

Report: Planning for the continuation of the Learning Matrix Project as a regional service

Dr Roger Clark, Friday, January 06, 2006

The Learning Matrix Distributed e-Learning pilot project is funded by HEFCE through JISC until March 31st, 2006. It set out to offer a small range of short “HE Taster” learning packages to non-traditional potential HE entrants via an interface that also included a degree of Personal Development Planning support.

The learner interface allows a potential student to browse offered packages from the Learning Matrix partners, and to initiate an application to study the package. The outcomes are permanently stored as a learner record for future use. The pilot project has delivered a technology base and will shortly take a cohort of learners through its systems. It has already demonstrated that there is a level of interest in the kind of regional service it embodies.

The potential of this approach for the region and beyond is apparent now the technology and interfaces are in place, both for the particular service piloted by the project and for other services based on the same technology and approach. There is, however, a good deal that needs to be done to take the Learning Matrix beyond the status of “project” and firmly embed it as a high quality, innovative service enhancing the region’s educational provision. The purpose of this paper is to map out these tasks as a three year plan, at the end of which the Learning Matrix could be a largely self-sustaining service.

Funding for the period March 2006 to March 2009

There are currently no funds secured for these tasks, but this analysis will proceed by examining the tasks that would need to be carried out over a three year period. It is believed that this would be useful to assist the region’s institutions in making strategic decisions. This report will try to show what could be achieved with £100k of funding spread over 3 years.

Possibilities for support and sponsorship by other local organisations are currently unknown but need to be explored.

What needs to be done to secure a high quality Learning Matrix regional service?

The tasks ahead are described below. Some of these are ongoing in the sense that they will need to be carried out all the time a service operates, for example Hosting, Technical servicing, User support. Others are short term, but essential, such as establishing the legal and quality assurance frameworks that apply to the service. Finally there are longer term activities that will become less prominent over time, such as procuring content (learning packages), promotion, and improvement of interfaces and user services.

Hosting and technical administration

Clearly the software elements that make the service possible have to be located on hardware somewhere, which has cost implications in ensuring that it operates as it should. A service such as this will need to be reliable, so a Service Level Agreement will be needed to establish the parameters for this. It may be that the system developers will take this task on initially, with it being phased over to the Learning Matrix partners at a later stage as expertise spreads, and the system stabilises.

Legal and Quality Assurance frameworks

Issues such as who is responsible for data management and accuracy within the framework of the Data Protection Act need to be clarified early on. Other issues have arisen in the course of the pilot around responsibility for the quality of provision, whether the learners have the same rights and obligations as other students at an institution and so on. It is anticipated that these can be resolved under the umbrella of existing institutional arrangements, but this will need to be explicitly clarified.

Needs Analysis and potential sponsor organizations

The service needs to be aware of matching provision of packages to the needs of those who may find value in what the service is offering. A view on this can be achieved in dialogue with potentially interested organisations such as Connexions, AimHigher, schools and colleges. We should be open to the possibility that some organisations may wish to encourage certain kinds of content, and be prepared to offer financial support. A report on these matters should be produced in the early weeks of the schedule.

Awareness and promotional activities

Some effort will be needed to bring the service to the attention of potential users and those agencies acting on their behalf. This will include printed and web publications. This activity should also address issues of sponsorship and longer term support.

Learning Packages

The range and number of packages developed for the pilot is not sufficient for an embedded service, though all are seen as valuable and it is to be hoped that the institutions will continue to offer most of them. There will need to be a more complete coverage of the HE curriculum, and different types of learning package can be anticipated, though the Needs Analysis will inform this.

Types of Learning Package

- Current learning packages are largely “tasters” of the work that students would undertake if they were to study a particular course or subject. The delivery mode has tended to be a mix of e-learning resources and face-to-face sessions. This has clear value as an aid to choice and a confidence builder, so the coverage of this type needs to be extended to a wide range of subject areas.
- Many institutions have events such as “summer schools” designed to give potential students awareness of particular subject areas. The promotion of these events through the Learning Matrix would be a convenience for all.
- Another type that should be developed is the purely informative about what is entailed in a subject and course. These would be largely e-learning in nature and could build on and extend the kind of information present in a prospectus, while the medium would allow them to be considerably more extensive.
- A further type that we can envisage is “preparational” or “warm-up” for study. Again, the e-learning medium would be suited to this type which would address the range of knowledge and skills expected of entrants to different subject areas. If expertly designed a combination of simple presentation and quizzes can inform what a subject is about, build confidence and highlight areas of relative weakness for attention.

The work of the first year should include help for institutions in developing new learning packages in broadly comparable ways.

Management, Administration and User support

There will be ongoing tasks to support the three main types of user of the service:

- Learners using the Learner Portal
- Academics and administrators using the Institutional Portals to manage courses and enrolled students
- Admin and computer service users, who will be using resources and tools provided at a more technical level to, for example, retrieve student data or trace transactions

Management issues such as standards for the quality of metadata and standardised vocabularies will need to be addressed in order to maintain the integrity of the service.

Interoperability with Institutional systems

This aspect deals with making processes such as student enrolment smoother and more efficient by aligning with internal institutional administrative and computer systems. Also included here will be making access to e-Learning resources as straightforward as possible.

Development and improvement of interfaces and functionality

As the service is used there will be emerging issues that need to be resolved, and the need for improved and extra services will be felt. The amount of work can be greater or less depending on the success of the service and the degree to which the participating partners want to develop it further. The areas below will probably need attention, based on reaction to the current system:

- Software maintenance, updates to software and updating as the interoperability standards mature and evolve
- Search facilities will be necessary as the range of offerings increases
- Interface improvements, cosmetic and functional

DRAFT: not for circulation



- Extending the Personal Development Planning services, which are currently quite basic
- Possibly facilities for e-assessment

A three year schedule

March 2006 – March 2007

During this first year there will be extensive work on establishing frameworks, staff development, package development, recruitment and technology bedding down. Once this work is done, the input required subsequently will be less. Some staffing dedicated to this activity will be needed, indicated as LMX staffing.

<i>Task area</i>	<i>Notes</i>	<i>Enactors</i>
Legal and Quality Assurance frameworks	Need to be established early in the year.	LMX staffing with partner Legal & Admin departments
Needs Analysis and potential sponsor organizations	One time activity with a report	LMX staffing
Hosting and technical administration	Ongoing	Phosphorix Ltd. Computer Services staffing
Management, Administration and User support	Ongoing. Help documentation production and pro-active support	LMX staffing
Awareness and promotional activities	Active contacts with local agencies, Promotional publications	LMX staffing Institutional PR departments
Learning Packages	Identifying potential packages, financial and advisory support	LMX staffing Institutional Learning Support Academic departments

Interoperability	Improvements to enrolment processes etc. Access to e-learning resources.	LMX staffing Computer Services staffing Partner Admin departments
Development and improvement	Updates, Fixes, PDP service extensions	LMX staffing Phosphorix Ltd PDP consultancy (LUSID)

March 2007- March 2008

Practices and documentation established will reduce the load, moving towards a “ticking over” state. Some or most admin tasks could be undertaken by partners as part of their normal work, or possibly jointly supported through the City of Learning collaboration.

Task area	Notes	Enactors
Hosting and technical administration	Devolving to partner institutions to make own arrangements	Computer Services staffing
Management, Administration and User support	Building on documentation and experience from previous, so less needed	LMX staffing
Awareness and promotional activities	Continuing from established base	LMX staffing Institutional PR departments

Learning Packages	Continued support for learning package development at lower level	LMX staffing Institutional Learning Support Academic departments
Interoperability	Further improvements on processes as necessary	Computer Services staffing Partner Admin departments
Development and improvement	Updates. Experience and evaluation of the first year will suggest amendments and improvements. Extension of functionality re PDP, ePortfolio, possible eAssessment facilities	LMX staffing Phosphorix Ltd

March 2008- March 2009

In this last year the service should be established and associated tasks becoming routinely embedded in the practices of the partner institutions. The management and administrative base will need to be firmly secured for the self-sustained continuation of the Learning Matrix.

Task area	Notes	Enactors
Hosting and technical administration		Computer Services staffing
Management, Administration and User support		Institutional arrangements
Awareness and promotional activities		Institutional arrangements

Learning Packages	Continued encouragement of new packages	LMX staffing Institutional Learning Support Academic departments
Interoperability	Issues should be well known by this stage, and solutions shared	Computer Services staffing Partner Admin departments
Development and improvement	Updates, further improvements on a limited scale	LMX staffing Phosphorix Ltd

Costing

The schedule above has cost implications. The plan envisages a “front loading” of costs in the first year, decreasing in each year to the point required for a self-sustaining service, from which point the service would need either to be self-financing through fees or to be embedded as an integral part of the activity of the region’s educational institutions.

Given support in principle for the plan, a detailed budget can be developed in the future. The costs envisaged here will pay for:

- Institutional contributions to the work by Academic, Learning Support, Admin and Computer Service departments.
- Support to Recruiters and Learners
- Learning Matrix service central management, development and administrative costs, weighted to the beginning of the schedule
- Technical development costs for maintenance and enhancements

The broad outline to achieve the tasks described as above is:

Year 1	Projected cost
Institutional	
Recruiters& learners	
LMX staffing	
Technical support and development	
<i>Year Total</i>	£75,000
Year 2	Projected cost
Institutional	
Recruiters& learners	
LMX staffing	
Technical support and development	
<i>Year Total</i>	£40,000
Year 3	Projected cost
Institutional	
Recruiters & learners	
LMX staffing	
Technical support and development	
<i>Year Total</i>	£20,000
<i>Combined Total</i>	£135,000