

Portal Management Group

Notes of the meeting of 4th November 2004, 4D24, Bolland Library

Present: Barry Cawthorne (Chair), Kevin Foreman, Rich Egan, Sid Baldwin, Margaret Needles, Leon Smith, Helen Cole, Katie Huthnance, Simon Hassell (notes).

1. Apologies: None

2. Introductions

Barry welcomed members of the Group and described the composition of the Group: managers of UWEonline, ISIS2 and Syllabus Plus, together with the project manager of the online enrolment project, and the Associate Dean of the Faculty of Health and Social Care, which is piloting the Portal project.

3. Terms of reference

3.1. Portal Management Group

Barry provided an historical overview of the Portal project's aims and objectives and reported that the PMG terms of reference were approved by the Project Board at the meeting of 20/10/04. Margaret informed the group of her involvement in the distinct, but related project investigating the potential for online self-enrolment by returning students. Margaret explained that whilst this is a separate project, it has been agreed to attempt to deliver the self-enrolment facility through the Portal. Barry explained that Kevin has agreed to pilot the Portal within HSC, but that the emerging HSC requirement will be benchmarked in another faculty to ensure the development of a system of relevance beyond HSC.

3.2. Co-options

Barry introduced Katie Huthnance (IT Services Business Systems Analyst), who has been co-opted to the Group, and explained her role in the development of HSC's Portal requirements through a workshop with key stakeholders in the faculty, leading to the production of the paper 'Student-facing Portal Project – HSC requirements/ideas' (item 5.1 below).

3.3 Portal Project Board (for information)

Barry explained the composition and role of the Portal Project Board, noting the Board's terms of reference were circulated to the Group previously.

4. Resources

4.1. Recruitment of Java programmers and XSLT programmer

It was noted that the Portal is being developed using uPortal, an open source system, based on Java technology and that during the Summer 2004, ATG had a single Java developer in place.

Rich explained that XSLT (eXtensible Stylesheet Language Transformation), a presentation-layer technology, and Java, an object-oriented programming

language responsible for data manipulation and business logic, and are the dominant technologies in the production of portals.

ATG had attempted to recruit both an XSLT developer and Java developer during the summer '04 and successfully appointed an XSLT developer who started in early October '04. However, the post of Java developer did not receive any applicants upon initial advertising, suspected to be as a result of the timing of the vacancy (August). Also, during this time, the existing Java developer in ATG was successful in applying for the post of Web Product Manager, leading to a second Java vacancy within ATG. Upon re-advertising 2 Java posts during September, ATG was able to fill both posts, with one developer in place as of 1/11/04, the other post holder commencing work on 15/11/04.

Rich noted that both the XSLT and Java developer already in place are currently familiarising themselves with the technical aspects of the uPortal system and the Project's proof of concept in time to begin work on new hardware once available (see item 4.2 below).

4.2. Hardware

Rich noted the capital bid for portal hardware had been approved. Helen reported the hardware was delivered week beginning 1/11/04, and will be configured week beginning 8/11/04.

5. Portal Development

5.1. Development of student facing pilot in the Faculty of Health and Social Care: progress with workshops

Katie Huthnance circulated the paper 'Student-facing Portal Project – HSC requirements/ideas', developed as a result of the workshop held on 28/10/04, between herself, HSC programme leaders and a member of the faculty administration. Katie explained the workshop was led by the student requirements as identified by the HSC staff involved, and informed by a JISC project into portal requirements, conducted via a web-based survey of staff and students of FE and HE institutions. Whilst Katie was intending to set priorities at the workshop, the HSC staff wished to confer with colleagues and/or students prior to setting priorities; Katie therefore requested feedback by 5/11/04.

It was noted HSC's use of Syllabus Plus is not as per 'standard' faculty usage and that this may have implications for the pilot. Sid offered a possible technical solution to the HSC timetabling arrangements whereby an additional process would request HSC students enter the Syllabus Plus identifier upon login, which would then be stored and subsequently used to retrieve the students timetable information. The bespoke functionality required by HSC would be in addition to standard usage, and may be required in any case to accommodate non-standard timetable usage in other faculties. Leon noted there is a degree of variation between faculties who do use Syllabus Plus; FBE and EDU also do not enter student details into Syllabus Plus. Additionally AMD do not make use of Syllabus Plus at all. However, in terms of student numbers, the majority do make 'standard' use of Syllabus Plus.

Leon noted HSC currently allow users to display a selection of different views of student timetables via their timetables web site and was concerned over loss of

functionality. Loss of functionality would be a major barrier to student uptake of the Portal pilot. However, it was stressed that this was not intended. The notion of student-pull with regard to timetable functionality was also raised (i.e. students who don't have access to individual timetables noticing that other students do); it was seen as desirable to support both standard and non-standard usage of Syllabus Plus through the Portal.

Katie highlighted that whilst the priority of features had not been set, it was indicated at the workshop that the support of placement students is of great importance to HSC. Margaret noted that placements at HSC are managed via System 1, a system independent of ISIS, and that the placement structure at HSC differs widely from those at other faculties. Kevin explained that HSC is contracted to the Confederation for Practice Learning Unit provision and that the Confederation is leading the procurement of placement software. It was noted the timescale for completion of the procurement process is within the next 12 months. Barry noted the importance of this issue but believed, at this stage, there were too many unknown factors to be able to consider them effectively.

Katie explained that deadline alerts were identified as the number one priority in the JISC research survey. Margaret noted submission dates within ISIS are not used consistently across faculties and that dates are often stored externally. Additionally, there is no requirement for faculties to use the submission dates option in ISIS. It was noted that there appears to be resistance to using submission dates in ISIS due to the complexity of creating and managing such information via ISIS. Margaret explained the process of adding submission dates to ISIS and whilst she felt it was not overly burdensome to set up, she conceded the management of such information across large numbers of module runs is less straightforward. Barry noted that a standard mechanism for the recording of submission dates would need to be developed to accommodate such requirements in future.

Barry stressed the Portal pilot should aim towards implementing achievable functionality in the timeframe permitted and noted from experience with other Portal projects that the general consensus was to forge ahead with functionality that could be delivered quickly. Barry suggested that ITS Group members attempt to scope feasibility of the requirements identified by HSC concurrent with the prioritisation of requirement by HSC staff. Barry suggested the requirements be categorised these into those that are readily achievable, those that are achievable subject to the availability of data and those whose technical feasibility is unknown. Additionally, those features requiring changes to ISIS administration and/or ISIS structure and business logic would require separate, additional consideration.

Rich was keen to stress that feasibility of some requirements are likely to be dependent on external forces outside of the control of the Portal project ie commercially-produced software integration with the Portal.

Actions:

RME, HC, KH and SB to liaise to categorise HSC's requirements as described above.

KH to arrange discussion with HSC regarding working practices.

5.2. Connection between the on-line enrolment project and the Portal

Margaret noted a project initiation document has been written and explained the project will attempt to facilitate the online enrolment of returning students only, and that this would only include their RASP enrolment and not module enrolments. Equally, the project will only accommodate the enrolment of students on standard awards and not those students on part time awards whose fees are calculated by their module enrolment choices. Essentially, it will allow eligible students to update their ISIS record online from the Eligible to Enrol status to an appropriate enrolled status.

5.3 Pilot staff facing Portal to allow access to lists of students (e.g. by seminar/tutorial/practical) and their photographs.

Barry explained that photographs are available in ISIS and that these come on a CD from House Services on a monthly basis. It was queried if the frequency of delivery of photographs was acceptable. In order for staff to be able to produce lists of students ordered by all group types, with associated photographs, there will be a connection between Syllabus Plus and the Portal to obtain seminar group information. It was noted that seminar groups are not present in HSC's use of Syllabus Plus.

Action: KH and HC to liaise to scope development work required.

5.4 Recent developments in linking ISIS2 dynamically to the Portal

It had previously been assumed that access to ISIS data via the Portal will be managed by creating a copy of the data as opposed to allowing direct manipulation of the master records within ISIS. It was noted that as a result the data available via the Portal would be a day out date with actual ISIS data. Rich advised that during the Summer 2004, the ISIS team had explored an alternative means of connecting the Portal to ISIS and were now working with ATG on this. Rich circulated a diagram detailing a firm proposal for the way in which the data may be accessed and explained the security measures afforded were assured by ITS to be as secure as is possible given data access requirements. This new method would allow real-time communication with ISIS, and was in proof of concept

A pilot will shortly be launched for a postgraduate online application system in conjunction with Enquiries and Admission and the Marketing and Communications departments. Sid confirmed this system is operational, but has yet to have load testing applied. It was recognised this would be as an appropriate proof of the technology, once completed.

Action: SB to keep the Group informed of developments in the postgraduate application project.

6. Form of and progress with the project initiation document

Rich stated the project initiation document is under development and expected the document to be completed prior to the next meeting of the Portal Project Board (17/12/04).

7. Meeting frequency and schedule of next meetings

The Group agreed to meet on a monthly basis, and attempt to arrange meetings to coincide with finish of the UWEonline Management Group. The date of the next meeting was agreed as 13th December, 11-12pm; Venue 4D24, Bolland Library.

8 Any Other Business

Leon explained that students are currently able, (via a web-based system) to view and make amendments to their seminar/tutorial timetables. The system only displays those sessions without conflict i.e. that have spaces remaining and do not clash with existing choices. Leon queried if this was being considered for delivery via the Portal. It was agreed to keep this facility under consideration.

Action: LS and RME to liaise to discuss viability.

It was queried if the pilot was expected to be in place by February 2005. Rich stressed that the initial proof of concept functionality (UWEonline, Syllabus Plus and ISIS) might be deliverable by then, but could not give clear indication of implementation of the functionality identified at HSC without definition of priority and technical scope, both of which are underway.

Kevin volunteered he would be happy to accept the introduction of the Portal pilot later in the year should the need arise.

Date/Time next meeting: Monday 13th December 2004, 11-12pm
Venue: 4D24, Bolland Library.