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Innovative Practice with e-Learning



# Case Studies

Changing culture

Building the 21st century college  
North Hertfordshire College of Further Education

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## Background

**North Hertfordshire College, a general further education college based in Stevenage, Hitchin and Letchworth, serves approximately 2,500 full time and 15,000 part time students each academic year.**

## The challenge

In the mid-to-late 1990s, employers in Stevenage were experiencing a shortage of the technologically skilled workforce they required. College senior management saw that it was vital to contribute to a new vision for the town by creating a centre of educational excellence. The new build would offer a technologically sophisticated environment, which would enhance the effectiveness of learning and teaching, but also improve the efficiency of course management.

## Innovative solutions

The Stevenage Centre was opened in 2003 with the aim of providing a state-of-the-art learning environment that would offer the best possible educational and training opportunities for the local community. The main entrance functions as a multi-purpose hall and reception area, known as the Atrium, which houses an internet café, a learning shop and cubicles where guidance officers can provide information on career pathways and advice on a range of learning support needs. The centre now has 3,500 students using its facilities each day.

Courses offered at the new Stevenage Centre include business studies, IT and science. All are now supported by a flexible suite of learning support options:

- Hubs of computers within a 'learning shop' encouraging independent learning, with support available where needed.
- Directed learning, where computers are arranged in suites, enabling groups of learners to follow instructions displayed on a screen.

- A learning development centre offering basic skills training.
- A mock office supporting elements of the business studies curriculum.
- Open access IT areas within the internet café, providing recreational access to web-based resources and games for learners during lunchtimes and the evening.
- Computers, printers and scanners available within the learning resources area, enabling integrated use of print- and IT-based resources.
- Service loaning laptops on a weekly basis from the learning resource centre.

The aim has been to use the widest possible application of technology in support of 21st century learning and teaching. Teaching rooms are uniformly 'hi-tech' with interactive whiteboards, video data projectors, computers and DVD players and digital cameras as standard equipment. To maximise the use of the college's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), and of other web-based and e-learning resources in classes, access to the intranet and internet is also possible in each teaching room. However, to offer the most flexible and responsive learning space, the college is also implementing wireless network access.

The guidance service has started to use mobile technologies to improve the reach and immediacy of its provision. Guidance officers have a visible presence in the newly designed Atrium at Stevenage; using wireless-enabled laptops and tablet PCs in discreet, screened off areas, they can provide access to a variety of support and guidance services for learners as they enter or leave the building. Formal interviews can then be arranged for a later date.

New builds are costly and, as a result, the efficiency of course management becomes a priority. A business process management system, Ultimus®, has been introduced which allows mobile processing of information. With this staff can

“The technology has enabled us to take learning into workplaces, community venues and people's homes. It has facilitated links into the secondary schools. In the first full year, our student numbers have increased by 11%.”

Chris McLean, Director of IT, North Hertfordshire College

act on business processes wherever they have access to a computer on any of the four campus sites or community outreach centres. The software also provides transparent measurement of process performance, which enables departmental managers to set service standards and create a culture of reliability and professionalism.

The results have been positive. North Hertfordshire College has seen an 11% growth in student intake since the opening of the new centre, as learners have responded with enthusiasm to the technology-enabled environment. Statistics show a significant increase in the use of the VLE, for example the daily page view statistics increased from 3,080 in October 2003 to 31,138 in June 2005.

### The technology

To equip the Stevenage Centre, North Hertfordshire College purchased 520 Dell™ PCs for learners and for staff. Specially adapted computers and laptops with changes to keyboard size and mouse design have been introduced to support learners with disabilities.

To ensure maximum integration of technology within the curriculum, it was decided to place a range of IT provision, from interactive whiteboards to data projectors, within every teaching room. Traditional resources such as overhead projectors and flip-charts are not made readily available.

Management of the administrative processes within the college is through Ultimus® business process management software. Staff and student portals and intranets are available for use alongside the VLE, Blackboard®.

### Making it happen

Administration and registration processes need to be efficient and effective to maximise return on investment. Business process management software can facilitate this, and should be considered.

In order to fully adapt to teaching with technology, practitioners need to be confident in the reliability of the

equipment and infrastructure. Technical support staff and training are therefore key to the success of a venture such as this – ongoing staff development in the use of IT, including mobile and wireless technologies, is vital.

### Key points for successful innovation

- Business plans must address the sustainability as well as the start-up costs of introducing technology into practice and administration.
- Sustainability could be achieved by creating new markets and aiming for greater efficiency in management, administration and support of students. However, the revenue support necessary to adopt IT effectively must not be under estimated.
- Managers need to set measurable goals for use of technology in teaching and be bold in seeing these through.
- Phased introduction of a wireless local area network (WLAN) is sometimes necessary. Use this as an opportunity to implement a rolling programme of staff development in mobile and wireless learning.



“The college is not just a set of buildings with technology; it is the opportunity to do something extraordinary.”

Roger Gochin, Principal, North Hertfordshire College

### Final word

A future aim is to provide every enrolled learner with a mobile device to access both in-house and external resources to support their learning, and to extend the use of SMS messaging. In time, it may be possible to send small learning objects and website links to learners' mobile phones to add value to what takes place in the classroom.

“A 21st century college has got to allow its staff greater freedom, and to accept greater responsibility for what goes on in the classroom and beyond. What you are trying to create first is independent staff within a supported framework, who are creative and innovative, and then you try, through interactive and open access delivery, to create the same spirit of self-reliance, self-awareness... in the students.”

Roger Gochin, Principal, North Hertfordshire College

### For further research

North Hertfordshire College – [www.nhc.ac.uk](http://www.nhc.ac.uk)

Ultimus® business process management software – [www.ultimus.com](http://www.ultimus.com)

This case study is based on case studies of innovative e-learning practice collected for JISC by the Open University – [www.jisc.ac.uk/eli\\_oucasestudies.html](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/eli_oucasestudies.html)

