

Harnessing the power of Office 365 to provide a social learning environment through a new Student Portal

Adrian Ellison¹ and Mauli Arora²

¹ University of West London, St Mary's Road, Ealing, London W5 5RF, UK, Adrian.Ellison@uwl.ac.uk

² University of West London, St Mary's Road, Ealing, London W5 5RF, UK, Mauli.Arora@uwl.ac.uk

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1. ABSTRACT

The University of West London (UWL) has harnessed the potential of a Cloud-based suite of collaboration tools (Microsoft Office 365, offered free of charge to higher education institutions) to create a personalised, interactive, social platform to both improve the learning experience and to enable students to combine social learning with their academic study.

UWL describes how it engaged with its students to design and refine the requirements for a new student portal, outsourced the development of hosted SharePoint, and delivered an award-winning solution¹ in just 5 weeks.

2. AIM

UWL's aim was to develop a Student Portal that would provide students not only with a gateway to all relevant information and systems that would support their academic needs but also to provide the students with social networking tools so that they could engage with fellow classmates and friends in a safe, secure and academically driven environment.

3. APPROACH

Three approaches were considered: an in-house developed bespoke solution; an "off the shelf" on premise solution; and a solution hosted entirely in the Cloud.

The in-house bespoke solution was ruled out because of the high development, support and infrastructure costs. It would also take too long to implement - the University had set a go-live target date of the last week of August 2012, to coincide with the start of enrolment. The off-the-shelf solution hosted on premise was ruled out because of the high infrastructure, support and maintenance costs. Most of the off-shelf solutions also lacked the modern messaging and collaboration tools that were essential for the success of the project. Therefore UWL decided to opt for a free solution hosted entirely in the Cloud. Microsoft's Office 365 product suite was selected over Google Docs, given UWL's existing investment and skills in using Microsoft technology.

The key deliverables of the project were:

- A new Student Portal providing a common gateway to all services and information sources (e.g., VLE, Library, Email, course and module information; careers and employability);
- All students and staff members to have their own website (called "My Site") which they could customise, share with fellow students and comment on each other's My Sites;
- Students should be able to use personal workspace ("My Content") to store documents, share documents and pictures, write blogs and work collaboratively in user-defined small or large groups;

¹ UWL's Student Portal in Office 365 won the 2012 UCISA-Eduserv Award for Excellence and has been short listed for the THE Leadership and Management "ICT Initiative of the Year" Award, 2013.

- A common way of providing notices, alerts and information, targeted by course and module as appropriate;
- A safe and secure social network ('My Connections'), where students could exchange and comment on ideas at the school level, course level, module level, club level and campus level;
- Cloud-based storage ('My Content') where students can upload and easily share data;
- Use of Microsoft Lync (a unified communications platform that connects students and staff with instant messaging, voice, video and desktop sharing; included as part of the Office 365 suite) to break down the barriers of multi-site campus;
- Integration of Office 365 student portal with UWL's Active Directory to provide seamless sign-on for staff and students;
- Integration of Office 365 with UWL's core systems including timetabling (CMIS), student records (UNIT-e) and the VLE (Blackboard);
- Migration of all 12,000 student mailboxes from on premises email to Office 365;
- Students would have their email account for life;
- Pre-enrolled students should also be able to access the student portal.

At the heart of the project was the desire to deliver a personalised student experience - seamlessly bringing together all academic, administrative and social IT systems so that teaching and learning can be tailored to meet the needs of each individual student - a core part of the University and IT strategies.

Students were engaged from the very start of the project and right the way through. They helped with the design, testing, refinement and training.

4. RESULT

The first phase of the Student Portal, which delivered all the key features listed above, went live on 28 August 2012. **Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4** illustrate the design of the portal, the arrangement of the "MyUWL" "apps" and a typical student "MySite". The second phase, which included a number of additions and enhancements to the Student Portal, went live on 2 February 2013. A further phase, which will focus on adding content targeted to members of staff, is being planned for launch in autumn 2013.

Student feedback gathered after the launch of the Student Portal was very positive. 89% of students felt that the collaborative tools provided through the Student Portal would help them in their studies. The feedback from students and staff members who are using Lync for distance learning courses has been particularly positive. Out of the 35 staff involved in the Lync pilot that were surveyed, 92% of these staff found communication through Lync very effective. Here are some of the comments received:

"I love the fact that as a student you can create a profile that looks like Facebook [which] allows me to meet my classmates before meeting them in class."

"I've got my own profile and my own blog on there that I update regularly... I update my status in the same way that I update my Twitter."

"My lecturers can share documents with me and I can share documents with them very quickly and easily."

"[It] gets us to share ideas, which is ultimately is what university is about."

UWL's students made a video of their new portal, which can be seen here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7o0ju21PDI>

UWL has worked with its partner, Fulcrum Worldwide, to generate a framework so that other institutions can harness the power of Office 365 to similar effect.

5. AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHIES



Adrian Ellison is Director of Information Technology at the University of West London. Previously he held senior positions in the ICT departments at the London School of Economics and Political Science; Royal Holloway, University of London and at the University of Leeds.

Adrian is also Secretary to the Executive Committee of the University and Colleges Information Systems Association (UCISA).

Adrian is a graduate of the University of Bristol and a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.



Mauli Arora is a Business Analyst and Project Manager within IT Services at the University of West London.