Portal Management Group

Notes of the meeting of 16th January 2006, Room 4D24

Present: Barry Cawthorne (Chair), Rich Egan, Sid Baldwin, Mike Garnier, Karen West, Helen Cole, Margaret Needles, Debra Campbell, Sarah Mackie, Kevin Foreman, Emma Taylor (Notes).

In attendance: Nick Coates

1. Apologies: None.

2. Membership
Barry welcomed Debra Campbell (FAS), and Sarah Mackie (BBS), to the group. Following the release of the portal to FAS and BBS, Barry confirmed that all faculties taking part in the pilot were now represented and Kevin Foreman was now the sole representative from HSC.

3. Minutes of the meeting of 28th November 2005
Approved.

4. Matters arising not elsewhere on the agenda
Group membership confirmed in Item 2 above.

5. Bid for rollout of the Portal in 2006-2007
Barry circulated a confidential Portal Business Case and Plan for 2006/07, which has been approved by the Portal Project Board, the Information Systems Project Co-ordinating Group, and the CPE, and is awaiting approval by Sir Howard Newby. The paper was produced by Rich and Barry in response to a request by Steve West, and outlines the resources needed to roll out a production portal during the 2006/07 academic year, incorporating current and planned pilot functionality.

Barry noted the following:
- The precepts and major risks identified on page 3 of the proposal stress the need for the consistent usage of the university systems which form part of the portal, and for system managers to have the authority to insist on particular coding conventions. Barry noted that faculties would not be forced to use systems in a certain way, but would be advised of the data protocols required to allow use of channels in the portal. Barry cited the example of student photosets, as he had been advised by Karen that this channel would be difficult to roll out widely due to inconsistencies in the coding conventions used by faculties in Syllabus Plus.
- The major risks identified are of an order which could potentially present very significant problems, possibly placing the entire project at risk, and include the need to formalise the role of faculty liaison (currently undertaken by Margaret on a good will basis), and the possible loss through retirement of a major source of ISIS expertise.
- The functionality described on pages 19 and 20 represents a good indicator, rather than a commitment, as some of the functionality is as yet undeveloped.
- The key date in the timetable on page 23 is February 2007, when a production portal will be launched to all faculties. Barry anticipated that, in order to manage the impact on supporting systems, the release would take place over a period of days. Barry noted that he, Rich and Sid considered this timetable to be ambitious, but achievable.

Rich noted two of the recommendations given on page 3 of the document:
- The portal pilot had been developed using the open source uPortal platform, and it is recommended that use of uPortal is continued.
- Given the University's commitment to supported products, it is recommended that commercially provided support be purchased. Following evaluation, it is recommended that support be purchased from Unicon.

Barry suggested that, subject to approval of the proposal, preparation was needed in advance of the release of the requested resources in August 2006. Barry proposed that a sub-set of the group's membership (Barry, Rich, Sid, Margaret, Karen, Helen and/or Mike, and Emma) attend an away-day to take part in a structured brainstorm.

6. Release of pilot functionality to BBS students
Rich reported that the portal had been released to 2,377 BBS students on 16 December 2005, bringing the total of potential Portal users to just under 5,000 Rich noted that usage was likely to increase further, as the release came at the end of teaching. Feedback has been received from BBS students and consistently indicates that they are finding the portal useful.

7. Announcements channel
The announcements channel was also launched on 16 December, and publication of announcements was launched on 12 January. Rich noted that announcements could be issued to module runs, modules, fields, levels or whole faculties. Sid confirmed that there were now 7 publishers within the portal, 3 from FAS and two each from HSC and BBS. Sid noted that there was scope for improvement in the channel, and that he and Bryan Mitchell were meeting to look at upgrading the functionality and improving the hierarchical representation for selecting groups to publish to. Rich noted that a facility to place announcements for seminar groups would be particularly useful for BBS.

In response to a query by Kevin, Sid confirmed that guidelines for publishers would be developed. In response to a query by Sarah, Sid confirmed that portal announcements would appear in a separate channel to UWEonline announcements, but that both types of announcement would be visible on a single page when users logged in to the portal.
ACTION: ATG to develop advice on the publication of announcements.

8. Bookmarks channel
The bookmarks channel was made live on 20th December, three months ahead of the March 2006 target. The channel allows users to save favourites on the front page of the portal. Sid confirmed that a small number of bookmarks will be pre-populated for staff and students, but can be deleted by users if they wish. Users can control the content of the bookmarks channel, but cannot unsubscribe from the channel as a whole.

Rich noted that the release of announcements and bookmarks had respectively introduced grouping and personalisation to the portal.

9. Electronic submission channel
Rich warned that, due to delays associated with work on the rollout plan and heavy dependence on grouping, it would not be possible to deliver the channel by the March 2006 target. Rich confirmed that he had drafted the specification for the channel, which Barry, Margaret and Mike would be meeting to discuss on Thursday 19 January. Rich thanked HSC, who had kindly provided code from their own online submission system to assist development.

Rich reported that E-submission and Phase 2 of re-enrolment were the two remaining items on the portal plan for 2005/06. In addition, Academic History had been selected for development.

Phase 2 of re-enrolment is targeted for July 2006. Margaret confirmed that the scope of Phase 2 is to allow returning FAS undergraduates, who have passed all assessments at the July boards, to pay their fees online and take their student record to a fully re-enrolled status. Margaret reported that Finance is implementing the WPM payment system to collect payments and store student bank details. Margaret and Mike attended the initial specification of the system, and Rich has given technical feedback to Finance to ensure that the system would be operable with the portal. Finance is developing the payment system as its own project, and the portal development team is working to connect this system to the portal. Helen noted that WPM software is used effectively in a number of universities. Margaret noted that significant work would be required to calculate fees owed within ISIS, and Helen stressed that this was not straightforward, due to possible changes in the bursary project.

Rich confirmed that Mike and Margaret had been considering which information would be most valuable and easiest to include in the Academic History channel to provide proof of concept, and would include information already in the public domain. Helen confirmed that this would be a one-way feed of data, and that users would not be able to make changes to their academic history. In response to a query by Kevin, Margaret confirmed that, while students were not being consulted in the initial stages of development of the academic history channel, advice was being sought from student administrators on the information being requested by students. Helen agreed that student input was valuable, and suggested that it may be possible to engage with the UWE Students' Union via Shelly Patel. Margaret agreed that there was a need to consult broadly.
ACTION: Barry to meet Helen and Margaret to discuss the impact of the Bursary project on on-line re-enrolment in advance of the Portal Project Board meeting of 22nd February 2006.

10. Dates of next meetings
27 February 2006
3 April 2006
All from 11:00-12:15, Room 4D24, Bolland Library, Frenchay Campus.

Kevin offered his apologies for the 3rd April meeting.

11. Any other business

11.1.   ARC placement system
Helen advised that HSC were implementing the ARC system to manage student placements, and that it may be possible for students to maintain their address details through the system. Helen is aware of the potential conflict with ISIS data amended via myUWE, and has therefore agreed that address amendments made via ARC will be e-mailed to faculty administrative staff, who will then amend ISIS.

11.2.   Portal demonstration
Rich advised that he, Sid and Barry would be giving a demonstration of the portal to the Academic Registry on Wednesday 18th January.