

Portal Project Board
Notes of the meeting of 27th April 2005, 4D24

Present: Steve West (Chair), Barry Cawthorne, Margaret Needles, Steve Grive, Rich Egan, Warwick Jones, Steph Keeble, Emma Taylor (notes).

1. Apologies

None.

2. Minutes of meeting 25th February

Approved.

3. Matters arising not elsewhere on the agenda

3.1. Incentive for student feedback

Barry confirmed that a £100 book token had been made available by HSC as an incentive to students completing the portal feedback form.

4. Update since launch on 18th April

Rich reported that an issue relating to internal faculty procedures had arisen shortly before the launch, and had been accommodated to allow the Bursaries and Grants office in HSC to receive notification of address changes. Twenty one responses to the feedback form have been received to date. Rich noted that, although this level of response gave only a superficial view, overall feedback on the usefulness and ease of use of the system was positive. Rich confirmed that further usage data would be available shortly.

Barry noted that the most significant offering of the portal was to allow access to ISIS for provisional mark checking and address changes. Steve West congratulated the Portal Team on their work, and noted that many of the issues which required resolution before a fuller roll-out of the portal had already been addressed.

5. Relationship between substantive portal project and re-enrolment project

Steve West noted that there existed the potential to make connections between projects to achieve a greater focus and reduce the time spent on management and support. Barry agreed that this was a significant problem as re-enrolment is being run as a separate project, but is being delivered through the portal. Barry clarified that Phase 1 of the re-enrolment project would involve getting students to EN by July 2005, and would be piloted within FAS. Phase 2 of the project would involve the payment of fees and the intention was to implement this between July and September 2006.

Barry identified two issues:

- The Re-enrolment Project Board has asked Margaret to produce a detailed project plan, which may not be possible given the reliance of re-enrolment on the Portal.
- Following the last meeting of the Re-enrolment Project Board, Barry became aware that Phase 2 of the project would involve building a production system to be used by the university, whereas the Portal Project involves the production of a pilot system only.

The Board agreed that there was a potential mismatch in the delivery of a production re-enrolment system through a pilot portal. Barry noted that there had been a hiatus in the development of the portal between March and October 2004, as the view had been taken that the portal was too high a risk to develop with the resources available at that time (one Java programmer). A subsequent bid to the TQA fund had secured funding for two developer posts, which had allowed development of the pilot portal to

proceed. Barry warned that the TQA portal pilot funding would end in October 2006, at the point at which it was planned to deliver a production re-enrolment system.

Barry identified two possible options:

- Re-enrolment be developed as a pilot only, and be delivered through the portal and overseen by the Portal Project Board.
- Re-enrolment be developed as a free-standing production system with its own funding, independent of the portal.

Steve West enquired about the implications and costs involved in a third possible option, in which resources are secured beyond October 2006, allowing the speed of portal development to be increased and the two projects combined. Barry re-stated the risk of developing a system based on a resource previously considered insufficient to support even a pilot. Steve Grive stated that it may be possible to request that the existing posts be commuted from fixed term to permanent contracts. Steph expressed concern at the push to develop re-enrolment, given the existing uncertainty of future demands, such as Bursaries.

Steve West noted that a clear statement of the position of the Re-enrolment and Portal Project Board chairs was needed, which could then be fed to the IS and Finance Executives to determine the degree of commitment to provide the resources required to move the projects forward. Steve Grive noted that development of the finance side of re-enrolment was a non-trivial task, and that there were a significant number of unknowns in the requirements for a system of this type.

Steve West sought suggestions for the membership of a merged Portal and Re-enrolment Project Board. Steve Grive suggested that it would be valuable to include a representative from Finance.

ACTION: Steve West to contact the Chair of the Re-enrolment Project Board to propose the merger of the Re-enrolment and Portal Project Boards, and to request a detailed report for submission to the IS and Finance Executives.

6. Next steps

6.1. Groups

Barry noted that the ability to communicate with groups was not part of the initial Portal proof of concept. It was noted that announcements and student photosets were both predicated on the existence of groups.

Rich confirmed that the absence of a Business Systems Analyst was having a significant impact on the development of groups, as this required a view of the university's data structure. Rich reported that consultancy from Oxford Computing had assisted in the integration of data from ISIS and Syllabus Plus, and that IT Services were also seeking to identify any existing groupings which may be used.

6.2. Announcements

Steve Grive enquired whether it would be possible to obtain grouping information to allow announcements to be delivered via Blackboard. Rich confirmed that Blackboard grouped only by module run, so would be limited in this respect.

6.3. Student photosets

Barry reported the intention to give academic staff the ability to print photographs of tutorial groups of students, and to pilot this functionality within BBS in October 2005. Barry has met Sharon Bohin to discuss the administrative issues, and has met Jane Harrington to identify approximately 15 modules in total from levels 1, 2 and 3 (excluding very large modules) to take part in a pilot.

6.4. Scalability

Barry stressed the need to develop portal functionality which is applicable across the university, and not solely to the participants in the current pilot.

6.5. Submission of coursework by electronic means

Steve West enquired whether electronic submission may also be incorporated into the Portal Project. Rich suggested that it may be possible to deliver this functionality through the portal, via Blackboard.

7. Project plan and risk analysis

Rich confirmed that the project plan was currently on course, and that a detailed plan was in place to 16th May when pilot stabilisation is reached. Rich confirmed that the next items on the critical path were evaluation, completion of Phase 1 of the online re-enrolment project in July 2005, followed by the pilot of student photosets in October 2005.

Rich circulated a copy of the project risk register, and drew the Board's attention to two items:

0202 - Inadequate resources available to adopt project for production purposes. This was noted at the last meeting of the Board, and has not changed.

0101 – Sudden loss of key development staff; Changes in project team; Appropriate development skills not available.

Rich reported that this problem had occurred in recent weeks due to the sickness of the Business Analyst, and the risk level had been raised from 1 to 2 to reflect the potential for its impact to grow if the sickness were to become long-term. Barry noted that, in addition to the impact on the development of groups identified in Item 6.1, the absence of the Business Analyst had already had an impact, as it had necessitated 2.5 days' work by Margaret to obtain timetabling data from HSC to avoid a delay to the launch of the pilot. Steve West noted that, as we begin to forward-plan, there may be an argument for requesting new posts to mitigate further risks of this nature.

8. Dates of next meetings

To be confirmed.

ACTION: Emma to arrange meetings in late June and early September.

9. Any other business

9.1. Discussion of the Portal

Steve Grive sought to clarify the position of the Board on discussing the portal, as Barry had expressed an objection to the inclusion of information about the portal in the IT Services e-mail bulletin circulated by Derek Norris. Barry stated that his understanding was that it had been agreed to delay the advertisement of the portal until the June bulletin, to ensure that the pilot launch had been successful. Barry clarified that he had been surprised to see the portal advertised in the bulletin as the pilot launch within HSC had been deliberately low-key, and users outside the pilot were not being encouraged to access the system. Barry confirmed that he would write a piece on the portal for inclusion in the June bulletin.

9.2. Bursaries

Steve Grive expressed concern at the possibility for resources to be re-directed from the portal to bursaries. Steve West noted that this again raised the issue of the separation of projects, and that collapsing the IS Executive and Finance Executive may allow a clearer overall view of the situation.