The network at work: the web presence of Italian as a case study for language program visibility in Australian universities

Abstract

The internet is now the primary source of information about language programs in Australian universities, for prospective students as well as for other academics and the interested public. A language program’s web presence can thus have a significant impact on its public profile as well as potentially also on student numbers. This case study, on which we report, surveyed the web presence of Italian programs around Australia’s universities. It examined the websites from several perspectives: (1) the general visibility of the program; (2) the perspective of prospective students; and (3) the program’s general academic profile, taking into account issues of content, design and navigation. This survey aims to maximise accessibility and visibility of language programs across the sector and is a useful example of how best-practice can be explored for the benefit of all language program’s in Australian universities.
1. Introduction

The internet is now the primary source of information about language programs in Australian universities, for prospective students as well as for academics and the interested public. A program’s web presence can thus have a significant impact on its public profile, potentially also on student numbers, and it can strongly differentiate one program from all others. However, despite the critical importance of the internet, there has been to date almost no interest in current practice in terms of web design for language programs in Australia, although there are critical questions to be asked with regard to (a) effective use of the internet, (b) best practice in web design and visibility, and (c) how in effect to determine such best practice.

In an effort to address this obvious lacuna, we undertook a pilot case study which tries to find answers to these questions. We surveyed the internet presence of Italian programs, as a useful initial sample, around Australia’s universities, examining the websites from several perspectives: (1) the general visibility of the program; (2) the perspective of prospective students; and (3) the program’s general academic profile, taking into account issues of content, design and navigation. The survey, while only preliminary at this stage, was conducted as a useful cross-sector exercise operating within the improvement-oriented framework of the recently established Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities (LCNAU). As such, it serves as a potential model for evaluating effective web use and improving web visibility for all language programs in the Australian tertiary education sector.

2. Background

A previous, very preliminary survey, conducted in 2007 as part of an ARC/LASP1 project on Beginners’ LOTE (Languages other than English) in Australian universities (Nettelbeck et al. 2007), reviewed the websites of all Australian universities from a prospective student perspective in order to identify the languages on offer and the information available about particular languages. Indicators of a good web-presence of language programs identified at the time by this survey included:

- clear profiles for languages as a field of study as well as for the individual languages on offer;
- comprehensive information accessible in a variety of ways.

The present survey focuses on internet usability and usability testing — both of which form a rapidly developing research field in general. The bulk of the existing literature on them falls into one of the following two categories:

(a) Resources with a practical, applied focus, directed mainly at web developers. These are either hands-on manuals and introductions to usability testing in conjunction with the development of a web site (e.g. Krug 2006) or internet resources and blogs published by web design and UX [User Experience]
practitioners or their companies (e.g. www.webcredible.co.uk, www.usabilityone.com, www.useit.com).

(b) Resources consisting of academic studies, generally with a quite narrow focus. Areas in which existing literature is concentrated include methodology (e.g. Ivory 2003; Ryu 2007), specific aspects of human-computer interaction (e.g. Sawasdichai 2007) or marketing and e-commerce (e.g. Hassan and Li 2005; Lin, Huang and Stockdale 2011). In addition, usability criteria and features of best practice can, of course, also be inferred from web design manuals or style guides (e.g. Lynch and Horton 2008; Di Marco 2010) or from writing guides for the internet (e.g. Mathewson, Donatone and Fishel 2010).

The existing literature that proved to be most useful in the context of our study was research that examined the usability of university websites (e.g. Hite and Railsback 2010), often in conjunction with certain other aspects, e.g. student perceptions of university websites (Bautista 2010; Nguyen 2009), cultural differences (Callahan 2007), or marketing and student recruitment (Pegoraro 2006; Poock and Lefond 2003).

University websites constitute a specific type of website and differ in many aspects from other types, such as websites of companies, NGOs or public administration. University websites as a whole, as well as the websites of individual faculties, departments and programs, have an extremely diverse target audience and fulfill a vast range of functions. The target audience ranges from prospective students to alumni; from academic to general staff; from the local to the wider community, and beyond, to the media (Hite and Railsback 2010: 107-108; Schwandt-Arbogast 2005). Functions include (but are not limited to) the following:

- to recruit students, reinforce [the] brand, process applications, collect tuition payments, [...] provide course catalogs, provide class schedules, handle course registration, collect and report students’ grades, showcase University success stories, provide news and event information, track payroll and budgets, provide resources for the community, provide online instruction, provide specific information from [all] departments, [...] allow access to the Library’s holdings, provide necessary information to prospective and current students, aid in scholarly research (Schwandt-Arbogast 2005).

Functions particularly salient for the visibility of language programs investigated here are: information about the department or program; the staff and their expertise (teaching and research); the teaching program (course catalogue, study programs, etc.); achievements and events. In terms of potential audience we concentrate on prospective students and the wider community, general and academic.³

The studies mentioned above offer important findings and conclusions, most of which are not limited to university websites. These include:

1. Users are often impatient: it is sometimes claimed that many users give up after three clicks or two minutes of searching. While these figures have not been confirmed empirically and have been termed a myth or ‘usability
folklore’ by several authors (e.g. Nielsen and Loranger 2006: 322; Gray 2010), these authors indicate all the same that users will be frustrated if they do not feel that they are making progress towards their goal.

2. Many users only read what appears on the first screen, i.e. they do not scroll down. This is particularly the case when it is not evident from the content and design of the first screen that there is more content below the ‘fold’.

3. Most users scan the pages rather than read them. As a consequence they need guidance through headings, highlighted keywords, lists, short paragraphs, etc.

4. Usability includes content, layout/design and navigation.

5. Usability of a website can and should be tested.

6. Usability testing should be based on specific tasks with defined goals.

3. Methodology

The resources and conclusions related above informed the development of the survey instrument used here. We referred particularly to Bautista (2010), Hite and Railsback (2010) and Pegoraro (2006), as well as to the manual by Krug (2006).

The survey instrument consisted of 15 specific tasks on the one hand, and of the evaluation of 23 individual features on the other. Examples of the tasks involved included finding out whether the university offers Italian for beginners, who is responsible for the Italian program and what their research areas are. The 23 individual features examined concerned content (e.g. Is the information up-to-date?), design (e.g. Are the pages easily scanable by eye? i.e. appropriate page length, empty space, highlighting of important information, headings) and navigation (e.g. Is the menu structure consistent? Are links clearly marked and labelled?). Limited space only allows us to discuss results for a few symptomatic tasks and features.

In the first instance, our focus was on the collection of quantifiable data, as we consider these most useful for an overview. Thus we determined whether tasks could be achieved or not and whether particular features were present or not. In addition, we used a difficulty rating for the tasks (1: easiest – 5: most difficult; based on Bautista 2010 and Pegoraro 2006) which took into account the time and the number of mouse movements required and whether inference or background knowledge was required to complete the task.

We examined 20 universities with Italian programs. The first author collected the data in late May and early June 2011. This provided a consistent approach and the survey instrument and criteria ensured that the data collection was done as systematically and objectively as possible. Overall, a combined approach to usability testing was taken: simulated ‘user testing’ for the tasks and ‘expert review’ for the features.
4. Results and discussion

In this initial study we present only a selection of the results, grouped according to four perspectives:

1. Online visibility of the program;
2. Information a prospective student would be interested in;
3. The general academic profile of the program;
4. Some features of design and navigation.

The results are reported anonymously since the purpose of the study is not to ‘name and shame’ institutions but to provide useful results for collegial discussion and awareness amongst university language academics.

4.1 Online visibility

Online visibility of each Italian program was tested in two ways: (a) direct search via a search engine (Google, in this case); and (b) search via the home institution’s own website.

The essential prerequisite for online visibility of any language program is its own webpage. We considered a program as having its own web presence (consisting of a single page or a whole set of pages) if it was exclusively about the Italian program and listed under the umbrella of a school or faculty. It was not considered to be a distinct Italian program webpage if it was combined with other languages or if the listings were part of the ‘Handbook’ (i.e. the course and unit information of the university) or of the ‘Future Student’ pages.

Our survey showed that only 12 of the 20 Italian programs (60%) have their own webpage. While a variety of reasons may cause this gap (e.g. pressure to follow the university template or structure, or lack of web resources), the importance of a distinct web presence and a clear profile cannot be overestimated (see Nettelbeck et al. 2007).

An important factor of online visibility is not only the presence of a (good) program webpage but also the ability to find it quickly and conveniently. To find out whether the Italian program websites are easy to locate, a web search for ‘University Name’ + Italian was conducted. Of the 12 universities with an Italian program webpage, eight are listed at the top of the first result page and only one is not on the first page of results, i.e. in the first ten listings.

As we wanted to consider all 20 Italian programs – not just the 12 with their own webpage – for the remainder of the study we selected a ‘substitute page’ for those without their own program webpage, namely the webpage(s) with the most comprehensive information about the Italian program.
Another starting point to test for visibility and ‘searchability’ was the university’s homepage. To see whether the Italian program website could be found (easily), three separate approaches were taken:

- The search function of the homepage: Most university websites use Google as their internal search engine, therefore the search results are similar to those of the general search mentioned above – 15 of 20 (75%) program web pages appeared at the top of the first results page. The average difficulty rating was low at 1.53.
- The university structure (e.g. University → Faculty → School → Department → Program): There was a higher success rate (18 or 90% of program websites were found), but also a higher difficulty rating (3.22), mainly due to a more complex navigation path involving background knowledge about university-specific terminology and structure: it was, for instance, not always straightforward to determine in which faculty or school the language programs are located (e.g. in one university, Italian is located in the School of Communication).
- The site index or site map: In the 2007 survey the vast majority of the universities had an A-Z Index and/or a site map link on their homepages. In contrast, at the time the present study was conducted, only 13 (65%) of the surveyed universities had a site index, with only five (25%) Italian program sites able to be found using this method.

4.2 Prospective student perspective

From the perspective of a prospective student, the results for four symptomatic tasks — questions which a prospective student of Italian might be interested in — are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Success rate and difficulty rating of four tasks from a prospective student perspective

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question/task</th>
<th>Success rate no. of universities (%)</th>
<th>Difficulty rating (average)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Can I do beginner Italian?</td>
<td>19 (95%)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ve done Year 12 Italian, can I continue Italian at university?</td>
<td>19 (95%)</td>
<td>2.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which subjects are on offer this/next semester?</td>
<td>19 (95%)</td>
<td>2.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can I do Honours in Italian?</td>
<td>12 (60%)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first question concerned the availability of \textit{ab initio} Italian. The question was straightforward and easy to answer, as is apparent in the low difficulty rating of 2. The success rate of 95% indicates that only for a single university could it not be established whether beginners’ Italian is on offer or not.

With respect to the availability of advanced Italian, the success rate is equally high (95%) but the higher difficulty rating (2.53) reflects that, in many instances, inference was required as the information provided was not specific enough, e.g. Italian is ‘available at all levels’, or ‘from beginner to advanced’. Information about specific entry points or who to contact for further information was often missing. On the other hand, there were very positive examples as well of sites which provided specific details including the study progression and a link to information about placement tests.

The question about the subjects on offer showed a high variability in the difficulty rating. With persistence this information could be found for all but one program, but it was very difficult for at least six of them, requiring several attempts and yielding difficulty ratings of 4 or 5 for those institutions. On the other hand, the same task was straightforward for seven universities (difficulty ratings of 1 or 2).

Whether an Italian honours program is available could only be established for 12 programs (60%). In several cases a link from the Italian program website led to a school or faculty site about honours programs which in turn did not specify the available areas of study.

4.3 General academic perspective

A language program’s general academic profile — information for the academic and the wider community — is just as important. Current information about the organisation of the program, its staff and their research activity is essential to communicate a program’s standing and its human and academic element.

Results for four symptomatic tasks about the academic profile of the Italian programs are listed in Table 2.

\textit{Table 2: Success rate and difficulty rating of four tasks from a general academic perspective}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question/task</th>
<th>Success rate no. of universities (%)</th>
<th>Difficulty rating (average)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who is responsible for the Italian program?</td>
<td>12 (60%)</td>
<td>2.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who is on staff?</td>
<td>17 (85%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are their research areas?</td>
<td>15 (75%)</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are their current projects?</td>
<td>7 (35%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The question about the program head or convenor proved to be surprisingly difficult to answer: only 12 websites (60%) provided this information. Both the low success rate and the difficulty rating (2.76) indicate that it was not always easy to find the person in charge: often it was neither mentioned on the program’s website nor provided as a contact, whereas in some instances it could be gleaned from the staff list (e.g. ‘Convenor of Italian’ as position description), requiring considerable effort for such basic information.

Staff lists were available for 17 programs (85%). The three exceptions are small programs which appear to employ only sessional staff with no permanent status at their respective institutions. Often, however, staff lists are provided at school or even faculty levels without specification of the language program the staff member is associated with. This lack of clarity contributed to the relatively high difficulty rating for this area (2.81).

General staff research areas were listed in 15 cases (75%) but current projects were only mentioned for seven programs (35%), indicating that a considerable number of staff profiles are not up to date. Overall, the extent and quality of staff profiles vary highly, not only between but also within universities and programs. It seems that it is often left to the individual staff member to look after their profiles without much guidance and incentive to update. On the other hand, since web templates are typically enforced at university level, many tend to be too restrictive with little apparent scope for individual profiling.

4.4 Features of design and navigation

Many elements of design and navigation are prescribed by university or faculty templates, designed to control and manage branding. However, the ones discussed here — scanability and navigation, which are also closely linked to content decisions, can often be determined or at least influenced by the program.

Scanability as a combined indicator of a well-designed webpage, is influenced by features such as page length, empty space, highlighting and headings (see for example Chapman 2010; Nielsen 2011). Eight Italian homepages were considered not easily scanable by eye for a series of reasons: (a) they are much too long; (b) too cramped with text; (c) use too many (different) ways of highlighting information; and/or (d) have inappropriate headings. This last issue was the most apparent one with 13 websites having some problematic headings. One website, for example, listed information about beginners’ Italian under the heading ‘Why study Italian?’; another provided information about the Italian major, under the heading ‘Non-award’.

The main features of navigation, menu structure and linking were generally well implemented. However, there were many cases of websites with broken or out-dated links (10), e.g. links to subject descriptions from previous years. This issue highlights again the need for regular checking and updating. Interestingly, however, the most problematic point was the lack of consistency in terminology used within
and across the program websites. Only four Italian program websites (20%) used effective (i.e. short, descriptive and unambiguous, Pegoraro 2006: 72) terms within links and menus and applied them consistently. For eight websites (40%) this was not the case, while six (30%) had at least a few problems. Examples of the use of problematic or ambiguous terminology include ‘course rules’ linking to information about the Italian major, ‘teaching expertise’ leading to the staff list, and ‘program’ and ‘degree’ being used interchangeably in different contexts by the one university.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the use of the internet to profile language programs in Australian universities is not being maximised yet, despite the undeniable importance of the web for global visibility. Overall, we found considerable variation between the programs ranging from the least effective web presence — no program website, only listings of single Italian subjects in the university handbook — to the most effective — a website which was clear, comprehensive, uncluttered and well structured, well linked to the other structural levels (school, faculty, university). However, all Italian programs could improve their web presence in terms of content, structure and/or visibility. Even relatively simple matters such as the presence of broken links appear all too frequently in the websites we tested, thereby reducing the usability of the site, increasing reader frustration and potentially reflecting on the professionalism of the institution and the program (Hite and Railsback 2010).

How can this survey help individual language programs to improve their web presence? We propose some preliminary ‘best-practice’ recommendations aimed at academic and administrative staff involved in university language programs which do not require specialist technical knowledge or skills:

1. Insistence on a separate webpage for each language program;
2. Regular checking of the program’s web visibility and ‘searchability’;
3. Establishment of a process for regular updating of the website;
4. (Regular) testing by members of all potential target audiences (e.g. colleagues, students etc.) and by language program staff, for content, structure, general ease of use and the elimination of broken links;
5. Analysis of similar websites that language program staff find appealing and easy to navigate, in order to determine what features work well.

While our survey has focussed on web use by Italian studies programs, the same issues and needs pertain to all languages programs in Australian universities. The results of this survey can therefore be applied to improving web visibility and accessibility across the languages sector. This survey is one useful example of how best-practice in the tertiary languages area may be explored for the benefit of all languages and culture programs in Australian universities.
Notes

1. ARC = Australian Research Council, LASP = Learned Academies Special Project.
2. As we did not take a ‘current student perspective’, teaching resources (if present on the website) were not examined.
3. ‘Universities with Italian programs’ are defined liberally as any institution employing local staff on site; not included are therefore four Australian universities offering Italian through a partner institution (e.g. the University of Adelaide where Italian is taught by Flinders University staff).

References


