



Optimising library systems and transforming workflows

The Challenges:

- Aligning library web presence with student online experiences
- Untenable costs of locally deployed systems
- More unified user experience required across university systems

The Outcomes:

- Simple intuitive design comparable with Google and Amazon
- Total cost of ownership reduced with hosted solution
- Potential for more unified student experience across diverse university systems

Background

Web-based search tools, notably Google, have altered expectations around the library OPAC forever. Forward thinking academic libraries are aligning their web presence with more general online experiences of university students. Within the institution, the library is under increased pressure to harmonise its front-end applications and tools with the university website and systems such as the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). In response to these changes, the library of Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) has selected Talis Prism 3 to combine simplicity and ease of use with institution-level interoperability.

The university now has in mind more deeply joined-up user scenarios across diverse campus applications. Angela Warlow, the university library's Library Services Manager (Systems and Databases), explains, "Many projects across the institution are exploring the development of a more unified user experience. The university is in the process of replacing its VLE with Moodle, which will be in place right across the institution by 2011, and will be using Aspire for its resource lists."

Reviewing the OPAC

It is in this context that Angela and her team reviewed Prism 2, the incumbent OPAC: "Despite innovations such as the integration of users' library accounts into the campus portal, the Prism 2 interface was starting to look a little clunky, and users were forced to think a little too much when searching. What do distinctions such as 'keyword' and 'title' mean to students brought up on Google's single search field?" Angela was also finding that the maintenance effort and hardware costs of locally-deployed applications such as Prism 2 were increasingly unjustifiable, and could no longer ignore the sector-wide trend towards remotely hosted applications.

Once Angela had evaluated Prism 3 with her team, she was confident that it had the potential to meet the changing needs of the library and its users, and harmonise with corporate strategy. She therefore scheduled the implementation of the application with Capita.

A cloud-based OPAC

A small number of infrastructural modifications were prerequisites to the migration of the library OPAC to Capita's remote hosting service. First of all, the Capita Consultancy team set up a mechanism (known as Local Data Services) that would enable the remotely-hosted Prism 3 to interoperate with the local LMS for item availability and customer account information. They then set up a tenancy for MMU on the hosted service, incorporating a 'sandbox' test area, and a demonstration environment for forthcoming releases, as well as the live service. Once MMU's cataloguing data had been imported into a hosted data store accessible from the tenancy, the project moved into design phase.

With the involvement of Capita's Design team, a look and feel was applied to the tenancy to meet the requirements of the university. As Angela Warlow recalls, "We sent our institutional web guidelines to the Head of Design at Capita, and told him that our Prism 3 interface needed to blend in with the university website. He came back with two or three designs. Straight away we liked the direction he took, and only minor tweaks were required. Capita's Design team was fantastic; they provided a very responsive service which was well received."

A more intuitive search interface

MMU library was then in a position to launch Prism 3 in the live environment, running initially in parallel with Prism 2. From the outset, Angela had no doubt that Prism 3 offered a more intuitive search experience: "The interface has been greatly simplified. We've found in the past that most users are reluctant to explore less obvious features and may not make use of them." In Prism 3, the purpose of features is very clear, and functionality deemed to be particularly useful (such as "Find out more by this author") is made prominent. Capita has sought to balance the need for

simplicity with the granularity still required in academia. A range of sophisticated capabilities will meet the needs of multiple stakeholders, not just undergraduate students, right across campus. Capita has introduced new search modifiers such as Classification Number, and the advanced search facility has been retained.

Frequent upgrades

Because Prism 3 is hosted remotely, updates to the application can be made much more frequently, and with minimal operational disruption. The demonstration environment, separate from the test area, enables Angela and her colleagues to preview forthcoming software releases, giving sufficient time to plan and carry out any requisite changes to the overall library service. One product enhancement that has been made since the library adopted Prism 3 is an improvement to item availability information. Angela confirms that site-specific information remains very important to academic library users, and her team was particularly impressed with changes that enable users to see quickly which sites have available copies. "We currently have seven sites, one of which is in Cheshire. It's quite conceivable that someone might travel to one of the Manchester sites if they believe that something is on the shelves here. It's important to make library transactions easier for users who may have little time to spare."

Positive feedback

Happy with the positive feedback from students and staff alike, Angela is preparing to make Prism 3 the default catalogue, ready for the start of the next academic year. She is particularly encouraged by the usage statistics which increased hugely with the introduction of the item availability changes, as a result of librarians enthusing to their users. At the end of the university's exam period, Angela will be arranging with Capita to change the host name to blend in with the institutional web address and connect Prism 3 to the campus portal. At this point, MMU will start to reap the full benefits of a library OPAC hosted 'in the cloud'. Angela eagerly anticipates the reduction in hardware costs – two locally installed servers were needed for previous versions. The library team will no longer have to plan for system downtime when upgrading. However, the most important driver is the student experience; Prism 3 is part of a host of developments bringing the user experience up-to-date right across the university. As Angela points out, "Students compare Prism 3 to Google and to Amazon, and I think it holds up very well in that regard."

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