

## **The TUC's pre-course support system**

A spin-off from Union Education Online (UEO), a JISC MLEs for Lifelong Learning project

### ***Presentation for the Centre for Recording Achievement's "Joining the Electronic Dots" Conference, Sheffield, 16/5/2005***

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## **Overview of session**

### ***Aims for this session***

This session has three main aims, namely to:

- give you brief details of what the TUC is doing in the e-learning domain;
- provide an overview of the TUC's pre-course support system;
- get your observations on what we are trying to achieve.

### ***Content***

This handout, and, depending on time and the direction discussion takes, some relevant material on the web.

## **What the TUC is doing in the e-learning domain**

### ***TUC***

The Trades Union Congress (TUC) represents around 6.5 million workers in 67 unions across the UK. The TUC brings unions together to draw up common policies on issues that matter to people at work by:

- making representations to government – through national, regional, EU and international bodies;
- campaigning on workplace issues such as pensions and equal pay;
- carrying out research on employment related issues.

TUC Education is the flagship service provided by TUC for union reps, officers and senior staff. Training more than 40,000 union reps and 500 paid officers every year through dedicated units based in more than 75 colleges of further education throughout the UK, the service has an unrivalled reputation for quality and innovation, and delivers accredited classroom-based and online courses. Courses are typically of between 12 and 60 hours, delivered on a block or day release or equivalent basis. A smaller proportion involve up to around 200 hours.

### ***TUC On-Line Learning Strategy***

18 months ago the TUC adopted an On-Line Learning Strategy, the thrust of which was to explain how the TUC would provide online distance learning versions of nearly all its face-to-face courses, working in partnership with the awarding body for its courses, and with a small number of FE providers.

Key features of the strategy included:

- learners to have a choice about whether to study face-to-face or online;
- on-line courses to include the same emphasis on collaborative work between learners, and workplace focus as face-to-face courses, with learners allocated to cohorts rather than joining courses on a "roll-on, roll-off" basis;
- TUC to retain central control over on-line learning materials (with central hosting, on a commercial rather than home-grown VLE) in the same way as it controls paper-based materials used in face-to-face provision;
- recruitment to on-line courses to be handled centrally by the TUC, enabling common pre-course assessment and guidance to be provided, and avoiding the same data about learners being repeatedly captured at several successive stages in the enrolment process (by the TUC, by colleges, by the VLE host).

It was definitely ambitious for us to include in the Strategy the diagram on the next page – which quickly became known as the Diagram from Hell – but which has guided the TUC ever since.

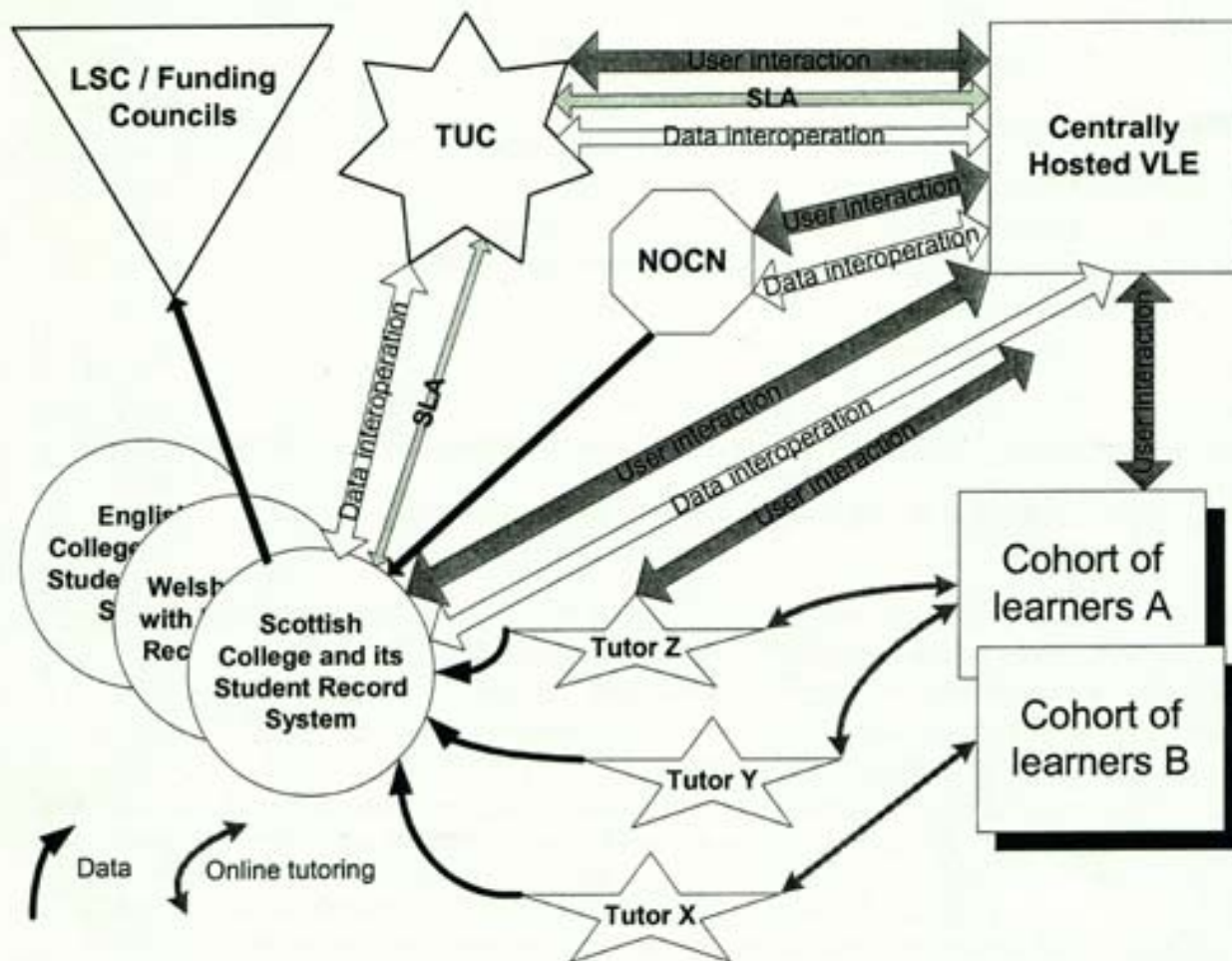
### ***UEO.....***

Around the time that the TUC's On-line Learning Strategy was being finalised, a consortium led by Stow College in Glasgow, and involving the TUC, Tameside College, TROCEN - the National Open College Network's northern arm, the Open Learning Partnership, and WebCT bid successfully under the JISC MLEs for Lifelong Learning

Programme for the UEO project. UEO aims to apply know-how from previous JISC funded activities to the online distance delivery of TUC courses for trade union representatives, with a particular emphasis on:

- several colleges each sharing access to a single VLE;
- data-sharing between the TUC and individual colleges, and between the awarding body, individual colleges, and a single VLE.

### Diagram from Hell



### Rubric to the Diagram from Hell

1. Data arrows (black) represent the supply of "audit-robust" data by:

- tutors to the college(s) to which the TUC's online learners are enrolled;
- the college(s) to the funding council for the country in question;
- NOCN to the college(s) to which the TUC's online learners are enrolled.

2. Online tutoring arrows (green) represent the tutoring activity of tutors, with one of the represented cohorts of learners being team-taught by two tutors.

3. User interaction arrows (blue) represent interaction between:

- learners and the proposed centrally hosted virtual learning environment, including discussion support tools (VLE);
- online tutors and the VLE;
- administrative staff in the enrolling college, NOCN, and the TUC, and the VLE.

4. Data interoperation arrows (clear) represent the passing of data between the record-systems of the TUC, NOCN, enrolling college, and the VLE – for example in the automated creation of learner and tutor accounts on the VLE, or the enrolling of learners to courses.

5. SLA arrows (yellow) represent service level agreements between the TUC and the enrolling college(s) and the TUC and the "owner" of the centrally hosted VLE.

6. The diagram omits (1) the employment relationship between tutors and their employing colleges, (2) funding flows, and (3) service level agreements between the enrolling institutions and these employing colleges.

### **.... and parallel activities**

Meanwhile, a number of other parallel activities are underway within the TUC, all of which should be seen in the context of the TUC's plan to establish a TUC Academy, which was described in the Labour Manifesto as part of the Government's "strong partnership with trade unions to boost workplace training". Here is a selection of "headline outputs" from these projects.

- Producing a comprehensive Manual of Guidance covering all aspects of the production and delivery of on-line courses.
- Converting a number of the TUC's main face-to-face courses for delivery on-line.
- Ensuring conformance of TUC on-line provision with "BS8426 - A code of practice for e-support in e-learning systems".
- Producing "E-Learning in the Workplace - A Union Negotiation and Implementation Guide".
- Procuring the on-line pre-course support system.

This latter initiative has been a major spin-off from UEO, as the rest of this document explains.

## **Pre-course support system**

### **Business problems it will solve**

By September 2005 the TUC and its partners will be using in anger a fully functioning, robust, on-line enrolment system, for all enrolments to the TUC's on-line distance courses for trade union representatives. Whereas FE colleges all over the UK provide face-to-face courses for the TUC, the TUC will be working with only a handful of colleges in the delivery of its on-line courses, with the learning materials hosted centrally for the TUC by the Open Learning Partnership, and the enrolment process handled centrally by the TUC.

What business problems will this solve?

**Firstly**, learners will be treated consistently during the enrolment process, provided with auditable, high quality advice and guidance, and accepted onto courses for which they are suited, and for which they have the endorsement of their trade union.

**Secondly**, data about learners will be captured in a consistent, efficient, DPA-conformant manner, for transfer to the delivering colleges, to the Open Learning Partnership, and to the awarding body. Data, for English learners, will fit the LSC's Individualised Learner Record (ILR) specification, with data for NI, Welsh, and Scottish learners fitting the requirements of the different UK nations.

### **User interactions supported**

In addition to "standard" process like account creation, the system will support a wide range of user interactions including the following.

#### **Learners**

- Expressing an interest in an on-line course or courses.
- Undertaking a pre-course assessment of suitability for the course or courses in which interest has been expressed.
- Providing application data, online, and obtaining prior trade union approval for course attendance.
- Finding out about where an application is in the approval process.

#### **Tutors**

- Responding to and approving completed pre-course assessments.
- Viewing learner details and cohort details.
- Signing off courses as complete.

#### **Administrators (TUC, College, VLE host, Awarding Body)**

- Managing information about colleges, tutors, and learners.
- Approving course applications.
- Assigning learners to course cohorts, and cohorts to colleges.
- Making data about learners and about course cohorts available to colleges, to the VLE host, and to the awarding body.

- Accessing data about learners.
- Accessing management reports.

#### Auditors

"Drill-down" access to individual records, interaction summaries, and reports.

#### ***Pedagogical and technical issues addressed***

The system is designed to address various pedagogical and technical issues, some of which are summarised below.

#### Pedagogical

- Giving the learner maximum control over the process of applying for a course.
- Providing the learner with satisfying and supportive pre-course advice and guidance.
- Ensuring that a learner's choice of course is balanced by process which ensures that learners know what the chosen course will involve and are accepted only onto courses for which they have appropriate skills and prior experience.

#### Technical

- Principal interactions between users and the system are via browser, printer, and email.
- Web content will conforming to W3C XHTML standards, and Web Content Accessibility Initiative Guidelines.
- Learner data will conform to LSC (and equivalent) ILR structure, and to "BS 8788 - UK Lifelong Learner Profile, 'UKLeaP'", which is due for publication soon by *BSI*.

#### ***Lessons we have learnt***

- **Real time interoperation with college systems and/or the VLE.** As the "Diagram from Hell" indicates, initially we imagined that either or both of these would be feasible. Now we know that the former is impracticable in the context in which we are working, whereas the latter is potentially feasible, especially if use is made of an open source learning environment such as Moodle.
- **UML activity diagrams are effective as ways of capturing business processes.** During the UEO project we commissioned the production, checking and validation of UML diagrams to describe the processes involved in UEO transactions. These diagrams have been a central component in the procurement of the system described in this case study.
- **Work with the grain of the funding and data rules, and consider them early.** UEO's work on rules and agreements covering data-sharing has made us confident that we can achieve the necessary formal commitments between partners to permit the data-sharing that the pre-course support system will facilitate.
- **"Joining the electronic dots" is as much a non-technical endeavour as a technical one.** Initiatives which fail to concentrate on "institutional interoperability" (the willingness to engage at human level between role-holders in different organisations) will fail.

#### **Contact details**

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#### **Links**

UEO: <http://www.tuc.org.uk/ueo/>

TUC: <http://www.tuc.org.uk/>

Union Academy: <http://www.tuc.org.uk/learning/tuc-9507-f0.cfm>

UEO Personal Data Flows and Institutional Relationships Diagram: <http://www.tuc.org.uk/learning/tuc-9474-f0.cfm>