Supporting widening access and social inclusion via an ICT based network

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Abstract: Widening access and social inclusion often necessitates the use of off campus, outreach centers. Whilst this solves the problem of bringing learning to the learners, Beattie (1999) and the Cabinet Office (2002), identified that such initiatives often created additional problems, for example, the loss of on-site essential backup systems such as support, guidance and advice.

Recognizing this as a serious oversight, Reid Kerr College, Paisley, in partnership with several organisations both from within education and the local business environment have joined together to devise an information technology based solution to this problem. The solution entails an ICT support network to provide access to information, guidance and support throughout the local community.

The overall aim of this project is to fill the identified gaps in provision and in doing so increase participation and retention rates within those areas considered by the Scottish Executive to be amongst the poorest in Scotland.

This paper will examine the process through which this project was established and report on the initial findings.

Introduction

Reid Kerr College, Paisley is a community college within the central belt of Scotland committed to social inclusion. This is confirmed through the college's recruitment programme, which includes a geographical area representing 12 of the 17 social inclusion areas in the West of Scotland. As one of the largest colleges in Scotland it currently hosts some 18,000 students. The college provides community provision within over 130 outreach centres which include disability centres, libraries, scout huts and local community centres. In 1999 the college supported just 200 students in the community. By 2003 this has increased to some 3,000 students (Reid Kerr 2002). However, in light of these increasing numbers, the college's student services department raised concerns over the lack of 'on site' support for these students. One of the major challenges arising from the expansion of social inclusion, and increased opportunities through outreach centres, is the associated need for student access to the range of student support services (Doyle and Cumberford 2002).

However, whilst support is fundamental to the success of the social inclusion agenda, it is vital that the support be available where and when the students require it. The Scottish Office responding to the public consultation on lifelong learning stated that:

> **The government agrees that the basis for the further development of adult guidance in Scotland must be strong local guidance networks which are easily accessible to individuals**

(The Scottish Office, 1997:1)

Another major barrier experienced by young people is the lack of effective communication between agencies along with the lack of co-coordinated and comprehensive information about learning opportunities and a range of support services. A Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF)

study into social exclusion found that potentially excluded youths saw the benefits of education and training and looked *locally* for advice (JRF 2000). A later study by JRF (2001) found that such groups often found it difficult to find, or obtain, information and guidance on the options available to them. Therefore, not only is information and guidance key to the success of inclusion into education, this must be provided locally.

The Beattie Committee Report (1999) also identified the lack of suitable mechanisms for providing community based learners with equivalent access to essential student services. The report emphasised the importance of suitable locations where learners, in particular young people, can get direct access to advice and information. Recognizing the need, and to overcome this, and other related problems, Reid Kerr College established their 'Remote Access to Student Support Services' (RASSS) project which provides a community based one-stop-shop facility which uses information technology as the medium and the Internet the means to widen access to student services. With approximately 1000 of its students studying from home the site offers information, advice, and even access to specialist support staff. This, coupled with the 3000 students studying at remote sites, means that almost 25% of students who would previously have been denied access to the same level of support as students studying at the main college campus now have this essential provision. Students can find out more about full time, part time and distance learning courses the complete range of student support services and link to external agencies such as employment services. They can contact the college by email, telephone or electronic enquiry forms. This service is also available to students studying within the main college campus who require access to advice and information.

Remote Access to Student Support Services Project
This project was the result of government funding obtained through the Strategic Innovation Fund in 2000. The project was a joint effort involving 13 institutions of which Reid Kerr was the lead institution. Of the other 12 institutions, there was representation from Scottish Enterprise, Chamber of Commerce, Paisley Partnership, local education authorities, employment and careers, West and South of Scotland Network (WeSSNET), Royal National Institute for the Blind and Capability Scotland. For 'The strategic framework for Further Education' (Scottish Office 1999) emphasises that the single most effective step that a college could take to improve access is to work in partnership with other agencies. This was also a point raised by Beattie (1999). The stimuli for the bid came from a lack of centralized, focused and timely provision of advice and guidance within the local community.

Prior to the development of RASSS, the online support available to students at Reid Kerr College consisted of a rudimentary College web site, comprising of just one page of information. This single-page site simply listed an address and telephone number and provided no further information. Students wishing assistance from the Student Support Services were required to contact the office at the main campus, by post, telephone or personal visit. This was particularly unsuitable and inflexible for students attending any of the Local Community Centres (Outreach Centres).

In January 2001, having successfully obtained funding, the RASSS project began. The stated aim of the Project was *to deliver a range of student support services to students studying within six pilot Outreach Centres.*

This was to be achieved by:
- Developing an Online Student Support Services system, to provide easy online access to the full range of student support services.
- Providing web-based discussion and chat facilities to encourage dialogue between students.

- Equipping each Centre with a video conferencing facility linked to Student Support Services at the main College campus.
- Training staff to use the video conferencing equipment

To ensure that those that are visually or hearing impaired are not disadvantaged all content created is compatible with the college's standard software for visually impaired students (JAWS and Zoomtext) and all audio and video content contains subtitles.

Overall the initiative aims to provide:

- Students within the community access to the fullest range of College services and support
- An innovative facility, unique in the West of Scotland
- A tool to help improve student achievement, attainment and retention levels
- Assist students moving into employment
- Accessible services for students with disabilities or particular support needs
- A pilot model that can be expanded to other centres
- A sustainable means of improving the student learning experience, articulation into FE and HE and ultimately employability
- A sustainable and collaborative provision involving all key agencies

The system provides a Community based one-stop facility, creating a social as well as service environment. The key emphasis is on assisting student access and progression by the co-coordinated collaboration between all relevant agencies including academic guidance.

The RASSS System
All aspects of the RASSS system are accessed via a single online entry point, located at the following web address: www.reidkerr.ac.uk/guidance This address gives access to the three main elements to the system, namely:

1. a comprehensive network of online information
2. a video conferencing facility designed to allow remote one to one contact between students and student support services staff
3. an online discussion group and chatroom system

Readers of this paper are encouraged to explore the RASSS website themselves (recently renamed Guidance Guru to reflect a more user friendly system), via the link given above. It provides an excellent model which could be adapted to the needs of other educational institutions, by careful alteration of the specific details of, for example, courses, facilities, names of personnel, for the overall structure and format of the RASSS system is readily transferable. The home page offers students links to the major categories of information carried by the website including; finance, childcare, study support, Admissions Unit, course information, centre locations, guidance and counseling, Student Association, library services. These links contain detailed guidance on the full range of issues covered by the College Student Support Services. They include the option to download some application forms from the site, or complete interactive forms online. These cover issues such as Housing, Nursery places, and so on.

The system has now been running for 18 months and continues to be modifies and changes as problems are highlighted.

Conclusions

Student support is vital to the success of social inclusion and, widening participation and progression and retention. The RASSS system was developed to overcome an identified gap in the colleges provision within its outreach centres. This system provides those most vulnerable to social exclusion with the advice and guidance then need at a time and most place accessible to them.

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