
A new departure: revising the websites by subject pages at WIT libraries

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PROJECT BACKGROUND

Based in southeast Ireland, Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) is a higher education institute of 8000 full-time students up to PhD level. The academic structure within WIT is divided into six schools, namely: business, education, engineering, health sciences, humanities and science. WIT Libraries actively supports the teaching, learning and research needs of the staff and students across each of these schools.

The academic liaison initiative, which was established in 2001 to communicate library developments to academic staff at the Institute, is one such support. Although the service has evolved through the years, with the liaison team providing assistance and advice to lecturers on library related issues, one of the team's first tasks involved developing subject pages for the library website. These pages were initially collated in summer 2001 and included a selection of subject

specific gateway sites, as well as a collection of Irish and international web links. The pages were regularly checked to ensure that the links had not expired, but the individual pages were never re-structured, and so looked very dated by summer 2006. A significant update was required, particularly given the fact that the majority of courses had at this stage undergone transformations which the old pages did not reflect.

PROJECT AIMS

A project team was established in autumn 2006, with the overall objective of updating the pages in line with the current institutional structure and curriculum. Following the theory that 'students will search the internet with or without us; it is imperative that librarians take leadership in making the internet search experience a profitable one'¹ the team's primary objective involved producing a listing of quality academic sites for initiating intelligent and informed use of the internet. The plan was that while the listing could not, in any way, claim to be definitive, it would provide users with a starting point for academic research, guiding them onto other relevant and related sites, and ultimately helping them to become discriminating internet users.

The team began by assessing user needs. From their work at the circulation and information desks, and their involvement in liaison and learning support, the team members recognised the difficulty that users, particularly first year undergraduates, have with using the internet for academic research. The need for a transparent 'one stop shop' through which students could access some of the key websites for their subject areas and could learn about search tools and strategies, was immediately evident.

PROJECT FRAMEWORK

The team decided to transfer the 'websites by subject' page, which had been set up as a separate element on the library website, onto the main Internet page. The link to the subject page is now embedded on the library's internet page together with links to search tools and tutorials. This re-positioning of the section reinforces its association with the internet generally, and provides users with an opportunity, not only to intuitively access quality sites at the click of a mouse, but to simultaneously learn internet search skills. (See figure 1.)

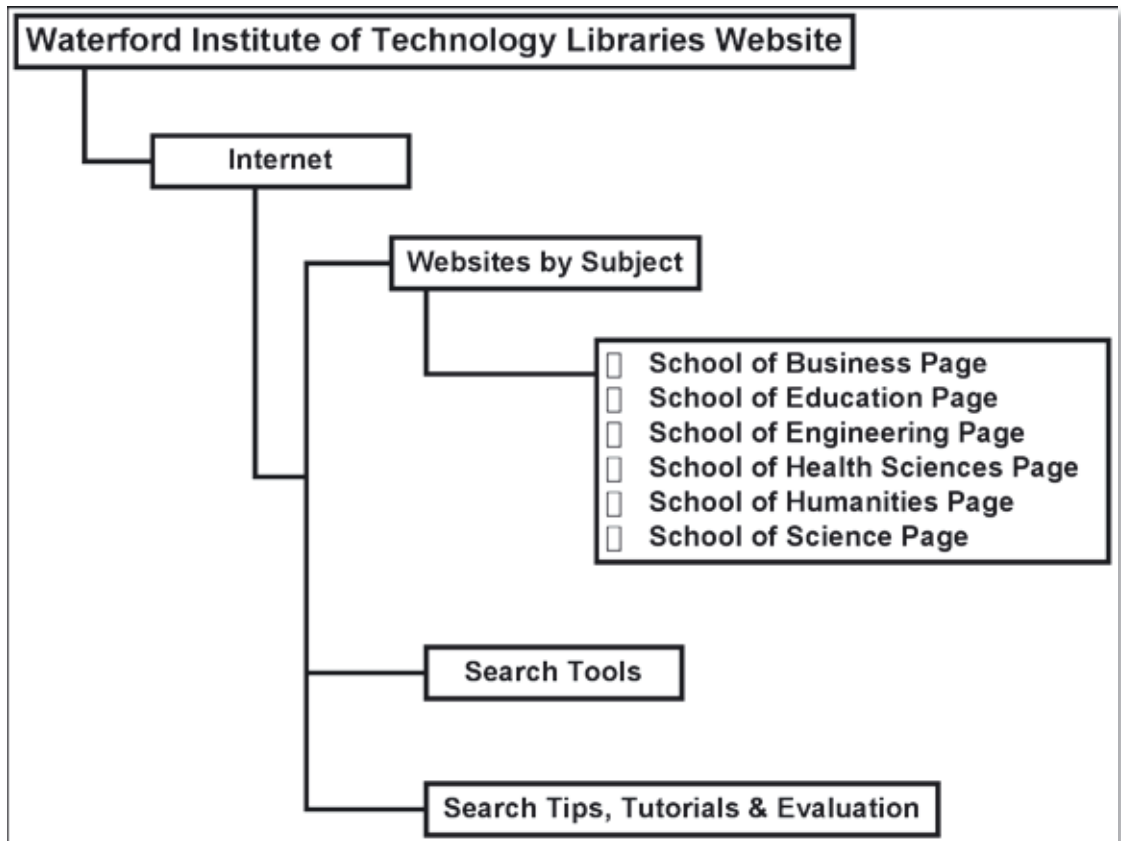
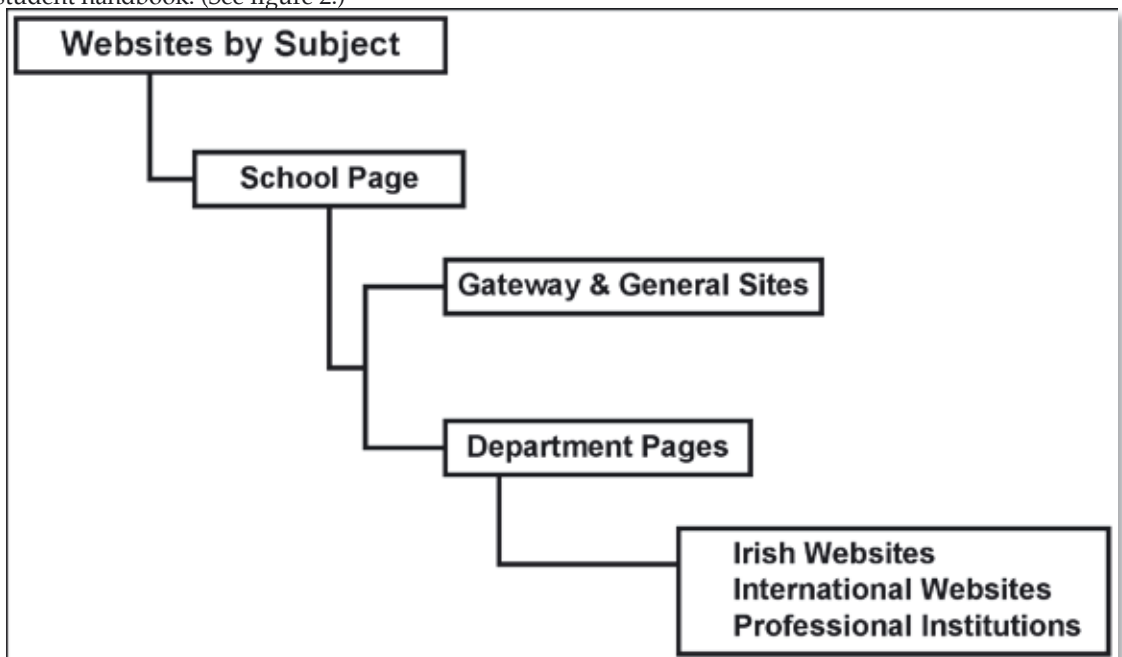


Fig. 1 – Structure of internet pages on WIT Libraries website

School pages

The 'websites by subject' page includes prominent links to all the academic schools at WIT. In an attempt to enhance associations between the library and these schools, as well as to the overall Institute, each subject page is further sub-divided according to an individual school and departmental framework. This division is in line with all other student information, including that provided on the institutional homepage and in the student handbook. (See figure 2.)

Fig. 2 – 'Websites by subject' page structures



In contrast to the old subject pages, which focused on providing links for each individual subject area, the decision to ground links to external websites in this way proves much more practical and relevant, for the reasons outlined below.

- **Gateways & general sites**

Following the new model, the opening page for each school includes a listing of key websites relevant to the entire school, regardless of any particular subject area. Gateway sites, which allow the user to access a wealth of links across a number of disciplines, are ideal for inclusion on the initial school page. Sites such as BUBL Information Service² and the recently launched Intute³ have proved so popular and useful within library training sessions that the team made a conscious decision to showcase these from the outset.

This model is in contrast with the former pages, which listed gateways for each individual subject, resulting in much repetition of links. In the current design, instead of having a link to the chemistry pages of a gateway, and a separate link to the physics pages of the same gateway, one overall link is now provided as appropriate on the opening school's page (in this case: science). This provides for a more efficient and effective framework.

In addition to listing gateway sites, these opening pages also include links to what the team defines as 'general subject sites', which are also relevant across the entire school. One example is Scirus,⁴ a science related search engine that provides access to academic sites, journals, news and other online web resources across the entire field of science.

Department pages

Links to individual departments are listed at the bottom of each school page after the gateway or general site listings. These departmental pages provide users with listings of subject specific sites, which, following the old page divisions, are categorised according to an Irish, international and professional context. The rationale for continuing to apply these divisions is outlined below:

- **Irish websites**

From our observations at group training sessions, we noted that many undergraduate assignments have a distinctly Irish emphasis. The team also noted that reference desk

queries revealed a tendency for students to request help in locating information in a specifically Irish context. In response to these needs, we felt it was important to demonstrate the availability of local and national information online. The Irish Government website,⁵ which provides a comprehensive overview of the organisations and departments within the state, is one example.

- **International sites**

In an effort to provide students with additional and alternate perspectives, and to encourage them to look beyond the Irish context, links to international and European Union sites were also included on the listings. A case in point is the World Health Organization,⁶ which provides access to comprehensive European and international information in the areas of nursing and healthcare.

- **Professional institutions**

In a bid to add a real-world focus to the pages, and following the strategic objectives of the Institute (which seek to 'produce graduates of distinction, equipped with a portfolio of personal, workplace and life skills that will ensure their value and success as employees and citizens alike'⁷) the team also decided to include links to professional institutions and bodies. The information on these pages not only foster and promote workplace skills relevant to the subject of study, but also include comprehensive links to additional web resources of potential interest. One example is the website for the Royal Institute of Architects of Ireland (RIAI)⁸ which contains a student resource section, plus links to a number of related websites.

SELECTING WEBSITES

With an established framework in place, our next task was to select and evaluate websites across all schools and departments that would match the new page templates. Despite being somewhat outdated and specifically structured according to subject, rather than schools and departments, the old pages provided us with a starting point for identifying quality academic sites. Whenever possible, content from the older pages was carried forward to the new structures, and modified accordingly. The BUBL Information Service site, which appeared on the initial 'websites by subject' pages, was, for example, transferred onto the relevant new pages. In addition, the team

drew on website listings that had been collated in other Irish and international third level institutions.⁹ The Irish Law site,¹⁰ hosted by University College Cork, is a valuable addition to the pages, as is the Teaching & Educational Development Institute (TEDI) site¹¹ from the University of Queensland. We also relied on recommendations from library mailing lists and other information resources worldwide. The HEAnet Information Resources Zone,¹² a web-based online repository of information resources of relevance to the academic and research community, is one such source. The internet resources articles from *College & research libraries news*, which provide annotated listings of Internet-accessible resources, is another.

EVALUATING WEBSITES

Taking our cue from a small number of information sources,^{13, 14, 15} the team aimed to select websites that were information-rich, up-to-date, reputable, reliable and well presented. All the links that appear on the 'websites by subject' pages were, therefore, evaluated according to the criteria outlined below.

Authority and currency

Authority refers to the author's or organisation's credentials, which we checked for repute. Given the nature and context of the project, our preference was for academic sites. As currency is related to authority, the sites were also monitored for date of creation and revision. This involved thoroughly inspecting each of the sites as we soon realised that even when the content appears to be current, certain sections, for example, news and events, may be glaringly out of date. Inter-site links were also tested to ensure that they were still live and current. Out of date information and expired links justifiably undermine the user's confidence in the usefulness of the site, and by extension, of the other sites listed on the page.

Content and reliability

Each website chosen for inclusion was deemed to have content of significant value to the teaching, learning and research needs of students and staff at WIT. The liaison team, who maintain regular contact with the lecturing staff, were useful advisers in this regard. While our preference was for academic sites, commercial sites were also included based on the valuable current information they contained in relation to specific industries.

Layout and design

The sites were also evaluated for ease of navigation. Ideally, design should allow the user to access each section of the site after the least possible number of decisions and clicks. As a general rule of thumb, sites with large amounts of unnecessary images, animations and banner advertisements were avoided as we felt such flashy graphics might be used to mask shallow content.

THE PROCESS

With the schools and departmental framework in place, and with the principles for selection and evaluation decided upon, the team set about collating and updating the 'websites by subject' pages. Working through the sections on either an individual or collaborative basis, depending on the complexity of the existing pages, the project was completed within six weeks.

In order to provide students with value-added content, jargon-free annotations were provided for each link. The generic descriptions from site homepages provided us with a starting point for preparing the annotations. Clear, simple, descriptive terminology was used throughout. As a pilot exercise, to determine the validity and the overall look and feel of the new design, the pages for the Schools of Business and Science were completed first. Following a positive reaction among staff and students, the pages for the schools of health sciences, education and humanities were then compiled. The pages for the school of engineering were finalised shortly afterwards.

ROLLING IT OUT

As the new pages were completed, they were gradually added to the library site. This phased approach, rather than an overall blanket switch, was considered appropriate, as it allowed for feedback on the pages throughout the course of the project.

It is worth mentioning that the websites by subject pages are becoming a crucial component of the library's internet training sessions. The fact that the listings have been selected and evaluated by a team of librarians and are of guaranteed quality instils confidence in the trainers and appeals to the students. Rather than randomly searching the internet for material for their assignments, students are now encouraged to bookmark the 'websites by subject' page as a starting point for research.

In line with the team's original disclaimer that the pages cannot presume to be a definitive representation of every web resource, the training sessions also go beyond the site listings. Students are introduced to a variety of search tools and to a number of search strategies for future searching, all of which focus on the academic context. The main values of the new pages lie not only in their provision of useful sites for initiating research, but also in their key role in fostering a range of transferable skills for future web searching.

GOING FORWARD

While the initial update of the 'websites by subject' pages has been accomplished, the team is aware that page maintenance is an ongoing project. The team is also aware that the content of the pages is subject to change over time, as the institutional structure grows and develops, and as new sites and suggestions for new sites come on-stream. With this in mind, we will continue working with the academic liaison librarians to monitor and evaluate page usage and to update the pages accordingly.

Access the 'websites by subject' pages on WIT libraries website. <http://library.wit.ie/GoingOnline/Internet/WebsitesbySubject/>

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