Core content modules at Leeds Metropolitan University

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THE PROJECT

As part of Leeds Metropolitan University's review of the postgraduate curriculum in 2012–13, Libraries and Learning Innovation (LLI) was asked to lead a project group to create two core content modules for use at Level 7 (Masters level) in Research Practice and Project Management. The rationale for choosing these two areas was the sheer number of modules in these subjects taught across a wide range of disciplines, each of which is currently designed and populated by individual course teams. The group consisted of representatives from the University's Centre for Teaching and Learning, academic staff, learning technologists and academic librarians, and was chaired by the Associate Director of LLI, Wendy Luker.

Core content modules (also known as wrapper or shell modules) are modules within a virtual learning environment (VLE) that have a clear structure and design, containing generic materials to support the subject. To keep them as generic as possible, so that they may be widely re-purposed and contextualised in a variety of discipline areas, they do not contain learning outcomes, assessments or other elements of pedagogic design that may curtail their widest possible usage. They are intended to serve as a template for academics designing a module, providing a range of high quality, up-to-date content (created by Leeds Metropolitan as well as from other sources) that may be easily inserted and contextualised within the curriculum. The resources within these modules can be transferred into existing modules and so they may also be thought of as discrete repositories for high-quality resources on a given subject. The fact that they are centrally produced and made available for all staff to use either in their entirety or by cherry picking those elements of the module that they find most applicable, is intended as a way of freeing up academic staff time to work on other areas of the curriculum.

Importantly, these VLE modules exist for staff use only – they are not created to be used 'as-is' with students but as a basis for module construction and as a repository into which staff may in turn upload examples of good practice (e.g. activities, slides, open educational resources [OERs]) so that other members of staff throughout the university could re-purpose them and thus avoid duplication of effort.

DESIGN OF THE MODULES

In order to maintain consistency between the modules and to ensure ease of use by staff, the group decided on an initial design for the modules consisting of a front page with six buttons highlighting different areas of the subject (see Figure 1).

The resources were then organised into sub-topics, and annotated individual resource links were added into one of three categories: print resources, online resources (these include OERs, websites / web pages and e-books), and activities (see Figure 2). The academic librarians, with help from LLI's graduate trainee, then set to work resourcing a wide range of high quality materials, including resources from the library's collection and resources produced by other institutions such as OERs, YouTube videos and presentations found on SlideShare. The team sought out contributions from staff for the activities section, and received useful sets of materials that had been created by an earlier project team who had worked on
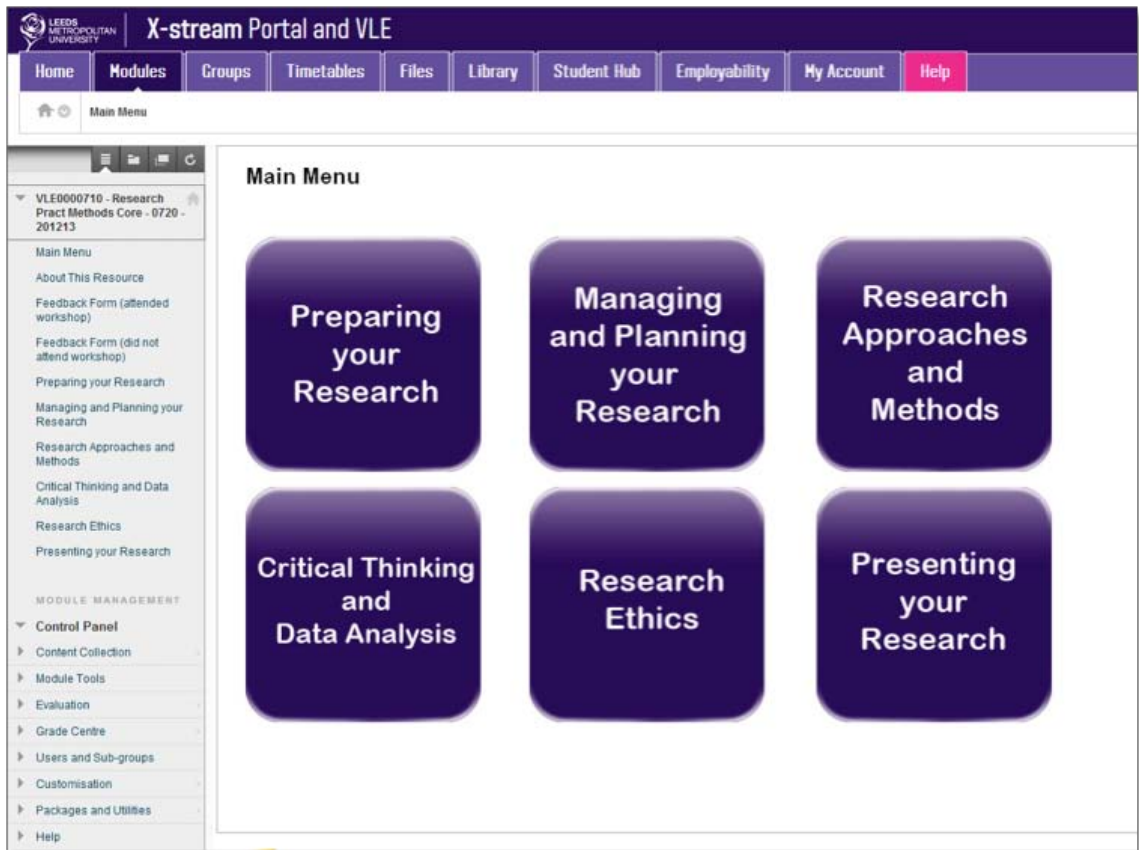
Fig. 1 Front page of modules

creating re-usable research practice activities.
Both these and other activities that were sourced
included online quizzes, PowerPoint presenta-
tions, and examples of in-class activities. The
team also drew heavily on the range of materials
and activities which already exist on our Skills
for Learning website (skillsforlearning.leedsmet.
ac.uk).

INITIAL FEEDBACK FROM ACADEMICS

After the modules had been created and basic
content uploaded, the modules were circulated
for initial feedback to academic staff across the
university, including those directly involved in
research support, and to staff working on Project
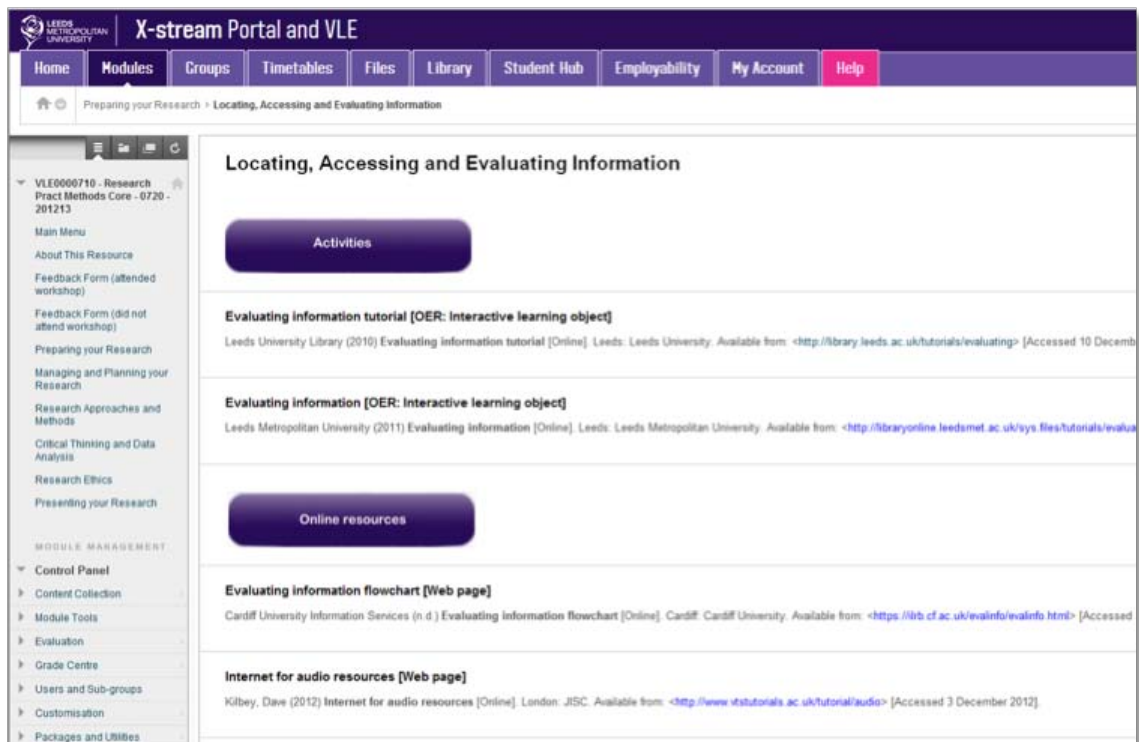Management course teams. Staff were asked to

Fig. 2 Example of Resources Lists in the Modules

feed back on the usability of the module, the categories selected for inclusion and on the types of resources included. The feedback received was very positive, and useful suggestions were made on how the design of the modules could be improved – this was particularly helpful in the case of the Project Management module. These suggestions were considered, and recommended changes – for example the inclusion of an 'About this resource' page to outline the sub-categories – were made. The modules were then circulated to a larger group of academics for a second round of feedback and they were completed in April 2013.

Promoting the modules

After the completion of the modules, the project team advertised a series of workshops, two at each of our two campuses, via the university's staff bulletin. Staff members were invited to come along to a hands-on session and demonstration. Staff enrolled on the sessions were then given access to the modules in the VLE.

At these workshops, LLI staff explained the background to the project, outlined how the modules could be used, and walked staff through the various sections before letting them explore the modules on their own. We asked for feedback via an embedded form built using Google Forms on the usefulness of our demonstration, ease of navigation, and the usefulness of the content, as well as any suggestions for improvements and resources that they wanted to include in the activities section. Staff were enthusiastic and asked for several colleagues to be given access to the module soon after the workshops. These requests were so numerous that the decision was made in late May for all members of academic staff to be included.

As a follow-on from these workshops, the team was asked to present at the annual course leaders' conference in July. The workshops ran along the same lines as the earlier sessions and were attended by course leaders from across all faculties as well as an associate dean who had heard about the modules via other colleagues. Attendees gave some useful suggestions for further resources to be included and several asked for assistance in copying resources into their existing modules during the workshop itself. Most importantly, these workshops generated several requests for academics to be included in phase two of the project, which will be the creation of the next two modules, provisionally Introduction to Marketing and Strategic Management.

Feedback so far

The modules have been extremely well received, with very positive feedback being given in the workshops through the feedback form and in meetings and events attended by team members. Several academic staff have already used a copy of the Research Practice module as the basis of their own research modules, and it has also been adopted by a new course for distance learners as the core of their Research Practice module, following on from recommendations of colleagues in that faculty.

A member of academic staff involved in the MSc in Strategic Project Management is working with the team on re-purposing a number of his own materials to augment this module, and these re-purposed materials will also be used to enhance and extend the project management content on the Skills for Learning website. The Skills for Learning team will be working with this member of staff in producing a 'Little Book of Project Management' to add to the list of 'Little Books' on a range of academic skills already produced by the team and widely used around the university. This has been an unforeseen and very beneficial additional outcome of the project.

In addition, following the availability of the modules to all academic staff, feedback has also been received from staff who had stumbled across the modules after finding them in their VLE list; this feedback indicates their usefulness and asked for further information about the project and the modules.

Future steps

The project team will now move on to developing the next two modules: Introduction to Marketing and Strategic Management. The same basic methodology will be followed, including the cyclical approach to creating some content to be reviewed and seeking feedback which is then fed into further development of the modules.

Academic staff will need to be assured that the content they are using and recommending to their students is current and accessible, so it is vital that the modules are kept up to date, with the latest materials and up-to-date editions being cited and with any broken links removed or updated. The responsibility for maintaining the modules will rest with the team in LLI; information services librarians in our academic support team will have

a regular schedule for checking the content of the modules for currency.

At the end of the 2013–14 academic year, the team will be asking academic staff to let them know how they have used the modules with their students, and to send the team any examples they have of how they have amended or augmented the existing content, so that this can be fed into on-going development. They are not intended to be static, but to continuously develop and act as showcases of high quality content from both within and outside Leeds Metropolitan University.

Conclusion

This has been a very rewarding experience for the project team, and it has led to the development of a set of resources which it seems will be of real worth to the academic community. The team felt confident and comfortable in creating a core content module in Research Practice, as this most closely matched our existing expertise. It was more challenging to get started with the Project Management module, but this has also been achieved successfully, and has led to further partnerships with academic staff working on other developments. The very positive reception given to the modules has certainly given us greater confidence to go on and tackle different subject areas.