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EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE REVIEW

Review of www.altis.ac.uk

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When reviewing a website the first question we should ask is, how useful is the site to students and/or academics? Altis proclaims that it is 'The guide to Internet resources in hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism'. Is this a justifiable claim? I would argue that whilst the resource has some value it has a long way to go if it is to live up to its boast!

In order to ensure that personal bias was restricted, I discussed the Altis site with colleagues and students. Colleagues felt that the idea behind the site was valid and that the website endeavoured to provide academics with a useful and up-to-date resource package. They felt, however, that the site failed to live up to their hopes and expectations.

Altis, whilst providing both academics and students with an easily accessible source of information, lacks originality. Even to the more 'mature' academic user its offerings appear dated, and whilst they are useful in providing information on the areas they claim to cover, these offerings are limited both in the insight they provide and their utility to the researcher. This is largely due to the limited scope of the links offered - something that should not be blamed in total on the website managers as they are dependant upon users for suggested links!

On the plus side, the Altis search engine makes effective use of titles, mega tags and page content. It fits our expectations in that it adheres to normal search engine protocols and offers standard search tools, i.e., keywords and categories. As a researcher in leisure and sport with a keen interest in issues of obesity, I entered these terms into the keywords search engine and initially obtained no results. After deleting leisure and sport, I obtained 28 links. Unfortunately after checking each link individually – a time consuming activity in itself – only one link offered any insight into the impact of obesity upon leisure and sport. This weakness could be put down to the fault of the researcher's choice of keywords, but other colleagues expressed similar views upon the validity of the site.

Pat McCarthy is a Senior Lecturer in Leisure. His research interests include the political economy of leisure, with a particular focus on socio-cultural barriers to social inclusion and their impacts upon access to leisure. He recently co-authored a chapter on comparative service quality expectations and perceptions between Greek and English sport and recreation consumers and he has previously carried out consultancy projects for Wolverhampton City Council Leisure Services on the identification of themes contributing to non-usage of public sector sport and recreation facilities. His main teaching areas are sociology of active leisure and research philosophy.

Students, who are often more used to seeking information from the Internet, argued that the technology that drove the website was effective but lacked any distinctiveness. Effectively, they were saying that the Altis site appeared 'old fashioned' - a major sin in their eyes as it made them feel that any information that could be obtained from the site would be out-of-date and was not therefore, worth wasting time on.

Another area that the Altis website was weak in, according to students, was its visual appearance. The website and its links did not offer a 'corporate' standard image, rather each page appeared in its designer's chosen livery. This to students suggested that the website lacked a holistic entity – in essence its parts were greater than its whole. They questioned the quality, reliability, and validity of the information contained within the website. What they were seeking was some form of content performance analysis that allowed them to make value judgements on the content of the material offered. What they got was links to sites without any quality standards checks. Although they expressed it differently, academic colleagues in hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism shared this opinion.

Overall, the Altis website, whilst functional and offering generally good levels of accessibility, does so to a limited resource base. Its navigation functionality is of a standard that would be expected, offering clarity and a logical layout, but it does appear dated to even the most 'mature' user (this reviewer for one).

The site is written in a clear and open way, using grammar and language that is accessible to all. The designers articulate their thoughts in a relevant manner, with an absence of duplication and repetition. It is clear that the designers have paid attention to detail, ensuring that mistakes and/or inaccuracies are kept to the minimum. Also worthy of note is the absence of dead ends, although some of the links are a little dated – on my search for links to obesity I found one page dated April 1997, which when using the Internet for sources, is like trawling antiquity.

The site's main weaknesses are in its limited sources and its dated design. For both students and academics the narrowness of its links means that it acts as a reserve site for information rather than being the 'cutting-edge' resource tool that its designers intended. And its design layout means that students avoid it, considering its content to be out-dated and old fashioned. This is a pity, as it does contain some useful nuggets of information.