



North East Surrey College of Technology

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Nescot is a college of Further and Higher Education, with a single site and a purpose-built learning resources centre, including the college's main open access computing facilities.



For several years, we had a computerised booking system, which was designed in-house and based on a Microsoft Access database. This worked quite well as a means of rationing computer time, but it didn't control the PCs and so lacked any way of enforcing booking. At busy periods this was mostly adequate, as nearly all the PCs would be in use. However, as soon as computers became free, there was nothing to stop students from jumping on – often in noisy groups. Discipline problems were endless, and an enormous amount of staff time was being wasted fighting a losing battle.

MyPC has definitely revolutionised the way we run our open access computing.

Current Needs

At this stage, the college had no system of individual student logins, but their introduction was imminent and it seemed a good opportunity to bring in a more sophisticated booking system. Clearly, what we needed was software, which would recognise the student ID, and only release the computer to the right person with the right login name and password. We also needed it to terminate the session automatically when time ran out, having delivered appropriate advance warnings to the user.

The LRC has several separate groups of computers – e.g. group work or single

user only, and machines with specialist applications such as graphics software. We wanted to be able to set different limits for maximum access time. We also needed different opening hours for the various groups (upstairs closes earlier than downstairs).

Lastly, we wanted to be able to extract information about the users

- Who was logged in when, if we needed to pinpoint an offender
- Analysis of use by different groups of students to guide future development

Both students and staff got used to the system very quickly, and the benefits have been enormous.

MyPC's policies and settings are easily customised, and most are under the direct control of the administrator.



The Decision

We investigated several likely systems, including MyPC and found it had many extras not present in the other solutions we evaluated. Whilst all had the main features we required, MyPC, was clearly providing all that we needed at considerably lower cost and with lower annual maintenance.

Getting Started

Once the decision was taken, and the individual logins had been introduced, we were able to go ahead at the earliest convenient moment, which was the autumn half-term week.

This did mean that students had been using the old system for some weeks and had to adapt to the new one. There was a minor amount of initial confusion, and the inevitable howls of complaint from those who had been misusing the old arrangements, but on the whole the transition went very well. Most users were delighted that the old free-for-all was a thing of the past and there would be no more arguments with students who failed to quit when their time was up, or who shouldn't have been there in the first place.

For greater control, we chose not to allow users to book themselves on, though MyPC can handle this option for those who prefer it. We don't book anybody without an ID card, and many of the problem groups simply disappeared from the scene, since they tended to be the ones who didn't bother to carry their cards.

We were able to set up initial parameters, see how they worked out, and change anything that needed fine-tuning. MyPC's policies and settings are easily customised, and most are under the direct control of the administrator. Teaching staff were also delighted that they could block book PCs for a whole

group, but still have the students log in to their individual network areas.

There were a few problems at first with the interface to our network server, but these have mostly been overcome by the later issue of the software. The system picks up its user records automatically from the College Information System, so it's always up-to-date.

Far less computer time is now wasted, since bookings lapse if the user fails to show up within a set period (we chose 10 minutes). The booking also ends as soon as the user logs out, so the machine is immediately released for rebooking – no more disagreements with students who could see there was nobody at a PC and weren't impressed with our argument that the machine was still booked and we couldn't give it away in case the other user came back.

Eight months on

MyPC has definitely revolutionised the way we run our open access computing. Both students and staff got used to the system very quickly, and the benefits have been enormous.

No one can get onto a computer without ID. No one can overstay their time and users know that they must save their work regularly to ensure nothing is ever lost. People do ignore the warnings, which we've set at 10 minutes, 5 minutes and 1 minute – but they rarely do it twice.

Overall we have been very pleased with the impact that MyPC has made. Students who just wish to waste their own or others' time rarely make the effort to book computers. There is a great deal more computer time being devoted to positive work and it has recently been shown that the computers within the LRC are the most heavily used in the whole college.

This Case Study was written by Janis Reid and Graeme Hodge, NESCOL LRC and printed unedited.

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