

Colchester Institute

Environment for Learning

Institutional context

Colchester Institute is the largest vocational education college in Essex, with 9,500 students on two campuses in Colchester and Clacton. The college offers a wide range of full-time and part-time vocational provision at a range of levels. There are around 2,800 full-time and 6,500 part-time students, and 480 full-time equivalent staff. The majority of full-time enrolments are aged 16 to 18.

Key specialisms

Colchester Institute is a Centre of Vocational Excellence for hospitality and food studies. There is substantial work-based learning provision, mainly in the areas of construction, engineering and business. A range of HE courses is validated through the college partnership with Anglia Polytechnic University (APU).

Current MLE

Student Record System	EBS ¹
Management Information for Staff	EBS
Virtual Learning Environment	LE2 ²
Library	OLIB ³
Timetabling	EBS Timetabling
Registers	EBS e-Registers
Assessment	Question Mark Perception ⁴
Curriculum Planning	Independent process
Finance	EBS eFinancials
Human Resources	The HR system is separate, Microsoft Great Plains ⁵ not linked at all to other systems. Responsible senior manager is reluctant to interoperate data. However, managers have relevant access to the data through a portal view of e-manager.
Staff Portals	Web Products which includes timetabling reports and Agent. EBS Agent, gives live view into EBS (courses, fees, pictures of students). There is also the Intranet for general information.
Student Portals	Internet and Le2
Other	Have a fully working MLE with Fretwell Downing EBS and LE2. All systems are currently FD or Microsoft

Standards and specifications

Colchester Institute led a project in the JISC Interoperability Pilots programme, and the college is aware of the wider context of metadata standards and specifications. When the college procured systems from FD Learning, it was recognised that a working system was needed while standards became more established. The longer term aim of the college is to consider ways of reducing licensing costs and to have a single point of entry through a personalised portal view for everyone. Currently there is no automatic data exchange with APU.

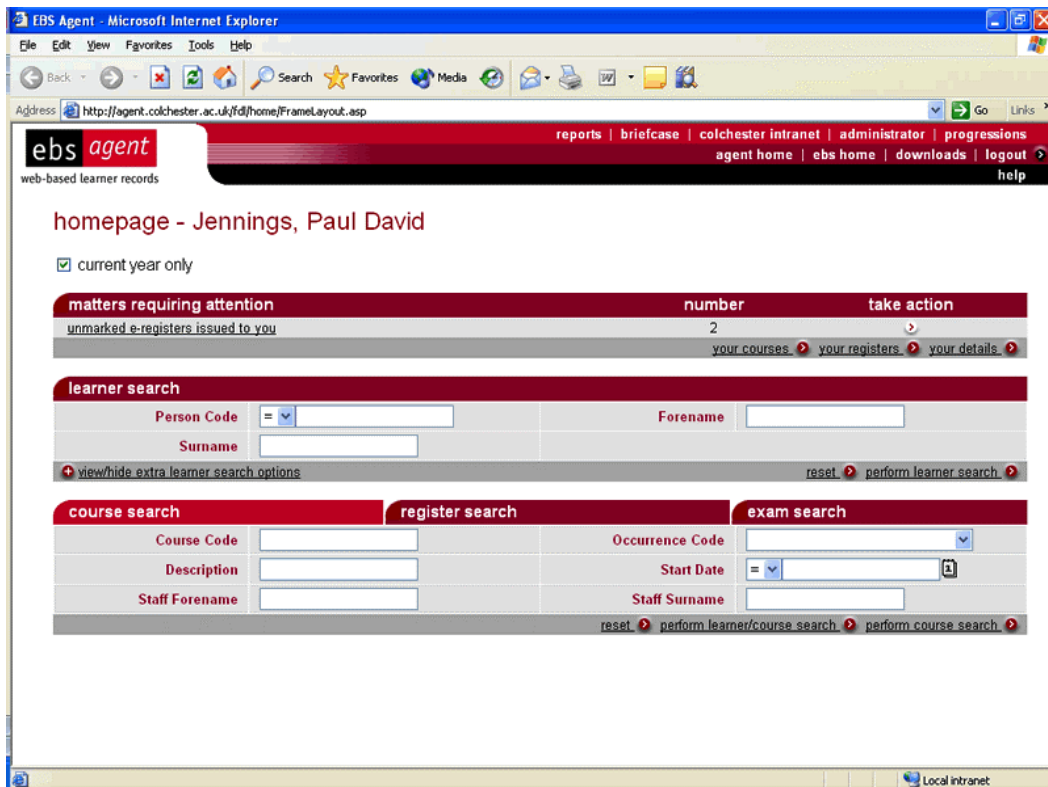
¹ http://www.tribaltechnology.co.uk/html/products/education_systems/ebs.htm

² http://www.tribaltechnology.co.uk/html/products/education_systems/le.htm

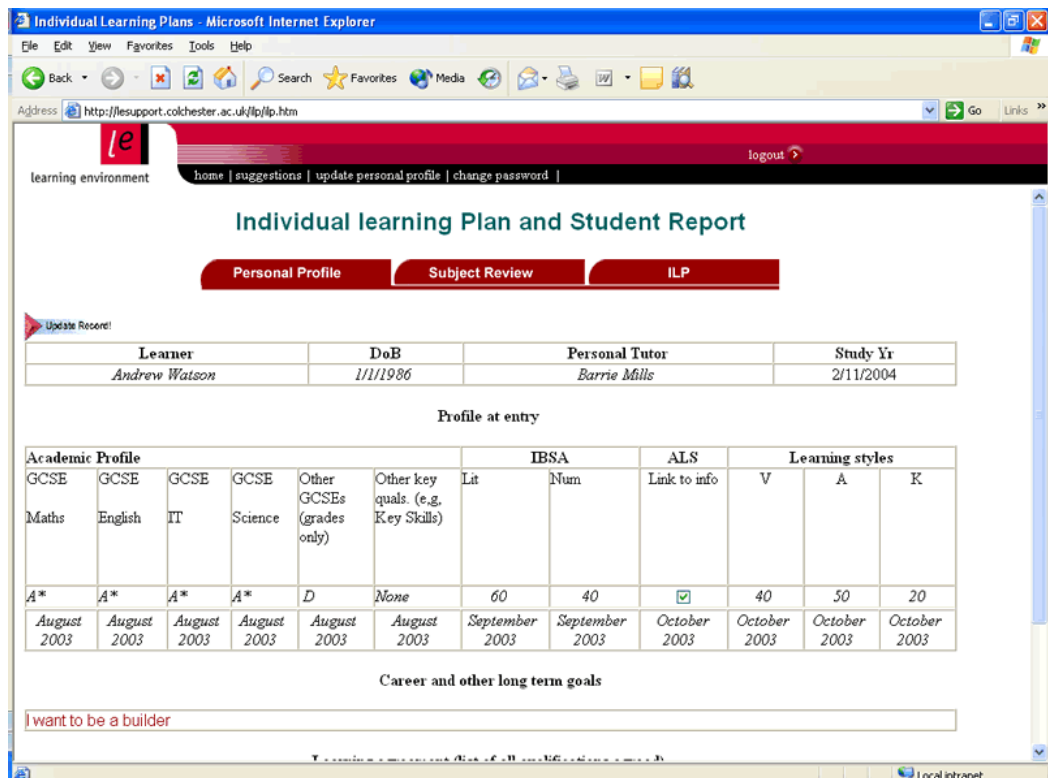
³ <http://www.fdgroupp.com/fdi/products/olib4.html>

⁴ <http://www.questionmark.com/uk/perception/>

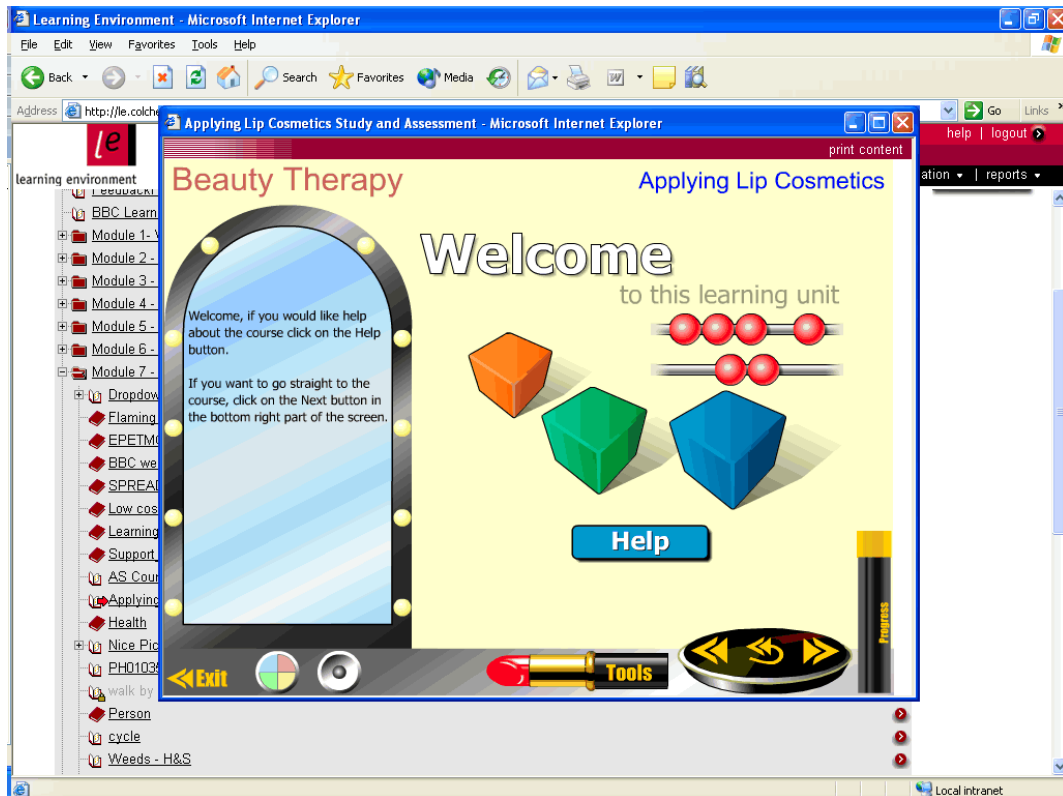
⁵ <http://www.microsoft.com/uk/businesssolutions/products/gp/default.aspx>



Screenshot 1: EBS Agent Homepage for Staff



Screenshot 2: Individual Learning Plan



Screenshot 3: Pop-up Learning Materials from within LE

Institutional strategy and policy

Colchester Institute has recently merged its ILT provision and IT Services into one single Department for e-Learning, with the Department Manager responsible to the Director of Quality and Development in the college senior management team. It was recognised that the availability of dedicated staff was a prerequisite for MLE development, and to this end new posts and job roles have been created. This is seen as a major step forward for integrated e-learning across the college. The Department is developing an e-learning strategy for the college. Academic Registry, which has responsibility for gathering, storing and maintaining all student data, is not part of the merged service.

Key strategic priorities include widening participation and international developments. A major business process review is planned for 2005, including efficient use of timetables, registers and the learning environment. The improved transparency and availability of data through the MLE has brought the urgency of this review to the forefront, highlighting the need for accurate and robust management information for all staff.

Rationale and context for MLE development

The wider context for the development of MLE systems at Colchester Institute includes the drive in the sector to explore collaborative working in an online world. The college is particularly keen to explore the opportunities presented by technology to address the challenges of education and transport in a rural area, and the new 14-19 agenda.

In 2000, Colchester Institute led a JISC interoperability pilot project exploring interoperability between the college's Technical Virtual Campus VLE and EBS. The pilot provided an opportunity to explore existing business processes, and showed the potential benefits of a fully integrated system. Following the pilot, the college reviewed its VLE requirements on the basis of an evaluation of the functionality required.

A number of FD applications were in operation at that time, including the EBS Agent module for staff which gives a view to curriculum and student information. Staff training was vital for the successful roll-out of EBS Agent, and staff were familiar with the FD layout, look and feel. Sustainability and future-proofing were also major considerations in the choice of the FD Learning Environment 2 (LE2) as the college's new VLE. A further major driver was the

avoidance of double data entry between the FD EBS and the learning environment, to reduce the academic administration burden. FD LE2 also suited some of the different academic requirements of both the FE and HE activities in the institution.

Since the implementation of FD Agent, two years have been spent designing and specifying the MLE that the college needs, and preparing for roll-out to staff. The e-learning and systems development team recognise that implementing the system two years ago when it was first procured would have led to failure. It was imperative to consolidate the back office systems in the first instance, and there is no room for error if staff are to have confidence in the new system. The development team is endeavouring to manage expectations while encouraging enthusiastic early adopters. The team is currently 'drip-feeding' information to generate staff interest in the planned MLE roll-out in 2005, using a metaphor of new birth/new arrival. 'Ellie' (LE) has been followed into college life by 'Emily' (MLE).

The key issue for staff is confidence in the system and the availability of robust student information. Where possible, electronic administration systems mirror the paper systems they replace (the on-screen equivalent of the 'pink form' and 'brown envelope' that staff were used to dealing with).

In 2004, the planned roll-out was again deferred while an in-house online ILP (individual learning plan) system was developed. Various models and reporting systems were reviewed, and an access-based prototype was produced and piloted as a standalone function with a web interface.

Access to resources

College management is aware that developments in wireless technology and pervasive PC access have significant long term implications for estates strategy and development. Currently the staff/PC ratio is 1:4. However, a number of these machines are of a low specification and are slow to operate. This is being addressed through a rolling programme of renewal and replacement identified in the eLearning strategy.

Where PCs are of low specification staff are reluctant to use them for recording attendance using e-registers. In some instances, staff will mark the registers by hand in class, then update the electronic system. Web use statistics indicate high levels of staff systems access before 9am, at lunchtime and in the evening. In this respect, the introduction of the electronic register system may actually be adding to the staff administration burden.

A small dedicated drop-in unit has recently been created for training and familiarisation associated with the MLE roll-out, including support on embedding e-learning into the curriculum.

Functional access issues

There is an awareness among those charged with implementing MLE developments that staff are generally quite nervous of change. When the college migrated from MS Exchange to Outlook, a substantial proportion of the staff had difficulty coping with quite small changes in the application software. This is a major reason behind the concern to retain as much familiarity as possible in terms of look and feel when introducing new systems, and to take developments at a relatively controlled pace.

Staff development is therefore key to the success of the MLE implementation. It is recognised that the use of ILT can be a major challenge for staff. There are plans to consult staff about their specific roles and responsibilities, and map these to tasks and functions that can be supported by the MLE, with a view to identifying and providing appropriate training for each individual staff member without increasing their workload.

Pedagogical Aspects

Curriculum and quality issues

The most recent Ofsted inspection in 2003 noted good use of ILT in some curriculum areas, particularly hospitality and leisure. Increasingly, there is demand from students who want access to course materials online.

Support for learning

Contextualised key skills provision is an important element in the use of ILT in the institution. Current developments are also focused at actively removing the barriers of location and available time.

Assessment

Plans for the introduction of online assessment are posing real challenges to the institution in estates terms. The current computer suites are designed in 'daisy-pod' style to facilitate interaction, not as the face-on single units required by the examination bodies. Criteria for examination rooms also specify the need for dedicated special needs provision in a neighbouring room. Accommodating these requirements will impact on the availability of teaching space, particularly in high-use computer suites.

Reflections

Benefits and opportunities

While few staff currently use the VLE for learning and teaching, there is awareness of the benefits and potential of increased use of technology. The costs of implementation, licensing fees and technical support provision for FD products are acknowledged. However, the system is robust and staff are comfortable with using the various components.

Risks and challenges

It is acknowledged that the implementation of EBS has imposed certain limitations and requirements in the way the college sets up its courses. However, staff see this as a positive development as it has required them to review and refine their business processes.

College technical staff also recognise that to some extent they are providing a test bed for FD products. While this enables them to explore new functionality, in-house expertise is required to resolve some of the technical issues that arise from pilot developments. In this context, staff are aware of some internal communications issues between different sections of the vendor company, which often do not seem to consider the wider implications of changes to one system or module. The impact of even small changes to one product can pose serious challenges to interoperability, even when the various system components are branded by the same company.

The college is aware that technological solutions will only work effectively if they support solid and robust business processes. Staff quickly become disengaged if there are errors in the electronic data they are being asked to process, and in the information provided by the system.

Future plans and vision

The college will continue to roll out its MLE implementation in a controlled and steady basis, with appropriate staff development and training to maximise the benefits of the use of technology.

The management information systems are undergoing a major review which includes solving issues surrounding the integrity of data. FD is taking forward development of the college's in-house ILP system as a separate EBS module, planned to be available from September 2004.