WebLearn
Collaboration Content Assessment Information Management

The Conference of Colleges

Communicating and Sharing Information

http://weblearn.ox.ac.uk/portal/hierarchy/colleges/confcoll

Oxford's Virtual Learning Environment, WebLearn, has been radically overhauled. The new WebLearn offers improved support for teaching and learning, and research offering features that enable online communication, collaboration and assessment.

"We have found that it is a very effective way of communicating with our multitude of committees and is ideal for storing, protecting and distributing minutes, agendas and other important documents."

"I'm not an expert IT user but have found the new WebLearn easy to learn"

weblearn@oucs.ox.ac.uk
www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/weblearn
OUCS, 13 Banbury Rd., OX2 6NN

**Oxford University
Computing Services**

Oxford's 38 colleges and 6 Permanent Private Halls are both an integral part of the collegiate university, and also independent, self-governing communities. The Conference of Colleges is where they come together to deal with matters of shared interest and common purpose.
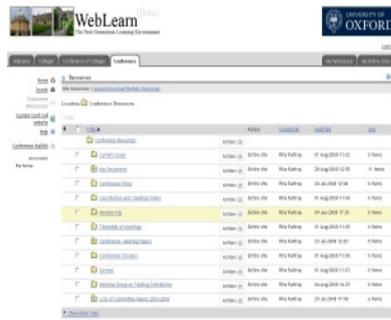
In 2007 the Conference Secretariat recognised that their current paid-for website and intranet had become outdated, had limited functionality for users, and was becoming increasingly unwieldy to maintain. In addition, the hardware was reaching the end of its life and there was a very real risk that the site would become unreliable and eventually disappear in a puff of smoke. It was clear that a review of this arrangement should take place as a matter of urgency.

Rita Rattray has been coordinating the initiative to identify the core functions of a new system. The Conference of Colleges has stipulated that any new system would have to:
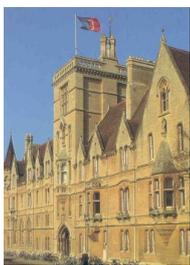
- allow on-line access to 'good practice documents', committee minutes, agendas and papers,
- have easy-to-administer and flexible access controls which can be applied to an entire 'site', specific areas (folders), or individual documents,
- have a facility to search Word and PDF documents, HTML pages, PowerPoint slides and Excel spreadsheets,
- allow new material to be easily uploaded,
- present direct links to external sites and News Feeds (RSS),
- have a facility for discussion within committees and groups using archived email distribution lists,
- have a simple administration interface that does not require any particular technical expertise.

Rita contacted OUCS who suggested that the new WebLearn offered an ideal framework for the above facilities. She has found that the software is intuitively accessible, moreover, unlike the existing website, it doesn't cost a penny!

The Secretariat deal with a large number of committees each having a different set of members; in addition, these committees often set up *ad hoc* working groups. WebLearn access controls coupled with its hierarchical layout of sites allow the Conference committee structure to be modelled with some areas being available to the general public, some to be restricted to members of individual committees or *ad hoc* working groups, and others to be confidential to a small number of named individuals.
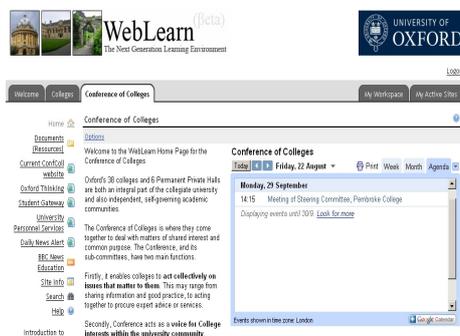
Since the decision was made to move the website and intranet, Rita and other members of the Conference Secretariat have been working closely with the VLE team at OUCS as part of the WebLearn Beta pilot program. A site plan and schedule was agreed. A roll-out of a demonstration site for Senior Tutors was scheduled for 6th Week Trinity Term. This was presented by Rita at a meeting in Somerville College and was enthusiastically received by Senior Tutors. Dr Nicola Trott, Senior Tutor of Balliol, summarises:

"The WebLearn Beta project is bringing the whole of the Conference of Colleges together in a new searchable, legible, comprehensive and hierarchical series of sites and folders. On the Senior Tutors' site, facilities mean that new sets of information are now available - and can be readily used and shared. One small but powerful example of the greater access and control is the single click Senior Tutors' mail-list with archiving of correspondence. I'm sure that as it develops the WebLearn project will have beneficial effects on how the University does its business."

A public home page is now live, 300 members of Conference are able to access the home page and non-restricted areas of the Senior Tutors' area. Committee papers from 2003-4 to the present have been uploaded into seven committee areas so far. Rita aims to complete uploading documents to the remaining committee sites by the beginning of Michaelmas Term 2008.
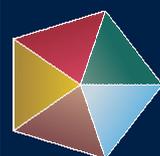
The most successful new features of the new site include ease of maintenance, an intuitive layout and structure, with clear, but flexible series of sites containing email lists, news feeds and files and folders for each of the committee areas. In addition there are several methods for retrieving documents (including searching for data included both within the filename and document content). The potential for linking content through hyperlinks, though not originally specified, has also proved invaluable for directing users to key documents.

Another immediate benefit to college members is that as access to the system is via the OUCS single sign on (SSO) service there is no need to have to remember a separate username and password to gain entry.

In summary, Rita says: "I'm not an expert IT user but have found the new WebLearn easy to learn. We have found that it is a very effective way of communicating with our multitude of committees and is ideal for storing, protecting and distributing minutes, agendas and other important documents." She adds: "We also envisage that it has the potential, in the longer term, to provide wider controlled access to new documents across the collegiate university to encourage more participation and engagement with Conference."

Rita Rattray and Adam Marshall, Aug 2008

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