Enabling development and sharing of over 250 content modules and 3,000 learning objects. TAFE Tasmanian puts EQUELLA to work.

EQUELLA
EQUELLA is a powerful Digital Repository that is revolutionising the way institutions search, manage, and create content online. EQUELLA has been implemented within a wide variety of Universities, Community Colleges, Schools and Corporate institutions.

Ensuring Flexible Training
TAFE Tasmania wanted to ensure it was in the best position to meet the growing demand for more flexible training options and maintain its high quality of delivery to clients and students. Part of achieving this aim was the development and implementation of an appropriate system to deliver, store and share learning resources.

This task was taken up by TAFE Tasmania’s Learning Media Services team led by Manager Peter Higgs and Senior Web Technologist Stephen Brain.

In 2005, after three years of research, planning and development, TAFE Tasmania unveiled an advanced learning content management system known as EQUELLA (formerly The Learning Edge).

The Framework Connection
TAFE Tasmania, through Peter Higgs, has been working closely with the Framework with a particular focus on learning object repository development.

An important driver in TAFE Tasmania’s learning object repository journey was Peter’s appointment as a Framework Flexible Learning Leader in 2002, which provided him with a scholarship to undertake extensive research into learning object repositories and to devise strategies and plans to develop an effective, user friendly learning object repository within TAFE Tasmania.

Since 2003 the Learning Media Services team at TAFE Tasmania has been working closely with the Framework’s LORN Project to develop the capabilities of LORN.

According to Peter, the Framework has played a significant role in helping TAFE Tasmania develop EQUELLA and allow its teachers and trainers to access a greater range of learning resources from other training organisations around Australia through LORN.

TAFE Tasmania
The institute of TAFE Tasmania is a public vocational education and training provider. Over 32,000 students per year participate in over 450 accredited training courses.

What Gives TAFE Tasmania its eLearning Edge?
Teachers and trainers across Australia are developing and using a multitude of learning resources to deliver education and training. Recognising the significant complexity of the role of the Vocational and Technical Education (VTE) practitioner, and the ever-present need to develop and improve learning resources, TAFE Tasmania, the leading provider of VTE in Tasmania, saw a real need to offer its staff a streamlined and supportive approach to learning resource development and sharing.

A hallmark of TAFE Tasmania is its commitment to fostering innovation and meeting learning needs by incorporating technology into course delivery. With the growth of e-learning across the organisation, an opportunity arose to meet the need for simple and easy development of course content.

An eLearning Enabler
EQUELLA is a user-friendly learning object repository, which allows teachers and trainers to create, store, share, discover, reuse, manage and deliver course material electronically.

It seamlessly integrates course content and resources into TAFE Tasmania’s e-learning platform (WebCT) and makes that content available to other teachers and trainers around Australia through the VTE system’s Learning Object Repository Network (LORN).

LORN is an ever-growing centralised on-line library of learning objects and resources developed by some of the largest VTE providers within the national training system. The delivery of LORN is funded and supported by the Australian Flexible Learning Framework, the national training system’s e-learning strategy.

EQUELLA
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“For our teachers the main considerations will be that the learning resources they are accessing are relevant, free, have clear conditions of use and add value to their teaching and the learning outcomes of their students.”

- Peter Higgs, Manager, ICT Applications and Learning Technology Team

The Challenges

One of the greatest challenges to the development of e-learning content within TAFE Tasmania has been the time needed to create online learning resources.

Peter Higgs said: “Teachers and trainers often work on short lead times and one of the main challenges we have had to overcome as an organisation, in terms of our e-learning strategy, has been the availability of our teachers for development activities. Teachers and trainers often have to fit creation of their learning resources around their teaching. If this expectation is then combined with limited technical skills this can create a disincentive for teachers to develop online content.”

With these issues in the forefront of their minds, the Learning Media Services team went about working with local Tasmanian software company that delivers EQUELLA to create a learning object repository.

The system created had to be easy to use, have a simple interface, provide extensive functionality and capture the look and feel of the organisation while meeting technical issues such as interoperability compliance.

An issue highlighted in the early stages of the learning object repository development process was the need for a high level information technology skills to facilitate the development process, which resulted in Senior Web Technologist Stephen Brain joining the project. Stephen believed it was imperative for the learning object repository to not be unduly complicated, with processes being simple and efficient.

“We recognised it wasn’t the role of teachers and trainers to have an extensive knowledge of the technical rules and specifications behind a learning object repository, and the system could be a real disincentive for our staff if they had to complete over 20 fields of data to place something in the learning object repository.”

Overcoming Issues

The provision of ongoing support to teachers and trainers in using EQUELLA is an issue that TAFE Tasmania have had to address.

One such issue is the need to encourage teachers and trainers to contribute their developed course material, generally consisting of several re-contextualised learning objects, back to EQUELLA and in turn LORN.

“Teachers and trainers are encouraged by the sort of materials they can access through LORN, in particular the learning objects from the Flexible Learning Toolboxes Repository. However, teachers and trainers generally are reluctant to share their course material, not because they don’t want to share, but because they feel their work may not be of a high enough standard. What we try to impress on our staff is that the most important part of sharing learning objects is how they are conceptualised for their students. A learning object which works well for one teacher might not work for another because of differences in teaching and training styles.”

To assist in the sharing of these resources, the company that delivers EQUELLA and TAFE Tasmania has collaborated to enhance EQUELLA’s functionality in the area of Digital Rights Management (DRM). Such functionality involves the attribution of ownership and certain restrictions being applied on the use of material developed by others. EQUELLA is now recognised globally for its DRM functionality.

Outcomes

TAFE Tasmania is now offering its teachers and trainers access to a high quality learning object repository, which allows them to discover, reuse, create, manage and deliver course material electronically.

The teachers and trainers working within TAFE Tasmania have the added advantage of being able to access and share learning objects through LORN which increases their choice of resources and also enables them to share their knowledge with colleagues around the country.

In its first 10 months of operation, EQUELLA has grown from housing two content modules and 200 learning objects to having 288 content modules and over 3,000 learning objects. This increase in the amount of online and e-learning content being developed by teachers and trainers within TAFE Tasmania has correlated with a significant increase in the use of WebCT by students and teachers alike.

According to Peter Higgs, senior management is encouraging the Learning Media Services team to keep up development and ensure that the TAFE Tasmania is able to keep technology one step in front of the needs of teachers and trainers.

Future Directions

Peter Higgs sees a bright future for EQUELLA within TAFE Tasmania and an increased role for LORN as learning object repositories become embedded within training organisations around Australia.

“Our aim is to make the use of EQUELLA so ingrained in teaching and training practice that teachers are not aware they are accessing LORN or any other repository network,” Peter said.