

NSW HSC ONLINE: THE SECOND PHASE

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(Photograph by M. Agzarian)

Summary

The New South Wales (NSW) Higher School Certificate (HSC) Online project began as a Charles Sturt University initiative in 1996 and has developed as a collaborative venture of Charles Sturt University and the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (DET). Given the development of new syllabi for the Higher School Certificate to be implemented in the year 2001, the project entered a second phase in 1999. A second website is being developed, based on the requirements for the HSC in 2001. This article summarises the history of the first phase of the project, outlines the planning and development being undertaken for the second phase, and discusses the main challenges and uppermost concerns of the project team in the year 2000.

Introduction - NSW HSC Online: The First Phase

The concept of a website to support teachers and students preparing for the New South Wales (NSW) Higher School Certificate (HSC), the credential awarded to students in Year 12, the final year of secondary school was developed within Charles Sturt University. In May 1996 the project was endorsed by the NSW Minister for Education and Training, The Hon. John Aquilina, and 'major players' with an interest in the HSC became involved in collaborative support (the NSW Board of Studies, the Joint Council of NSW Professional Teachers' Associations). In July 1996 the project became a joint venture of Charles Sturt University and the NSW Department of School Education (subsequently the Department of Education and Training, DET), with sponsorship from Access Australia Cooperative Multimedia Centre. The aims of the project were linked closely with the mission of Charles Sturt University in its own geographical region. These were to provide:

- support for all students studying for the NSW HSC and, in so doing, enhance particularly the prospects of students in rural areas;
- support for teachers preparing students for the NSW HSC, particularly those teachers working in rural schools;
- a vehicle by which interested parties may gain access to the deliberations, publications and activities of the various subject associations;
- an environment in which the various parties involved in the HSC enterprise may communicate via the Web; and
- assistance for schools in establishing communications via the Web.

Work proceeded during 1996 and 1997 with project management structures being established, technical work on website design and development occurring and teams preparing materials for the various HSC subjects that were given first priority. The project site was placed 'live' on the Internet in March 1997 and it was officially launched in July that year. The website included not only information relevant to HSC subjects but also hints on study methods and examination techniques. Material was also included on the use of technology in teaching and learning, links to Australian school home pages on the Internet, links to teachers' professional association home pages and information on careers and post-school options.

From its early days, members of the project have been aware of the need to evaluate the site and its use. An evaluation, funded by Access Australia in 1997-98, pointed to the potential of NSW HSC Online as an educational resource, particularly with respect to the quality and relevance of materials, and the speed and ease of updating and enhancement. The collaborative nature of the project promised to create 'an emergent educational community committed to the most effective use of technology in learning and teaching.'

In 1998, the project managers identified particular challenges to be addressed. The most significant was, that in spite of considerable effort to promote the website via the media and professional development networks, the site was still comparatively little used. Students surveyed in 1997-98 seemed to be relying on their teachers to direct them to use the Internet for learning purposes and teachers seemed relatively slow in integrating use of the website into their teaching practice.

Related to this was the challenge of convincing teachers themselves to contribute, to see the site as 'a suitable vehicle for publishing their original material'. There was disappointment that teachers were tending not to offer materials to be published electronically, were not taking advantage of an electronic journal associated with the project and were not contributing to an associated online forum. Wider and more effective publicity was suggested as a means of promoting the website with teachers and students.

Another set of challenges was associated with technology and issues of access and equity. The site was constructed so that it would be accessible to users of low-end machines and easy access

for users in remote and isolated areas was a priority throughout. However, the project managers recognised that some users would expect more sophisticated features such as video and sound, while others would be limited by narrow bandwidth in what they could easily download from the site. An associated challenge was to enable users of the site to communicate with one another without compromising or contravening the policies of the publicly funded agencies contributing to the development of the site.

In brief, in April 1998 NSW HSC Online was seen as 'a very rich website' but one that was not being used extensively by its target groups, as an exciting and innovative resource, and as a means of effectively utilising evolving technologies in the service of teaching and learning. Development of the website continued with more subjects added so that by mid-1999 there were materials for 25 subjects on the site with five more under development. In all cases, content published on NSW HSC Online was relevant to the syllabus and all material was quality assured. This applied to links to other websites around the world, which were checked for relevance and to ensure their appropriateness to a student audience. The site also provided links to syllabus documents, to past examination papers and to examiners' comments.

A further evaluation was undertaken in 1999 to investigate student and teacher use of NSW HSC Online, specifically to identify ways in which the site was used for teaching and learning and perceptions of site content and design. The evaluation team visited six schools, including the four involved in the earlier evaluation.

Again, although there was widespread positive comment on the site, there was also evidence that it was not as widely used as had been hoped. Findings on a low level of awareness of the site and lack of clarity about its purpose among both staff and students led to another recommendation for greater promotion. Other problems identified by the survey included low levels of computer literacy among staff; limited access to the Internet at school and at home for both staff and students, as well as technical issues affecting Internet connection and the speed of downloading material.

Data collected during this evaluation included specific information from students and teachers on the features they liked and on others they wanted to be added. This was to prove useful during the second phase of the project.

Despite a perception based on the 1999 evaluation that NSW HSC Online was still an underutilised resource, statistics on use collected by the technical team indicated considerable growth. Graphic representation of the number of pages delivered per month between mid-1997 and the end of 1999 showed a general upward trend, with peaks occurring just prior to the trials and the HSC examinations. A peak was reached in October 1999 with more than 500,000 pages delivered that month. In 1998 and 1999 cooperative arrangements between the partner institutions and the Sydney Morning Herald (SMH) led to considerably greater traffic to the site. Over successive weeks the SMH published study guides on HSC subjects to assist students in their preparation for HSC examinations. In the hardcopy newspaper version these study guides included references to the project; from the electronic version published on the SMH website they included direct links to NSW HSC Online. By 1999 the site provided a substantial resource for students and teachers with materials for some 30 HSC subjects available as well as the range of other services and links offered by the project.

NSW HSC Online: Planning for the Second Phase

Review of the Higher School Certificate and the development of new syllabi across a range of subjects in 1999 posed a new set of challenges for NSW HSC Online. There was debate about future direction: should the current site be modified to take account of changes, should a new site be developed, should there be two parallel sites for old and new syllabi? It was decided in late 1999 that a completely new website would be developed for the NSW HSC 2001.

A schedule for subject development was agreed, with a first group of 25 subjects to be prepared ready to 'go live' on a new website in late 2000 or early 2001, and a second smaller group to be developed and published in 2001. The two collaborating institutions developed a revised operational plan covering processes and procedures for the project as a whole. Funding from the Ministry enabled the DET to support Key Learning Area Managers and teams to develop content for the new site, and both teachers and academics are being encouraged to contribute materials relevant to the syllabuses for the year 2001.

Charles Sturt University assumed responsibility for the technical work involved in developing a new site to include a new design and to incorporate features recommended by users in their responses to the project evaluations. One aim of the second phase of the project is to provide scope to use more fully the potential of the Internet as a teaching tool, to incorporate features made possible by technological change and by greater take-up among the population of home computers and Internet access. Developers are exploring features such as greater interactivity and use of video and audio. However, those involved in the project are aware that some constraints on use of more advanced features persist. Some users do not have adequate access to computers at home or at school, and in some areas, even where there is access, bandwidth is too narrow to enable speedy downloading of material that includes graphics or more sophisticated use of the technology involving multimedia. Furthermore, if sophisticated applications are added to the site that require students to install 'plug-ins' onto their machines to access them, this may cause problems as such installations are not always straightforward.

As well as planning for the future with respect to effective use of evolving technological possibilities, members of the project are keen to explore the pedagogical and theoretical issues arising from use of the Internet as a teaching and learning tool. Subject teams during the first phase of the project generally relied more on common sense than on any considered theorising when preparing materials for publication on the website. Staff training and informal exchanges led to greater awareness of the advantages of a relatively 'flat structure', of ways of improving site navigability and general user-friendliness. However, in the mid-1990s there had been little time to reflect on web design or on the pedagogical implications of this new mode of delivery. That situation has now changed, and in 2000 there is a growing literature on these matters. One feature of the new site will be an area designated for teachers, where information can be exchanged and where teachers can access materials relevant to their own professional development.

Some aspects of Internet delivery, however, remain unchanged and will continue to present challenges. The volatile environment of the Internet means that particular attention has to be given to maintaining accuracy and currency, particularly when there are links to sites beyond the project itself.

There is still work to be done in promoting the site among teachers and students in New South Wales schools. The project will also face greater competition when the 2001 site is launched than it did in 1997. One Internet provider in NSW is attempting to establish a cyber school with classes in a range of HSC subjects. Other private web providers now offer online tutoring to HSC students. No doubt there will be more competition from online schools using the latest technology and offering customised packages to meet client needs. In such an environment the success of NSW HSC Online will depend increasingly on effective marketing that stresses its high credibility based on the partner institutions involved and on consistently high quality assurance procedures.