Portal Project Board

Notes of the meeting of 20th October 2004, FC78

Present: Steve West (Chair), Steph Keeble, Rich Egan, Barry Cawthorne, Emma Taylor (Notes).

1. Apologies
Warwick Jones, Steve Grive.

2. Introductions
Steve welcomed members of the Board.

3. Terms of reference

3.1. Portal Project Board
The draft terms of reference of the Board were circulated and agreed. It was agreed that the Board will submit an evaluation report at the end of 2004.

Steph raised the need for projects within the university to liaise to allow co-ordination and forward planning, and to ensure compatibility between developments made. It was suggested that this may be achieved by the formation of a group consisting of the Chairs of project steering groups, co-ordinated by the Strategic Planning Executive.
ACTION: Steve to take this suggestion to the Directorate for response.

3.2. Portal Management Group
The draft terms of reference of the Portal Management group were circulated and agreed. Group membership comprises the managers of UWEonline, ISIS2, and Syllabus Plus, the manager of the online enrolment project, and the Associate Dean of the Faculty of Health and Social Care, which is hosting the Portal pilot. It was agreed that membership of the Group may change over time. Barry anticipated that, following the model used in the support of UWEonline, the Project Board may stand down and pass responsibility to the Portal Management Group on the successful completion of the project.

Barry reported that the project is currently at item 1.2.1 of the terms of reference. It was agreed that, whilst it is vital that Portal developments are useful to the pilot faculty, as noted in item 1.2.2, it should be ensured that the needs of other faculties are also taken into consideration.

Barry reported that the Directorate has not yet signed off the plan budget. A capital expenditure allocation has been made for staffing, and two new posts supporting the Portal pilot have been funded from the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund.

4. Portal development

4.1. Proof-of-concept prototype
Rich reported that the uPortal open source system has been adopted. It is free and is widely used by the academic community, where support and advice is shared. Access to services through uPortal is given via channels. Channels have now been constructed to Blackboard, Syllabus Plus, e-mail and the ISIS database. Due to security concerns, the ISIS channel connects to a nightly copy rather than to the live database. It was noted that this would prevent the use of

real-time applications such as online enrolment. The Board agreed that, while this is unlikely to be a significant problem at present, the development of real-time applications in the future should not be prevented.

The prototype was demonstrated to the following four key stakeholder groups in January and February 2004:
- Students
- Academic staff
- Administrators
- Services staff

Barry reported that a positive response had been received overall. While he had been concerned about the reaction of administrators, most had recognised the potential for long-term benefits.

4.2. Recent developments in linking ISIS2 dynamically to the portal
In order to address the security concerns described in item 4.1 above, Rich reported that ATG staff have worked with the Business Systems Team in IT Services to provide secure real time access to ISIS. This development was originally undertaken to support online Postgraduate applications. Rich circulated a diagram illustrating the development undertaken, which will enable ISIS to accept communications through the firewall from the Portal or another approved server, and for ISIS data to be leveraged into the Portal. It was agreed that the Portal Management Group should determine which data may be submitted from the Portal into ISIS.

4.3. Development of pilot student facing portal in the Faculty of Health and Social Care
Rich reported that award leaders and administrators in the Faculty of Health and Social Care attended a portal demonstration on 23rd September. Katie Huthnance, Business Systems Analyst in IT Services, is now setting up workshops with key stakeholders within the Faculty to discuss their requirements. Rich noted that problems have been encountered in attempting to arrange a meeting of staff before mid-November.
ACTION: Steve to contact academic staff to discuss availability for workshops.

4.4. Connection between the on-line enrolment project and the portal
It was agreed that, while online enrolment and associated adminive processes will be delivered via the Portal, supervision of the project itself is not within the remit of the Board.

4.5. Pilot staff facing portal to allow access to lists of students (e.g. by seminar/tutorial/practical) and their photographs
It was noted that, due to staff demand, the successful integration of the seminar group data held in Syllabus Plus with the student photographs held in ISIS would represent a significant win for the Portal Project.

5. Resources
Steve enquired whether any training implications or demands on administrative time would be raised by the introduction of the Portal.   Barry confirmed that the University of Nottingham and LSE had both reported a strong growth in portal use and cited the administrative time-saving made by allowing students to check their marks online. It was agreed that the pilot would allow further areas with a beneficial impact on administration to be identified, such as address changes.

Steve emphasised the need to ensure that sufficient resources are available to the end of the pilot as there is no capacity for additional resources. Barry confirmed that Portal work has been placed high on the priority list of the Business Systems Team and will take preference over other items. It was suggested that the service managers involved in the pilot should be contacted to ensure their commitment and check their understanding of the implications of involvement in the pilot.

The Board agreed that the report on the pilot should include an indication of the resources required for the Portal to be released across the university, and that a risk register should be included in the project initiation document.

5.1. Recruitment of Java programmers and XSLT programmer
Rich reported that approval for recruitment had been received on 31st August, and the XSLT vacancy was filled on 15th September. The Java programmer post within ATG has been released to support the Portal, but the original member of staff who had developed the Portal prototype has since been appointed to another post within the team. Two Java programmer posts have therefore been advertised: one permanent to replace the existing post, and one two year fixed-term post.

Rich reported that, due to the timing and wording of the initial advertisement for the Java posts, no applications were received. A subsequent re-advertisement has attracted 45 applications, and a field of 6 candidates will be interviewed on 21st October. Rich expressed his appreciation of Personnel's assistance in expediting this difficult process.

5.2. Hardware
Following budget allocation at the start of September, the hardware order was submitted for processing in the week of 11th October.

6. Appropriate form of the project initiation document
Rich circulated an outline example of an IT Services project initiation document. A risk register is included, but values have not yet been attached. Rich noted that, as the development of the portal represented a learning process, the task list normally present in initiation documents had been omitted, and was replaced with a high level plan. Steve stressed the need for the plan to be clear and focused, but not necessarily lengthy. The Board agreed that it would be valuable for the Faculty of Health and Social Care to be involved in the identification of risks.
ACTION: Rich to pencil in risks and bring to Project Board.

7. Meeting frequency and date of next meeting
It was agreed that a meeting should be held before Christmas, and once per term thereafter.

Friday 17th December, 10am, Room 4D24, Library, Frenchay.

8. Any other business
None.