Wider Horizons: a regional portal for lifelong learning

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The paper describes the development of a major new regional online service. Our project is creating an online educational environment open to students and members of the public to provide them with services and information they need to progress from one form of education to another within the local region. The project is being carried out at the University of Worcester in collaboration with the Hereford and Worcester Lifelong Learning Network, one of a series of networks set up across the UK. We hope that the outcome of our project will lead to setting up of similar systems in other regions, and indeed, in other parts of Europe.

1.1. Background

Viv Bell is Learning Technology Coordinator for the HWLLN and Andrew Rothery is Head of Innovation in E-Learning at the University of Worcester and both are jointly leading the project to develop the new portal and online environment, called "Wider Horizons". The project started in March 2006 and the initial prototype was launched in May 2008.

The aim of Wider Horizons is to provide an online environment for information and interaction. Examples of services envisaged are: information about colleges, universities and courses, online taster courses, online discussion areas, access to information and resources, personal web space to enable learners to maintain and share portfolio or other information, personal communication tools such as blogs, and access to information and guidance.

A number of stakeholders will provide information: the university, the Further Education colleges in the surrounding region, educational and public organizations locally, and employers. We also hope that students themselves will contribute information and advice to each other through social networking opportunities.

1.2. Alternatives

When planning the design brief a number of alternatives were considered. The system needed to include access for authors to "information areas" on the portal where content could be edited and uploaded. Initially the team decided to use UPortal (an open access portal system) to build the infrastructure, but this proved an unnecessarily complicated approach. A simpler approach was adopted whereby a main website is linked to a collection of interactive information areas set up using Moodle.

1.3. Conclusions

The decision to link Moodle with a main website solved the challenging problem of designing a regional virtual learning environment that is also a web based information portal. The first stage of the portal is now operational, with a number of Moodle information areas already created. A login facility has been created from the main website and users can create accounts which give them access to the information areas. The team have begun user testing with small groups of users and this will be rolled out on a larger scale during Autumn 2008, leading to full implementation by January 2009.

2.   ABOUT THE LIFELONG LEARNING NETWORK

The overall objective for Lifelong Learning Networks (LLNs) is to improve the coherence, clarity and certainty of progression opportunities for vocational learners into and through higher education. The Lifelong Learning Networks are funded by the Higher Educational Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

The HWLLN was funded from August 1st 2006. The role of the LLN is to increase the opportunities for vocational learners of all ages to progress into higher education in Herefordshire and Worcestershire and succeed once there. The main objectives of the LLN are: curriculum development to facilitate progression, information, advice, guidance and learner support systems and production of network-wide progression agreements.

3.   WIDER HORIZONS

Provision for funding Wider Horizons was included in the LLN's initial plans. The concept of a regional portal as a delivery platform for LLN services seemed an ideal solution, especially as users in the region are spread out over a large geographical rural area. Funding will be available until 2010 and it is envisaged that after the end of the LLN project Wider Horizons will be mostly self-sustaining.

The main target users for Wider Horizons will be students or prospective students from Herefordshire and Worcestershire. The purpose of the portal is to provide information on progression towards higher education in the region. Users who create an account on the system will be able to talk to other users, join in discussions, use the e-portfolio system "My Horizons" and access the information areas.

Wider Horizons does not include children at school, it is for those who are students, or thinking of becoming students at further or higher education level, mainly over 18 years of age. There is no upper limit, as the LLN promotes participation in education at all stages of a person's life and career.

Stakeholders in Wider Horizons will be all the educational providers in Herefordshire and Worcestershire, organizations who give information and advice to students such as Aim Higher and Connexions, and eventually employers, local government organisations and training providers will be asked to contribute.
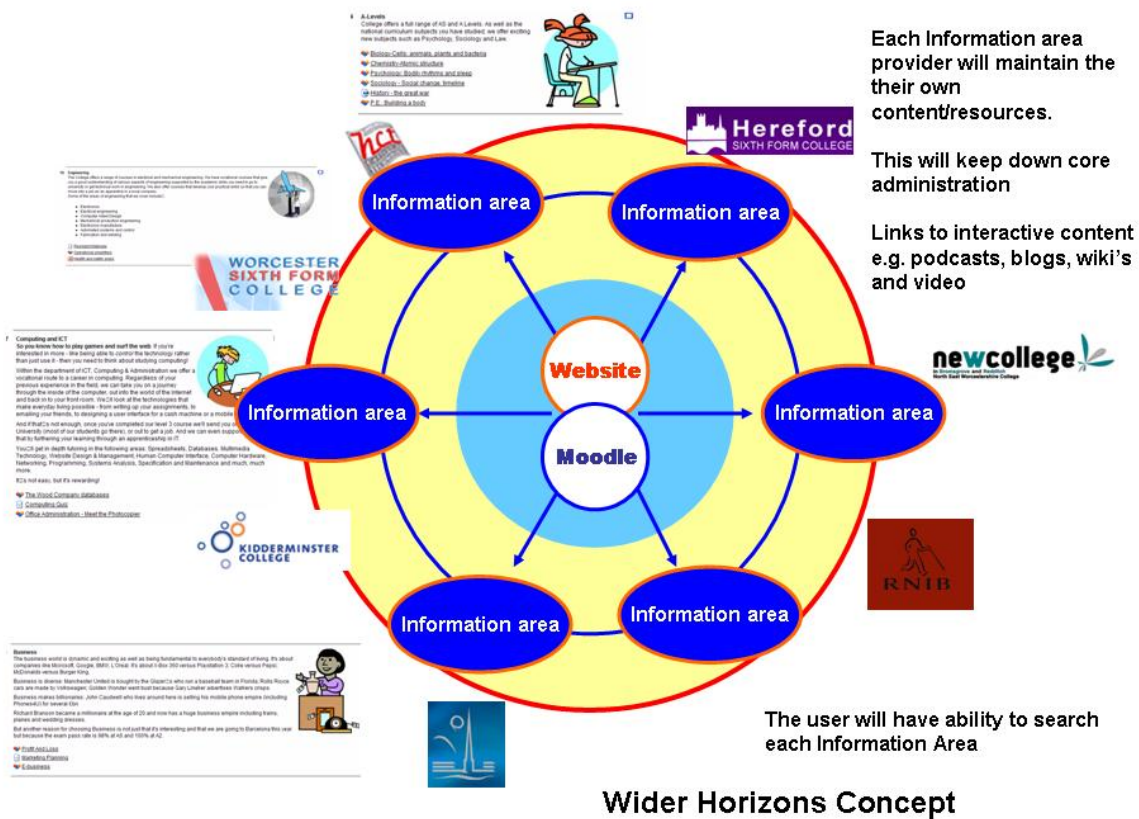
4.   DESIGN AND CONCEPT

The concept for the portal is based on a main website linked to information areas whereby a main website with a small number of sub pages (or tabs) was linked out to Moodle information areas – designed using Moodle "courses" as templates. Though not actual courses being taught, the information areas can be created using the Moodle course-creation templates and tools.

This solved the complicated problem of creating accounts and logins as Moodle could handle the accounts and logins, and it made it easy to devolve the authoring and uploading of courses to the stakeholders rather than through a third person. This also cut down core administration of these areas. A decision was made to install one version of Moodle held centrally at the University of Worcester and to designate several information areas to these individual organizations.

The information areas are "owned" by the stakeholders who have admin access into the Moodle. The design of the Moodle areas are "themed" so the transition between these areas and the main website is seamless and users can move between them easily.

This is illustrated by the diagram below:

Wider Horizons Concept

Each Information area provider will maintain the their own content/resources.

This will keep down core administration

Links to interactive content e.g. podcasts, blogs, wiki's and video

The user will have ability to search each Information Area

The website has been given a clean modern look. It has 7 main pages (or tabs) and each of these contain links out to the Moodle information areas.
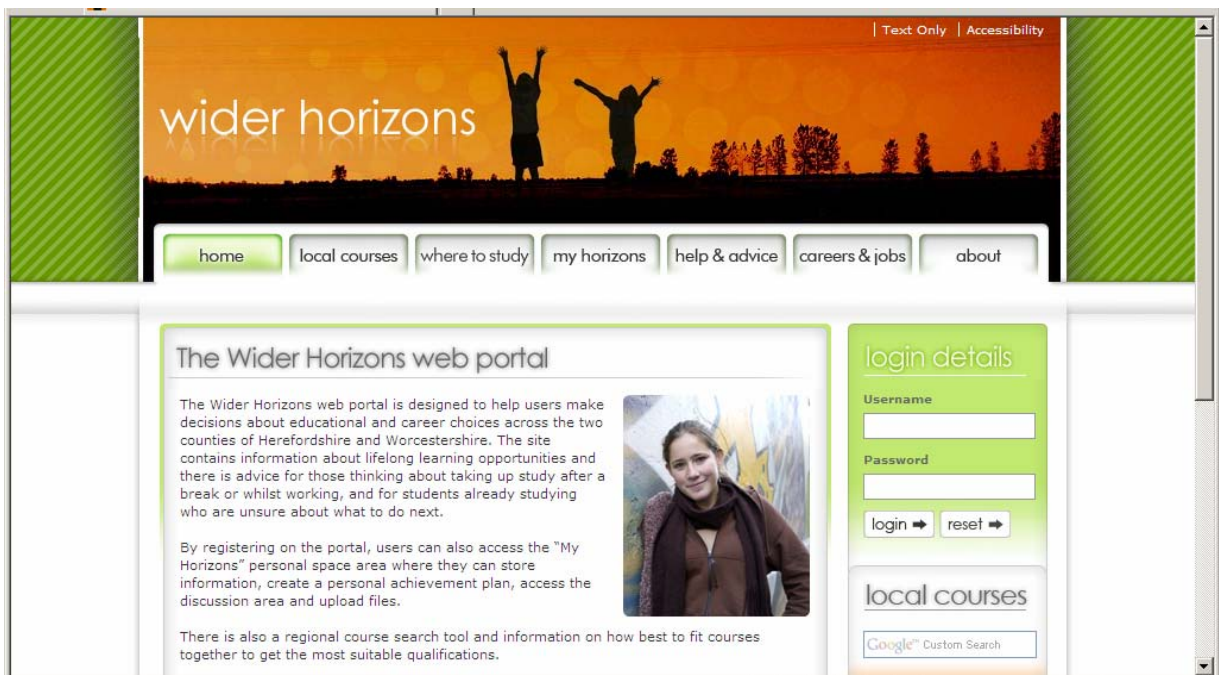
5. WIDER HORIZONS INFORMATION SERVICES

5.1. The main web site

The main web site provides information through tabs to:

- **Local courses**. There is a search facility for users looking for local HE courses in the region and links to a variety course finding tools. There are also links to the taster courses held in the Moodle information areas.

- **Where to study**. There is a map of all the educational institutions in the region with information about each one. This section will be expanded in the future to include any other information the institutions feel might help the user decide on the most suitable place of study.

- **Help and advice**. This section has information and advice for users on a range of topics, including: mature student support, disability advice, financial help, careers advice, student services, discussion forums and more. Future developments will include a progression tool for users so they can plan the next stage of their education and career.

- **Careers and jobs.** The careers and jobs section includes examples of career paths, local employer information, example CVs, and in the future will include forums involving employers.

5.2. Information areas

Within the main website there are links to the Information Areas in Moodle. Thought the main website is open, users will need to register and log in to access the Information Areas. A number of very different types of area are planned: some will be rather like mini-courses, but many will be interactive information services.

We are building a collection of taster courses. These show examples of the course activities and can include video interviews with students and staff, and can involve activities for the user such as quizzes. The concept is to give an impression of what a particular course is like to help prospective students make decisions. We plan to have a range of taster courses: some from each college in the region, examples from each subject, and examples for part-time, full-time and work-based students.

Another information area is for information and guidance about working in higher education. This is a mini-course and though it mainly contains information, Moodle tools are available to introduce activities and interaction as usage develops.

We plan to provide information areas about particular career options, about particular subjects taught across the region - indeed anything which will be of value to the community of Wider Horizons users.

Another type of information area can provide personal tools: this is described in the next section "My Horizons".

There are two major benefits to using Moodle. First, there is a strong element of activity and interaction within this kind of software which is not available in standard web-based or portal systems. Using Moodle we can present information in a lively engaging manner. Secondly, each information provider can be given an independent area which they can manage themselves. This way responsibility for authoring and keeping things up to date can be clearly devolved to specific individuals or organizations. It is hoped that this will encourage sustainability.

6. MY HORIZONS PERSONAL SPACE

6.1. Personal tools

As well as providing information from different sources, Wider Horizons also provides a range of personal tools for its users. The tools are a mixture of file upload and communication tools. We wish to give users space to keep important documents, to maintain information about themselves, and to

share this with other people; also, we wish to encourage communications between students and between tutors, students and institutions.

The rationale for our approach is twofold. First, despite the availability of public open Web 2.0 tools such as Flickr, MySpace, Facebook etc for webspace and social networking, we felt that students in the region would welcome a separate area for their educational information and contacts. They can provide and share information about their education, and make contacts with others about educational matters without having to also share personal information about themselves and about their social activities. If they choose to share information with teachers and employers they might not wish them to also know about their hobbies, parties, relatives and political opinions.

Secondly, we wanted to provide personal tools in a single environment so that users do not have to log into different systems for different aspects. Once logged into Wider Horizons, students can access the appropriate information areas and the personal tools. The information area within Moodle containing the personal tools is called "My Horizons"

Clearly the operational evaluation of our system will confirm whether or not we are right with this rationale, but from the initial feedback from partners in our project this seems to be the right approach to start from. As the system comes into use, we intend to monitor the views of student users and stakeholders and modify our approach as appropriate.

My Horizons provides a wide range of tools. Many of these come within standard Moodle. For example there is a simple user profile available to other registered users and a blog which can be made public to other registered users. Discussion forums and chat rooms are available for communication purposes.

6.2. Portfolio

In addition to the Moodle personal tools, we have introduced an extra "block" called My Info which is based on an e-portfolio add-on. My Info gives users a text editor and a file upload facility. It is arranged so users can create a profile, a curriculum vitae (CV) and information about their educational background and aspirations. In addition there is an area which is rather like a blog but less structured: users can upload a series of written items, which can include uploaded files. This is deliberately left unstructured so users can use it for whatever purpose is best for them. So it could be used as a series of reflective thoughts, or as a diary, or as a list of achievements, or a place to upload important documents and papers, or a place to record their work experience with uploaded photographs, or to record a portfolio of their work. This area is called My Things.

People can share the items in My Info with anyone, even people who are not registered users of My Horizons. This is done by simply giving the url to those people with whom the user wishes to share. Within My Info people can select which items they wish to make open and which items they would like to share. We anticipate that students may wish to share their My Info with other students, or with their teacher, or with a prospective employer. We hope that different people will use the facility in different ways and we look forward to monitoring and evaluating the use to see how valuable this has been.

Some institutions in the region do have their own e-portfolio system and students registered on their courses would of course use the system in the institution where they are studying. However some institutions do not, so My Info will be available to them. However, since Wider Horizons is independent of any educational institution, My Info will be available to students even after they have completed the particular course, and they can use it "between courses" (i.e. not a student) and can continue to use it if they undertake another course at a later stage. It is genuinely personal.

6.3. Communications

The communication aspects are expected to work best where there is a specific purpose or topic with someone to oversee and facilitate the interactions. For example, there will be students who are following similar courses at different colleges and universities in the region. Particular examples within our Lifelong Learning Network are Health Studies and Education. With the agreement and support of the tutors, students in one institution can join a discussion forum together with students in another institution. They might use this to exchange experiences and advice on a particular

curriculum topic, or perhaps at a more general level coping with being a student. The discussion forums would be set up in My Horizons and the tutors encouraged to help promote suitable use.

More open topics would be possible, for example forums which provide help and advice on a certain topic. Though these could in principle consist entirely of student contributions, we expect that they would be set up at the initiative of a particular expert or adviser who could then add to the discussions.

Our concept is for the regional community of those engaged in lifelong learning and higher education to be able to interact with each other and with the staff in institutions, both teachers and advisers.

7.   A MODEL FOR OTHER REGIONS

The concept and design of the portal works well for our region - which is a large rural area with one university and ten colleges of further education. Our model was to design a system with a central core, with information areas that are owned and managed by the stakeholders, that is seamless to the user. Our model could work well in other similar situations, especially where there is a consortium of partners who work together to support students.

Though Wider Horizons has been developed within the Herefordshire and Worcestershire region around the University of Worcester, its principles would apply equally to other regions in the UK, and indeed in any part of Europe. It aims to provide services and communications to people in a region who are engaged in study, or are thinking of studying. In particular it supports movement from one course to another, and encourages movement towards higher education and university level courses. Many universities are in regions where there are several colleges or other educational institutions working with students of all kinds, at all ages and at different stages of their careers. Because Wider Horizons provides an online environment which is independent of any one particular institution, it can encourage progression and a sense of educational community.

To succeed, it requires a number of stakeholders whose ownership and commitment will keep the online educational environment up to date and lively. Our starting point has been the ten local colleges who work in partnership with the university. Each stakeholder acts as an information provider, or author of different parts of the system, and its staff contribute to the discussions and personal interactions. As well as colleges, there are a number of educational organizations in the area; Wider Horizons can give them access to a community of staff and students to help them fulfil their missions. Employers too might have an important role to play, perhaps advising on what qualifications are needed for different types of work, or for supporting work based learning of different kinds. Again, availability of such organizations and institutions is common in many other regions and they would find it useful to have an online environment such as Wider Horizons to participate in.

8.   FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

Wider Horizons will continue to be funded over the next two years by the LLN but sustainability has been built into the project since the conception of the idea. Developments in the next two years will include: strategies for creating and collecting content, user testing and development of the e-portfolio area, promotion of the portal to other stakeholders - including local government, employers, training organizations and student services, development of login procedures which may include single sign-on through college and university systems, marketing and promotion of the portal to other local groups, dissemination of findings and reporting on progress to interested parties.

Wider Horizons will never be a finished product. We hope that as its use grows, the content will grow too. Within the infrastructure created, additional stakeholders can easily be included, and the number of different types of information area is unlimited. So we have started something which we hope will expand substantially within the same scaleable framework.