

Portal Project Board
Notes of the meeting of 30th November 2006, 4D24

Present: John Rushforth (Chair), Barry Cawthorne, Tessa Harrison, Rich Egan, Steve Grive, Margaret Needles, Warwick Jones, Emma Taylor (Notes).

1. Apologies

None.

2. Minutes of the meeting of 13th October

Approved.

3. Matters arising not elsewhere on the agenda

3.1. Plan for 2006-2007 and beyond: to note the approval by the ISCG of the two papers considered at the 13th October PPB meeting

Noted.

4. Summary of progress

Rich reported the following from the High Level Plan:

Item 7, Feed for roll-out. Margaret confirmed that the specification was complete. In response to a query by John, Rich confirmed that contention for staff resources was included in the risk register, but he had received assurance from the DBA working on the feed that it was on target. Rich advised that January had been allowed as a contingency. Margaret confirmed that, to further manage risk, elements of the feed were being prioritised and non-critical elements identified.

Item 8, ISIS test users. Rich reported that this was slightly delayed, but was not a show stopper.

Item 9, Production Hardware. The development team are now focusing on the production hardware. Following consultancy and the enabling of the content switch, this item is on target.

Item 11, Timetable channel. The Timetable channel is largely completed. Some development is still needed, but Rich has been advised that this is not substantial.

Item 17, Online Coursework Submission Pilot. Rich circulated a report by Margaret on the OCS pilot. OCS has been piloted with two FAS modules, one of which will be marked on paper, the other electronically. Of the 17 students on Module 1, 12 had submitted online. Of the 40 students on Module 2, 34 had submitted online. In answer to a query by Barry, Margaret confirmed that no late submissions had been received. In each of the pilot modules, approximately half of the students had submitted their assignments on time, and half had submitted within 24 hours. Margaret is in e-mail contact with the students participating in the pilot and is exploring any issues raised. Margaret confirmed that she would be meeting HLSS staff in response to a request by PMG to investigate the possibility of piloting OCS further with MA Translation students. Barry stressed the need for caution, for further load testing, and for the Portal Management Group to consider carefully the advice given to users when the channel is released. In response to a query by Steve, Rich confirmed that faculties could control access to OCS and that he and Margaret had discussed ways of controlling access with the Business Systems team.

It was agreed that there was a need to develop processes and protocols for marking electronic material and that advice was needed from LTAC. Following a detailed discussion with the member of FAS staff marking electronically, Margaret suggested that he could make a useful contribution to the development of processes. Barry noted that the Open University already had clear protocols for online marking and advised that these could be used to inform the development of our own advice.

4.1. Faculty engagement

Rich confirmed that Item 24a was now ahead of schedule. Faculties not in the portal have been approached and as of today, all Undergraduate and Postgraduate EDU students have access to the pilot. Rich noted that the intention was to include a number of Joint Honours students and that Education had identified a number of these students. Over the course of the week beginning 4th December at least 250 students from each of the remaining faculties will have access to the pilot, increasing the total pilot users from 5,000 to 9,500. Rich noted that the inclusion of all faculties in the pilot would allow any previously unforeseen faculty-specific issues to be identified. In answer to a query by Steve, Margaret confirmed that this had been a joint academic and administrative approach, and that the programme directors of the groups of students included in the pilot had been contacted. Warwick raised the need for engagement with students and integration of the portal with the development of learning and teaching strategies. Tessa suggested that a briefing could be taken to the December Academic Board and to LTAC. John confirmed the need to inform Academic Board in addition to a wider broadcast of availability. Barry confirmed that a paper had been drafted for the January Bulletin and that an online demonstration was being developed. Barry suggested that a briefing could be given at the December meeting of the UWEonline Support Group, as the group contained representatives from all faculties. Rich stressed the need for a timely release of information.

ACTION: Portal briefing to be taken to UWEonline Support Group meeting of 13th December.

5. Readiness for launch

Barry advised that the readiness reports were given for each back-end system, rather than for each channel.

5.1. Mechanism for phased release over February 2007

Rich noted that the experience of other universities had informed the decision not to release the Portal to all users simultaneously. Barry confirmed that the initial plan to release the Portal in four tranches had been modified. Rich described the more gradual mechanism which would now be used to release the Portal during February:

- Pilot users' access will continue.
- Each day during February, the Portal will be released to similar-sized clusters of staff and students ordered by surname. Information on this phased release will be placed on the myUWE support web site, and the division of users by surname will better allow support staff to answer queries from users unable to access the Portal.
- Following the inclusion of the final group of users, a link to myUWE will be placed on the UWE home page.

Steve enquired whether Rich and Barry were comfortable that the timing of the release during February was sufficient to manage the increasing load on the system, or whether they would prefer to extend the release into March. Barry suggested that this would be a decision for IT Services. Rich noted that the

February date had been set by the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Resources), but that, in light of the Board's comments, the option to extend into March would be considered a contingency. Rich noted that the impact on ISIS of large numbers of staff and students was the greatest concern. In answer to a query by John, Rich confirmed that the largest single tranche of users added to the Portal to date was 1,200, although this had been done with the caveat to users that the system was in pilot mode. Warwick noted that potential peaks in accesses to ISIS by administrative staff and students were likely to occur during the exam period. Rich confirmed that it would be possible to withdraw specific channels and replace them with a notice to users if ISIS performance was affected by the level of accesses.

5.2. ISIS2

Rich confirmed that good progress had been made and that he had received a report from the Business Systems team of successful tests with 400 separate test accounts and 400 different processes being processed in approximately 80 seconds. Rich noted that, as the live ISIS system was more powerful than the test system, he would expect that these results would also apply in the live portal. Rich noted that the Academic Record was the most challenging channel, with 400 processes taking approximately 100 seconds to process. ISIS stress testing will be ongoing throughout December.

5.3. Syllabus +

Rich noted that he was taking advice from CETTS. No additional loading is expected as Syllabus+ is only loaded when the Timetable channel is accessed.

5.4. UWEonline

Rich reported that the summer upgrade had significantly increased the capacity of UWEonline. A separate performance issue is currently being pursued with Blackboard Inc.

5.5. The feed

Rich reported that good progress has been made, but needs to continue. Barry confirmed that the feed was on the critical path, but was on track.

5.6. Announcements

Rich confirmed that the new Announcements channel was going live and would be complete by the end of December.

6. Risk Register

Rich highlighted the following risks:

- 102 Competing demands on development staff. Rich noted that, although he has received assurance from the Database Administrator working on the feed that he was on target, there was still a need to register the contention of staff time as a risk.
- 202 Inadequate resources. This risk has been lowered to 3 in light of recruitment.
- 303 Procedural impact on staff. Action has been taken to address this risk by the early extension of the pilot to groups of students from all faculties.
- 402 Competing faculty initiatives. Rich noted that this issue had caused concern as it had sometimes been assumed by faculties that their development work could be incorporated into the Portal. John noted the need to focus on developments which would benefit the whole university and the need for a mechanism to capture and consider these. Rich confirmed that he had been in discussions with faculties to ensure that any developments

undertaken could be integrated into the portal. Barry noted that the ISCG would require a business case to describe how any new developments could be scaled up to university level.

- 502 Unstable/poor performance of IT systems undermines portal. Rich noted that a response to this risk was ongoing in the ISIS stress testing.
- 503 ISIS or other systems compromised by portal activities. To note. In response to a query by John, Rich confirmed that contingencies were in place to mitigate any affect on systems by the portal and that channels could be disabled.
- 602 Lack of appropriate uPortal support. Rich noted that an open source portal product had been deliberately selected to allow integration with university systems, but that a contract had now been initiated with a commercial company providing support for uPortal. Rich noted that the impact and likelihood of this risk were unchanged and that commercial support was a mitigating factor, rather than a reduction in risk.
- 701 Organisational changes. Substantive item 7 below.

7. Organisational changes

Barry stressed the need for awareness of this issue as changes to the university's infrastructure, such as the re-structuring of faculties, could affect the underlying data and represent a risk to the portal and the university systems on which it depends. John suggested that the use of scenarios may help to determine how the impact of changes could be managed and noted that changes were likely to occur after the February 2007 launch. Steve noted that the extent to which data was affected by changes would depend on the level at which the changes were made. Warwick advised that there may be a need to move students between faculties during re-organisation and that the timing and impact of these actions would need to be considered carefully. Rich confirmed the need to anticipate impacts in all areas, and noted that a change to the student e-mail service had already had an effect on the Portal.

8. Date of next meeting

Wednesday 31st January 2007, 10:00-11:00 (4D24).

9. Any other business

None.