**Starting to Study Islam – Final Report**

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**(with assistance of Damian McDonald)**

**Project Objectives**

This project was funded by the Islamic Studies Network. A grant of £2841 was made available for the development of an open access online resource which would provide a base-line introduction for students starting courses in the Study of Islam. The resource was intended to allow students to gauge whether they have the general background knowledge that can be expected for a level one Introduction to Islam module. Guiding them through basic information, checking their knowledge with simple quizzes, and suggesting other sources of information, the resource is intended to be used informally by students who are lacking confidence, and it was also hoped it would be used formally by institutions that could require a certificate of completion to check students have covered the background knowledge.

**Project Practicalities:**

The resource can be found at:

<http://arts.leeds.ac.uk/introductiontoislam/>

The resource has been developed by Dr Mel Prideaux of the University of Leeds, working with Damian McDonald of the University of Leeds’ Faculty of Arts Blended Learning Team. The Blended Learning Team will support the package for three years, as per the project bid.

The online resource consists currently of four units of work. These include two multiple-choice vocabulary and general knowledge quizzes, a time line activity and a map activity. There is also a ‘links’ section to flag up good quality supported web based resources, these will be supplemented over time. There are plans to continue to supplement the quiz section of the resource but, as will be discussed below, it is difficult to get good feedback on appropriate other areas for development.

**Project Development and Feedback within the resource:**

After an initial stage of development of materials the team worked together to create accessible web-based resources. Considerable effort was put into the feedback students receive from the quiz section of the resource. If a student selects the wrong answer, or even the right answer, they will receive additional information to support them in their learning and understanding. The selection of questions, writing of responses, and research concerning appropriate content was very time consuming. However, this early stage worked pretty much to schedule and the outcomes were fairly immediately evident.

The second stage was seeking feedback from student and academic colleagues who might use the resource. This proved to be the most time and resource intensive aspect of the project, and is unexpectedly the area where most ‘project learns’ are visible (see below). Feedback attempts and results are identified in the table below:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Date | Attempt | Outcome |
| 9th May 2011 | Visit to local institution to lead a workshop on a related issue, and generate feedback from students who had been asked to review the resource. | Most students, despite requests, had not reviewed the materials. Those that had gave positive but non-specific feedback, as they numbered only three of four it was not possible, as intended, to generate group discussion about what would be useful from such a resource. |
| 26th May 2011 | Attended ISN Workshop, Leeds to advertise resource and seek colleague feedback | Questions challenged the plausibility of effective download capability. One participant contacted me afterwards to offer some minor corrections to content and to advise that she intended to use the resource with her students. |
| May – November 2011 | Emails were sent to colleagues from a range of institutions seeking feedback. | Where feedback was received (very few cases) this was broadly positive and did not offer specific suggestions for improvement. The lack of enthusiasm for the resource suggested that plans for a meeting of colleagues to discuss the resource were not practicable. |
| Sept-Nov 2011 | Students were introduced to the resource through introductory lectures and asked to provide feedback. | New students were reticent about making comments in the lecture, students who were asked informally gave broadly positive feedback but without any specific suggestions for improvement or addition. Arguably, these new students did not yet know what was going to be useful to them. |
| November 2011 | Produced article for the ISN ‘Perspectives’ magazine to seek colleague feedback. | No responses received. |
| November 2011 | Produced a paper feedback questionnaire (see appendix) to get feedback on resource from level 1 students. Students to receive £3 printer credits for completion (this was in line with previous incentives.) | Only three responses received |
| Dec 2011- Feb 2012 | Created and advertised a survey using ‘Survey Monkey’ based on the paper questionnaire. Respondents were asked if they would be willing to take part in a focus group discussion of the resource for a further and higher payment. Only one student responded favourably that they would be prepared to do so. | Ten responses were received. All were broadly favourable, there was an even balance between those who felt the resource was too easy, too difficult and about right – indicating that it is pitched appropriately. Some issues regarding instructions were identified and Damian responded to these. There was no consensus on possible areas where the resource could be supplemented. |
| 11th January 2012 | Attended joint ISN/MBRN meeting to advertise resource and seek colleague feedback | One person responded. Their comments were favourable and they expressed an intention to use the resource. No suggestions for change were made, but suggestion of sites to link to were made. These were added to the list which was being discussed and checked. |
| Jan – May 2012 | Level one students directed to the resource as part of Introduction to Islam module | Most students engaging with the resource to some extent. |

**Changes to Project:**

Certificate of completion

It had been hoped that there would be functionality for individuals to print a ‘certificate of completion’ once they had completed the tasks in the resource. However, it soon became clear that despite Damian’s efforts in this area this would not be practicable.

Download of materials in alternative formats

It had been hoped that it would be possible for tutors and instructors to download the materials in alternative formats so that they could use them within their own teaching resources and manipulate them accordingly. It has not been possible, thus far, to achieve such a system. Teaching staff are directed to contact the project leader by email and it is envisaged that should people wish to access the materials in alternative formats this can be arranged on a case by case basis initially. The team will continue to explore options for creating this functionality.

**Project Learns:**

Although there seemed to be clear scope for a resource of this nature, and initial feedback at the stage of developing the project proposal was overwhelmingly positive, the difficulty in received post production feedback has been significant.

Where feedback has been received it has been positive and has indicated several ‘learns’ which may be useful to take away from the project:

Firstly, students appreciate responses in ‘click-through’ web based resources which help them gather further information and feel that they are engaging with materials rather than passively receiving them

***Learn: it is as important to develop good quality responses in ‘click-through’ materials as it is to develop good quality questions.***

Secondly, student expectations of what ‘introductory’ materials may look like vary widely, even between the same cohort following the same programme. Where introductory courses concern religion there is of course the difference between those who are adherents of the religion and those who are not, but there is also a difference between international and home students, students of different ages and students with different pre-existing qualifications. The students who were most positive about the resource were those who were particularly lacking in confidence. The decision to vary the ‘difficulty level’ of the questions throughout the resource rather than having staged easy/medium/hard questions seems to have helped in this regard.

***Learn: confidence building can be particularly important for students with no previous knowledge of a subject. The use of web-based packages to support learning may help students to engage with more academic resources.***

Thirdly, students particularly valued responses in the materials which clarified issues which may seem particularly trivial. This was noted of a question about the Qur’an which had a response, whatever the student answered, which explained the existence of different spellings of the word Qur’an. One student commented that this was useful because it had not been explained elsewhere, but did not seem the sort of thing it was appropriate to ask in lectures which may start, even at an introductory level, with much more complex and demanding material.

***Learn: when teaching introductory courses it is particularly important to be aware of the ‘assumed knowledge’ that can underpin the module, but which may not be straightforwardly identifiable in texts.***

Feedback on the resource:

Where feedback has been received it has been positive – indicating that when colleagues and student do try the resource they do find it useful. The lack of feedback could indicate one of several things:

1. Feedback requests are at saturation point

Students and colleagues are asked for feedback on a fairly perpetual basis. It is notoriously difficult to get responses to any feedback request where that feedback is not required as part of teaching or professional practice.

***Learn: there may be broader scope for evaluation of whether feedback is always necessary – it may be that fewer requests for feedback and consultation could lead to higher quality responses when they are really needed.***

1. The resource does not have immediate appeal

It is plausible that people are not sufficiently interested to work through the resource, and thus be confident to give feedback. However, where feedback has been received it has been positive, and there does seem to be a reasonable amount of student use of the resource at Leeds, if not yet beyond. There are a significant number of web-based packages being developed currently and this may have added to a lack of immediate interest.

1. The ways in which feedback has been sought need further development

Efforts at seeking feedback have been numerous, as indicated above, and have included the offer of reward (at the standard rate used in the University) but without significant success.

***Learn: it may be useful for bodies such as the HEA to provide systematic guidance on generating feedback.***

1. Individuals are unwilling to provide negative feedback on a resource that is not fit for purpose. It would be very useful to receive some engaged feedback from the project funders.

**APPENDIX: feedback questionnaire**

Student name:

Student ID number:

Thank you for agreeing to review the Introduction to Islam online materials. You will find the materials at this address:

<http://arts.leeds.ac.uk/introductiontoislam/>

The materials are designed to assist students to assess their knowledge of Islam and improve their general knowledge prior to starting modules in the study of Islam.

Please answer each of the questions in as much details as possible, and include comments to illustrate your answer. This information will be used to improve the resource before it goes live in 2012.

Each student who completes this form (in full) will receive £3 in printer credits. There will also be a focus group arranged in semester 2. Attendees at the focus group will receive an additional £7 of printer credits. Please indicate below if you wish to be part of the focus group.

**Q1. On entering the site how would you rate the clarity about the purpose and content of the website:**

Very good Good Average Poor Very poor

Comments:

**Q2. In completing the timeline activity (Unit 1) how would you rate the instructions?**

Very good Good Average Poor Very poor

Comments:

**Q3. How would you rate the difficulty level of the timeline activity?**

Very difficult Difficult Average Easy Too easy

Comments:

**Q4. Units 2 and 3 contain a variety of multiple choice questions with varying difficulty levels. When the question is answered there is a feedback box, often containing additional information. How would you describe the activities? Tick all that apply:**

Too difficult

Too easy

Too varied

Too similar

Unclear questions

Clear questions

Useful feedback

Not useful feedback

Comments:

**Q5. Unit 4 is an activity to identify countries on a world map. How would you rate the instructions for this activity?**

Very good Good Average Poor Very poor

Comments:

**Q6. How would you rate the difficulty level of the world map activity?**

Very difficult Difficult Average Easy Too easy

Comments:

**Q7. Which of these additional areas would you include in any updates to the materials? Circle all that apply. Add any additional suggestions. For each that you circle provide some suggestions of the type of information which would be included.**

Islam in the UK

Islam in the media

Visiting a mosque

Key Quranic verses and their meanings

Comments:

**Q8. Overall, how would you rate the usability of the materials?**

Very good Good Average Poor Very poor

Comments:

**Q9. Overall, how would you rate the appearance of the materials?**

Very good Good Average Poor Very poor

Comments:

**Q10. Overall, to what extent have these materials improved your confidence in studying Islam?**

Significantly To some extent A little Not at all

If you would like to be part of the focus group to discuss the materials in more depth please tick here: