

## Digitisation Project

### INTRODUCTION:

As the world becomes increasingly digitalised, the physical and the digital worlds are becoming ever more intertwined. As the Economist (2012) states, ‘of all the methods of communication invented by humanity over the centuries, none has disseminated so much information so widely at such high speeds as the internet.’<sup>1</sup> This report’s aim is to discuss and assess the outcome of the digitisation project that I was part of. The report will look at Lancaster University as though it is a company and evaluate its attempt to become a digital university. According to Lancaster University, its aim is to ‘maximise the opportunity for the exploration of digital technologies in the pursuit of its ambition to become globally significant’<sup>2</sup>. I was part of a project that aimed to see if the digitisation of the department of European languages (DELC) was possible, with a particular focus on trying to put grammar tests online as a starting point. As Hirtz discusses ‘creativity is an important part of modern teaching and learning. It makes sense to take students’<sup>3</sup> ideas and upgrade them using emerging twenty-first century technology. The main responsibilities I had were to meet with the Information service system department (ISS) in order to facilitate the project, have regular meetings with the scheme’s organiser in order to discuss how things were going, contact different members of staff in order to receive information about the grammar tests and finally conduct independent research in which consisted of the learning and testing out of the software that I was given to work with. If this project were to be successful, it would be a great achievement for the department, as

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<sup>1</sup> The New Local, The Economist, October 2012, <http://www.economist.com/news/special-report/21564992-physical-and-digital-world-are-becoming-increasingly-intertwined-new-local> [Accessed 22 March 2016].

<sup>2</sup> Digital Lancaster- Helping to Create a Global University, Lancaster University, <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/iss/info/docs/login/digital-lancaster-final-28072014.pdf> [Accessed 25th March 2016].

<sup>3</sup> Hirtz, S, Education for a Digital World: Advice, Guidelines, And Effective Practice From Around The World. [http://hets.org/virtualplaza/files/2014/05/Education\\_for\\_a\\_Digital\\_World\\_complete.pdf](http://hets.org/virtualplaza/files/2014/05/Education_for_a_Digital_World_complete.pdf) [Accessed 23 March 2016].

students would be able to receive instant feedback on tests and therefore would be able to significantly improve their personal weaknesses in a shorter period of time.

### **THE COMPANY:**

At first glance; Lancaster University is merely an educational institution, although when looking at the bigger picture, it can also be seen as a business just like any other. The University has been ever more turning towards not only being an educational institution but also a private company. Recruitment, research and ranking are in fact key roles of Lancaster University. The university is currently ranked ninth in the United Kingdom and one hundred and thirtieth worldwide according to the Times' higher education programme<sup>4</sup> in regards to the University as a whole. As it is ranked so highly, Lancaster must attempt to keep its rankings this high, if not strive for better positions. All the work that is imputed into the rankings is part of Lancaster's internal organisation and structure which strives to achieve excellence.

Just like any business, Lancaster University has a clear strategic plan that they wish to implement by 2020. Theirs is to 'become a university that is globally significant- a leader in higher education that provides the highest quality research and teaching, and engages locally and internationally on the issues and debates of the day and future. Driven by research, and stimulating learning, the globally significant university informs and changes practice and thinking worldwide.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Times Higher Education, World University Rankings, 'Lancaster University'.  
<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/lancaster-university> [Accessed 25 March 2016].

<sup>5</sup> Strategic Plan, Lancaster University, <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/about-us/strategic-plan/> [Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2015].

## **MY ROLE:**

My role was to first see if the digitisation of grammar tests in Spanish, German and French was possible with the help from members of the ISS department and to then to use the information gathered to try to put the grammar tests online. I expected the project to be difficult, and in fact the technical aspects were more problematic than I predicted. It took some time to engage fully with the software as I am not used to working with software other than Microsoft word, Microsoft excel or PowerPoint.

My first duty was to contact members of the ISS team who could aid me in trying to make the digitisation of the grammar tests possible. With the help of the staff I learnt which software I could use and how it worked. I then went on to communicate with language teachers in order to acquire past grammar tests so that I could begin to see if the software had the capacities for the project to be a success. After obtaining these tests, I set aside hours every week in order to attempt to digitise the grammar tests. In the meanwhile, I kept in contact with the leader of the project so that they could be updated as to how the scheme was coming along.

The project lasted several months, and was a continuous cycle of trial and error. My responsibilities were not only to try and test the software in order to see if it had a multi-lingual capacity, but also to record what was working on the software and what was not. This was so that the leader of the project could then have an overview of the issues that the software had so that they could try to be resolved in the future. If the project were to be a success, my main responsibility would then be to teach the staff of the DELC department how to use the software to create digital grammar tests for their students.

## **KEY ISSUES OF MY PLACEMENT:**

To fully understand the digitisation project that was undertaken, it is essential to understand both the shift from paper based learning to e-learning and the vision of Lancaster

University. A question that can be raised is *what is digital?* According to Lancaster University ‘all electronic forms and uses of information and technology, both inside and outside the University. It goes beyond what might typically be considered the scope of IT and includes smart mobile devices owned and used by students and staff, social media, unconstructed and multimedia data, connected devices and things.’<sup>6</sup> Lancaster University has a digital vision: ‘[The University] will embrace digital technology in all [its] activities, enabling [it] to provide world-class digital learning environments for [its] students, and highly efficient and effective digital ways of working for [the] staff. [The university] will develop rich digital communities across [its] global organisation. [The university] will think and act digitally’<sup>7</sup>.

The university strategy sets out a vision to become ‘globally significant’ with two strategic goals: firstly to establish itself as a global university, measured by securing a top 100 position in key global rankings. Secondly, to strengthen its national position, measured by consistently being placed in the top 10 in leading national rankings. Additionally when using paper grammar tests ‘grading and giving feedback is probably the most time consuming task for the instructor,<sup>8</sup>’ and therefore e-learning is essential in order to save time but also so that students receive instant feedback on their work. It also must be considered that through e-learning, as the results are instantaneous, it allows for students to self-assess and know ‘how to improve should they have to retake the test.’<sup>9</sup> Furthermore ‘going from hard-copy tests/ quizzes to offering the same capabilities online reduces consumption of goods such as paper - especially important when the online classroom is large and growing<sup>10</sup>’.

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<sup>6</sup> Digital Lancaster- Helping to Create a Global University, Lancaster University, <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/iss/info/docs/login/digital-lancaster-final-28072014.pdf> [Accessed 25th March 2016].

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> The importance of tests and quizzes for students in eLearning., E-learning: concepts, trends, applications. (San Francisco, California, 2014). <http://www.talentlms.com/elearning/tests-and-quizzes> [Accessed 23 March 2016].

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Another key issue of the digitisation project is the comprehension of projects and self-lead project management. According to Tim Parkin, (Parkin Web Development) “communication is the most important factor of successful project management<sup>11</sup>” and that “without regularly and clearly communicating, the project will fall apart<sup>12</sup>.” As self-lead projects usually are independent projects, there can be a lack of communication between different players that are needed to complete a project.

Furthermore, as nowadays communication is typically done through the use of emails, due to both physical locations and practical issues, it can be a slower process to receive a reply due to different priorities and busy schedules that people have. Additionally, the fact that different members of the University might need to be contacted at different stages of the project in order to check it, time management is essential as it is surprising ‘how long a simple task can take when’ different members need to review it.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover if the person doing the project has an issue or obstacle in regards to the project, it is harder to resolve it as in a group there would be members with different strengths that would be able to give assistance. Instead, with a self-lead project, one must either try to find an effective solution by themselves or either ask an outsider which might take a longer period of time. When working in a team, it is easier to bounce ideas off each other, however when working solo, it is hard to get clear ideas or even to know if you are on the correct path.

Likewise, when approaching members who are not familiar with the project but whose help or cooperation you need, it is a possibility that one might have to explain the whole

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<sup>11</sup> Schiff, J, ‘12 Common Project Management Mistakes--and How to Avoid Them’, CIO, 26 September 2012. <http://www.cio.com/article/2391872/project-management/12-common-project-management-mistakes--and-how-to-avoid-them.html> [Accessed 25 March 2016].

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

project to them and this can be quite time consuming. In regards to the organisation of meetings, as you are contacting individuals who are not working on the same project as you, it might take days if not weeks before a person has time to meet your needs, in turn this can slow down the project.

Finally, the bridging between the DELC department and the one of the information system services (ISS) in regards to languages. As an ambassador, I was representing the DELC department and all of its cultures and languages. An ambassador, according to the dictionary is “an authorized messenger or representative<sup>14</sup>,” I embodied this role and tried to bridge two separate entities, which under normal circumstances would not communicate. As an ambassador for the DELC department, I had to communicate and try to bridge two completely diverse entities at Lancaster University. The DELC department is academic, whereas ISS, is a completely digital one; therefore trying to unite both departments under one project was quite challenging. These different departments can be viewed as being multilingual (DELC) versus monolingual (ISS). Lancaster University which is a global university does not have sufficient software to cope with foreign characters thus it does not have a multi-lingual capacity in its software.

This is disappointing as Lancaster University is a global university that should definitely have the adequate resources in order to provide the maximum services to its students, especially as at the University there are over 3,000 international students<sup>15</sup> and numerous language students who with these services could improve their language skills drastically.

### **WHAT WORKED AND WHAT DID NOT:**

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<sup>14</sup> Dictionary, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/ambassador> [Accessed 29 March 2016].

<sup>15</sup> International Students, Lancaster University, <http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/study/international-students/> [Accessed 22 March 2016].

There were many challenges that I had to deal with during the life of the project. One of the toughest aspects of the project was learning how to use the Moodle quiz and assessment page properly in order to create the grammar tests.

After my first meeting with a member of the ISS department, I began to work with the software that was on Moodle in order to create the quiz. As I became more familiar with the software I became aware that the software does not cope with foreign characters and therefore every foreign character has to be manually imputed. For me this was an issue that I learnt to deal with, however as this project; if successful, is to be used by teachers as a quicker and more effective method than a test based on paper, then it would not be efficient.

This led to the next issue which is that as the software does not cope with foreign characters, it is therefore not possible for students to 'type in' their answers as one would normally do on a grammar test. This therefore meant that the questions and answers had to be restricted to a multiple choice format as otherwise they would be wrong as students cannot input accents/ foreign characters which are a fundamental part of any language. This format also means that if this test were to become accessible it would not be preferable to a handwritten test as a multiple choice format is a simplified variation of a normal test.

Furthermore as handwritten grammar tests have many different question formats for example: joining up opposite words, writing numerical calculations in the target language, fill the gap exercises and open answer questions, a lot of the material from previous past grammar tests cannot be used. In addition to this, as the format of all the questions would be in a multiple choice format; for each question I had to come up with two wrong answers per every correct answer so that there is a choice in the answers. However, as I only have an intermediate level knowledge of the Spanish language and therefore any tests above my level I was not able to produce. For the German test quiz I produced, I had a similar result. Although my German

mentor had given me the right and a selection of wrong answers to input, the format of the majority of the questions were impossible to input due to the software's capacity. This meant that out of a three page grammar test I was only able to successfully input one section of the test which evidently is not sufficient to test a student's language progression.

Additionally, when the project first started I was hopeful that the test could be used as an end of term formal assessment, replacing the paper tests. However, as the quiz would be taken on the internet, there would be no constraint over students not being able to use other websites or applications whilst doing the test and this could lead to cheating.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Although the project was not as successful as it set out to be, the project took a different turn. This was due to a multitude of reasons such as the inefficiency of the software and the vast amount of time needed to upload the questions, it is not at this time possible to achieve the original goals of the project, instead I worked on using the digitisation of grammar tests to be used as a mode of self-assessments for language students.

Even though the project could be considered a failure, one should look at the outcome as a success as without these types of projects there would be no development in the area of online learning. Consequently, now there is a clear depiction of what does/ does not work and the next steps can be taken to ensure that the original outcome of the project is realised in order to help students and their language learning.

Ultimately, this report has discussed and reflected on my personal experience as to working independently on a digitisation project at Lancaster University. The report has focused on viewing the University as though it is a business in order to explore its current mission and future goals in relation to my project. The report has described my role as a project leader and ambassador for the DELC department and the expectations and responsibilities of my role..



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