

I-TECH

E-learning: It's all about the students, teachers and parents

Martin Debattista

While the Maltese government is still in the process of choosing and then rolling-out a national e-learning platform for primary and secondary schools, Chiswick House School and St. Martin's College, two local independent schools, have just announced the launch of their own e-learning platform.

The schools, which cater for students aged 2-18, have adopted the e-learning solution of LP+, a UK-based company whose platform is used by over 500 schools with over 400,000 online users in the UK.

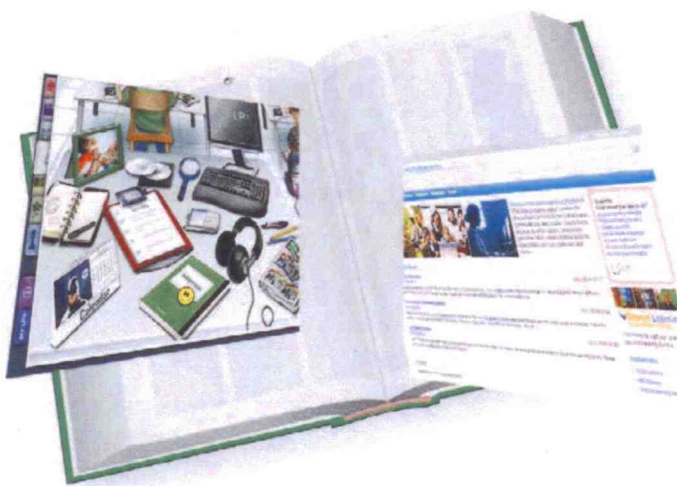
"We recognise that a good learning platform solution will help us in our quest to deliver more personalised learning, to facilitate parental engagement, to promote project-based work, and to enrich and develop communication and collaboration skills," Patrick Tabone, principal of the two schools, explained to i-Tech.

"Essentially, this platform will allow us to reach out to our students through a medium that they are extremely comfortable with, and will therefore find easy to engage with. It allows us a forum where we can share with them academic materials, documents, images and even film with great ease."

However, Mr Tabone wants to put people's mind at rest that computers are not taking the place of people at school.

"International experience clearly shows that no e-learning platform can, or should try to be, a substitute for face-to-face teaching and learning, but it can be an excellent complementary tool. Since the online world will certainly be an important part of our students' future life, a closed, monitored, online community such as the one we are creating is also a safe way for our students to learn how to navigate the net safely."

E-learning platforms have been used in Malta or some years now, especially in higher education, but this announcement is important as



Two major independent schools in Malta have adopted the LP+ e-learning platform, used by over 500 schools in the UK.

it is the initiative of a non-governmental educational entity that has realised the need and the potential of the technology.

"I'm sure students will take to the platform like a fish to water," said a confident Mr Tabone. "Of course this is a learning process for everyone and the idea is to start modestly and increase usage and functionality as people become more comfortable with the system. The good thing is that it is designed as simply and intuitively as possible, so adaptation times are actually quite low."

Exigi, a member of the M. Demajo Group that delivers strategic software solutions, including on a national level to the Maltese government, is the LP+ partner in Malta. The Maltese company has an important role in the development of the LP+ solution both in Malta and the UK.

"The LP+ platform offers an e-learning solution that fosters creativity, communication, collabo-

ration and curriculum delivery for all school stakeholders by offering a range of Web 2.0 technologies delivered through an enterprise architecture," explained Trevor Bezzina, enterprise projects manager at Exigi.

"Class sites, e-portfolios and learning manager help ensure that a child's learning journey can be tracked. The solution is enhanced through integration with third party applications such as content providers, school information systems, library systems to ensure that important and relevant information can be accessed, anytime anywhere, through a browser."

The LP+ platform is built on the Microsoft Learning Gateway Framework and is a fully hosted and managed system which means that there is no need for additional server hardware to be installed at the schools. Teachers, students and parents can access it through an internet browser on a computer or a mobile device anytime any-

where through a secure login that gives them personalised access to the LP+ sites. A hosted solution means that schools do not have to worry about the server technology and can concentrate on learning and teaching, added Mr Bezzina.

A recent independent study by Lancashire University on the LP+ system revealed that a primary school could save £38,000 (€45,000) per year in administrative overhead costs. However, making teaching and learning more effective and more fun, developing better communication with parents and saving on costs are only part of the story. One of the major concerns for any educational establishment is security and the protection of minors.

"We build on best of breed, enterprise class products because we take our responsibility in handling schools' data seriously. From our tier 4 hosting centre that supports critical systems and staff checked against the criminal

records bureau to our e-mail solution, security is at the heart of our product design," reassured Francois Grech, executive director at Exigi.

"LP+ is accessed through individual logins personal to the user. All access contributions to the platform are tracked with enhanced levels of filtering that ensure protection against viruses and spam. LP+ SafeMail, the e-mail solution from LP+, offers a whole range of flexibility including the possibility to control the ability to e-mail externally to the school and also provides a vast number of reports to ensure user security is in line with school policies."

LP+ won the prestigious 2010 BETT Education Partnership Award for its work in transforming schools in the Wolverhampton local Authority. LP+'s ADOPT framework has also been selected by BECTA (British Educational Communications and Technology Agency, the UK government's educational ICT authority), as the national model for e-learning maturity in England.

Mr Grech is confident that other Maltese schools can make good use of e-learning platforms.

"We believe that Malta can become the hub of e-learning excellence that will empower the local community and accelerate the development of Malta as a knowledge economy," he added.

Whatever the potential of the latest e-learning technology, such technology is only a tool to support people's learning.

"The technological challenges are there, but they can be met if you have the right technical advice and expertise. Our careful and prudent approach, plus the fact that we are using tried and tested partners with a very robust platform makes me confident that this project will be a successful and fruitful one for students, parents and school alike. The trick, I think, is to remember that this is primarily about students learning not about technology; that this is about empowering teachers and giving them new tools," Mr Tabone concluded.

New adapter for wireless gaming

Sitecom has launched a new 2nd generation gaming USB network adapter which is the ideal combination for hardcore games, thanks to the integrated dual-band technology that supports two frequencies: the standard 2.4 GHz and less congested 5 GHz band which is ideal for time sensitive applications such as gaming.

With the WL-329 GM, in combination with a wireless "N" router such as the Sitecom Gaming

Router 2nd Generation, the user can count on optimal wireless performances with speeds up to 300 Mbps on both frequencies, since the device supports the latest wireless technology 802.11n. The Gaming Adapter 2nd Generation is, just like its predecessor, equipped with an OPS (one-push setup) button to create a WPA2 secured connection with just the push of a button and without any complicated software installation, the company said.

Both the Gaming Router 2nd Generation and the Gaming Adapter 2nd Generation come with an extensive 10 years warranty.

Sitecom was established in 1998 and its head office is located in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. It offers 200 innovative products, network solutions and computer accessories for use in the home and by small businesses that are also available in Malta.

www.sitecom.com



The Sitecom WL-329-GM gaming adapter.