

Advice NI

Area	e-portfolios
Programme(s)	NVQ levels 2, 3 and 4 in Advice and Guidance
Awarding body	Open University (OU)
Learner numbers	20
Contact	Fiona Magee

Background

Advice NI is a voluntary sector organisation providing a range of services in Northern Ireland to support a professional community advice and guidance service. One aspect of providing this support is to offer professionals working in the sector the opportunity to gain appropriate qualifications which includes a number of relevant NVQs accredited by the OU awarding body. Advice NI is based in Belfast and its learners are spread throughout Northern Ireland. This has been challenging for Advice NI both in terms of providing support to learners and undertaking assessment and in 2006, they decided to examine how an e-portfolio system might help to address these challenges.

How they got started

The first decision that needed to be made was the choice of system. Ideally, the organisation wanted a VLE that would enable it to combine the provision of learning material with an e-portfolio system. A major barrier was cost – as a small voluntary organisation many of the commercially provided systems were beyond the budget available. Furthermore, Advice NI felt it did not want to be ‘tied in’ to a bespoke system. For these reasons, Advice NI chose Moodle, a free, open source software package. While there is a strong online community for Moodle, Advice NI felt that contract support was needed in the first instance to ensure the system was up and running successfully and to populate the learning materials. Consequently, the organisation put out the tender to a number of companies to both develop online learning material and provide Moodle support.

In addition to make sure that all the learners were confident in using the system, Advice NI ran a half-day workshop to introduce learners to the system and ensure that they all had the minimum IT skills necessary to get started.

Where the system did not offer a particular facility, Advice NI undertook to make some changes, e.g. Advice NI wanted to use the blog facility within the system as the particular area of work required assessors to see journals of learners’ thoughts and activities. However, it had not been possible for the blog facility to be configured so that the assessors could view individual learner blogs.

Advice NI also established a ‘buddy’ system and use of the discussion forums within the VLE to ensure that learners had access to support from other learners, not just from the assessors and tutors.

Progress

A significant amount of learner material has been produced and this is integrated with the assessment requirements in a very effective and engaging way. This ensures that the collection of evidence is not seen as separate from the learning support. Advice NI has also begun using the system to monitor learner progress and assess learner evidence.

The organisation used e-futures specifically the guidance offered by [e-assessment: guide to effective practice](#) and found this to be a very useful document to raise awareness of a number of issues within the team that may otherwise not have been considered.

Advice NI has actively involved its awarding body the Open University, which has been very supportive of the development.

To date all modules have gone live and learners have been working their way through the various exercise and assignments in each using Moodle as the learning tool. They have now identified an alternative suitable e-portfolio system to compliment their online learning package and have introduced e-portfolio plus.

After discussing the system with their awarding body and External Verifier, Advice NI purchased 25 registrations and 2 half day training sessions. Feedback from the awarding body and assessors has been very positive. Feedback from the learners so far has also been very positive about their overall online experience.