belgium.

The project was developed by the University's newly established Educational Development Unit (EDU). As part of the Learning and Teaching Department, EDU is working closely with the University's programme teams to build capacity to develop and deliver high quality, accessible, learning experiences for UHI student by:

- Developing new blended learning teaching resources
- Developing staff who will use the new resources and delivery models

The high quality resources developed by this project aim to encourage students to become independent thinkers and provide them with an enhanced portfolio of graduate attributes suitable for employment in the 21st century.

The Challenge

It was identified that owing to the dispersed nature of UHI that there was a requirement to make good learning and teaching resources discoverable and encourage staff across the institution to share, develop and use these resources.

Alignment with UHI's strategic objectives:

UHI's strategic objectives for 2012 – 2017, highlighted the link between achieving research degree awarding powers with the need to "encourage and support academic staff to engage in the level of research, knowledge exchange and scholarly activity appropriate to their role, in relation to both their subject and its pedagogy, in order to promote a culture of enquiry throughout the university" (UHI 2011: 4.5 a).

To achieve this strategic objective it was important to extend the level and depth of collaboration within and across the partner organisations. It was felt that the Toolkit could provide the mechanism to facilitate and embed a greater level of collaborative working throughout the institution.

Although platforms existed within the institution that could be used for sharing resources, these were primarily communication tools which lacked the functionality required for searching and accessing resources. As such the existing tools had minimum reach. It was also noted that many staff spent a lot of time trying to locate 'good' resources but did not have a suitable mechanism of disseminating these discoveries. This resulted in duplication of effort and led to staff using many different tools and information sources to accomplish, in many instances, the same task.

By providing a mechanism for sharing resources, it is hoped that staff will appreciate the advantages of sharing material and experience, gain significant benefits from collaborative working using the Toolkit and building up personal networks within the UHI.

Specific challenges:

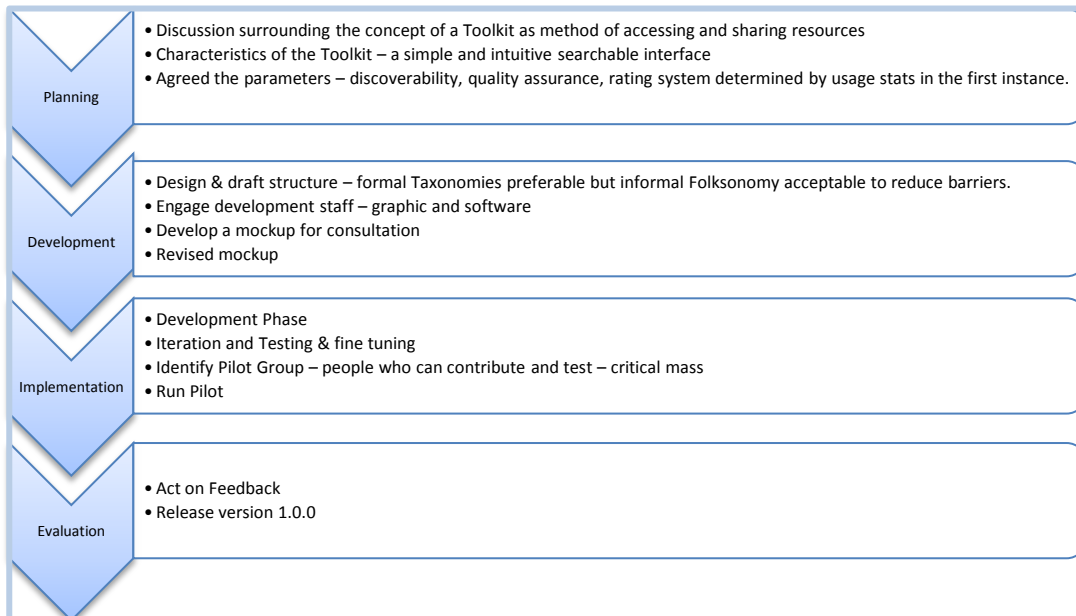
A meta-study of existing publications indicates that institutional attempts to implement repositories have difficulty in encouraging contributions (Luker & Shepperd, 2008; Taylor, 2009). Research into the success of repositories within educational settings and indeed our own experience confirmed that the uptake of repositories in institutions was varied. Some of the major barriers cited were, obtaining critical mass, the onerous nature of submitting to a repository, cataloging the resources, maintaining data integrity. In addition to this financial and human resources were limited.

Finding a solution:

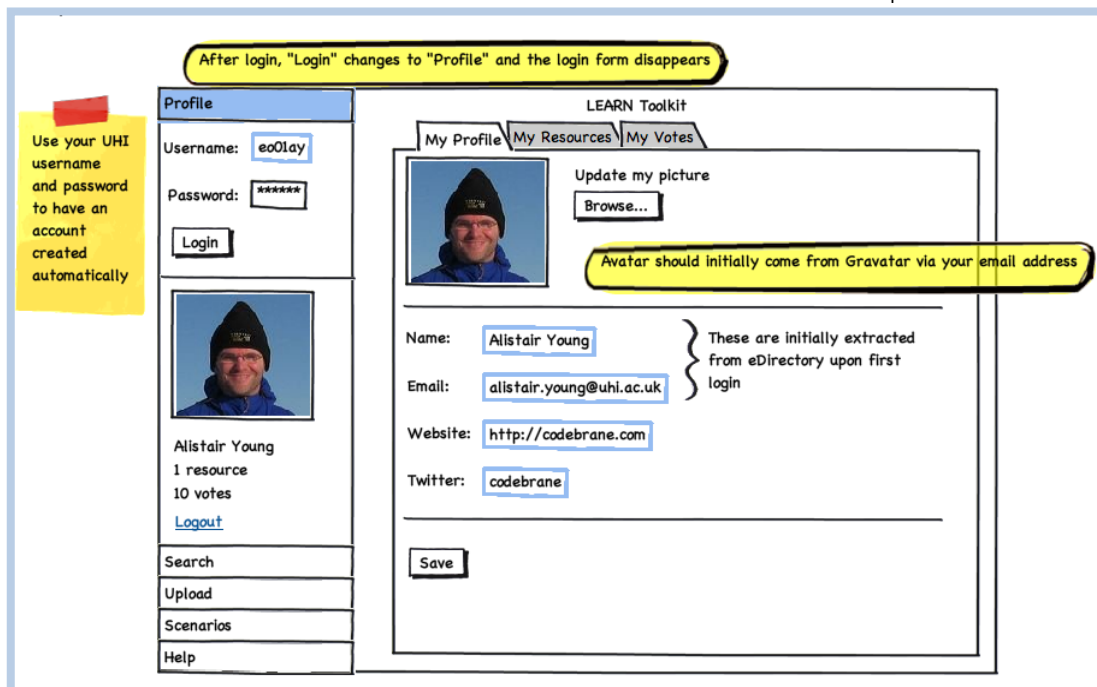
To secure funding there was a requirement that the solution be endorsed by the Dean of Learning and Teaching and driven forward by the learning and teaching department. Following extensive desktop research and talking to members of both academic and support staff research a Short Life Working Group (SLWG) was convened to discuss methods of sharing information.

The Activity

A SLWG was formed which was made up of representatives of a cross section of the institution and included members of the teaching, technical and support staff. The SLWG then worked through the following steps:



1 Work flow steps for the Toolkit SLWG



2 Mock up of Toolkit layout

The aim was to create a quick, easy and user friendly way for staff to share resources without incurring the huge administrative overhead of a full-blown repository.

The Outcomes

A toolkit has been created that meets the specification outlined by the SLWG. Staff continue to populate the toolkit with quality resources. So far feedback has been very positive and constructive. Training and awareness sessions have been provided and an iterative approach is being employed to ongoing development whereby it is our intention to release quarterly updates to the service. The toolkit has now been adopted as an institutional service and is being supported by the University's Learning and Information Services department. In addition the Educational Development Unit in collaboration with Learning and Information Services are working with the University's computing teaching staff to utilize the Toolkit as a live system that degree students can analyse and contribute to as part of their studies. This has potential benefits for both the students and the Toolkit.

The Toolkit has been rolled out across the university using technology such as Video Conferencing and, in the same way, could easily be rolled out across any other university, college, school or indeed any establishment that wanted to share resources. Discussions are currently under way within the University to release the code into the open source environment in the hope that others will find it useful and contribute to the ongoing development of the software.



3 Image from the Toolkit

There has been an increased in efficiency in finding 'good' resources with staff now coming to the Toolkit first rather than spending time searching the Internet. Staff confidence in sharing and using resources has increased and it is envisaged that this will have a positive impact on the quality of teaching and learning as a result of an increased use of quality resources.

Lessons Learnt

The Toolkit was developed by utilizing staff employed within the institution. The effect of this was that project staff were required to undertake work over and above normal staff hours, this required overtime arrangements. This lengthened the development timeline which was difficult to control as the key staff we only able to commit a limited number of hours to the project.

For future similar developments an option worth considering would be to use an external software development team to create the service within a fixed timescale would be worth considering. However, this approach would still require input from the University's development team. As this

service was being developed as part of a project it was not deemed a priority by all departments within the institution. This led to delays and conflict in development. Any similar future development would need to secure more widespread engagement across the relevant departments in advance.

Useful Links

Luker, W. & Shepperd, N. (2008), Implementing an Institutional Repository for Leeds Metropolitan University, available at <http://ie-repository.jisc.ac.uk/362/> (Accessed 16th January 2012)

Taylor, S. (2009), The University of Bolton Institutional Repository, available at <http://ie-repository.jisc.ac.uk/423/> (Accessed 16th January 2012)

UHI Strategic Plan 2012 – 17 [online] Available from <<http://www.uhi.ac.uk/en/about-uhi/strategy-and-planning> (Accessed 17th January 2012)

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