Special Project Portal: A Case Study of a Customised Course Management System

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Abstract

The ECNG 3020 - Special Project Portal is a custom-built, course management system, used in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, The University of the West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine Campus. Given the specific management and administrative demands of the Final Year Project, the need for an e-solution was evident. Departmental resources, were mobilized to build the Portal with a view to improving the 2008/2009 ECNG 3020 offering and beyond. The Portal serves as: 1) a central hub for information, 2) an administrative and processes management platform and 3) a sharing tool.

End-user feedback was positive, and encouraging. Users rated highly the Portal's function as a one-stop shop for course information and the project proposal provisions. The course administrator lauded the scheduling tools, which significantly reduced the effort needed to generate an array of schedules.

A customized course management tool does require significant initial outlay, both material and human. Using departmental advantages, namely software expertise and hardware, the Portal's many facilities, tools and inherent adaptability justify this initial investment as it promises to serve the department for the long-term. Its greater potential is in its possible applicability in the management of other final year projects.

Keywords: UWI, ECNG 3020, customised course management system

INTRODUCTION

The ECNG 3020 - Special Project is regarded as the capstone course of the BSc in Electrical and Computer Engineering. It is a student-driven, research and development project that does not involve traditional course delivery and assessment. This course has an average enrolment of eighty (80) students, who are supervised by approximately fifteen (15) lecturers.

ECNG 3020 commands significant resources, administrative time and effort. Faculty may each supervise as many as ten (10) independent student projects. For students, ECNG 3020 is arguably the most critical and demanding course as it is a year-long, high-stakes assessment that counts for 6 credits and contributes 20% of the final weighted average used to determine the class of degree awarded.

Specific course needs and associated processes, which are not part of existing course management systems, such as WebCT and Moodle, necessitated the development of a customised management portal. The Special Project Portal was developed, by the authors of this paper, using open source software, to address these requirements. The Portal serves as: 1) a central hub for information and communication, 2) an administrative and process management platform and 3) an information sharing tool.

Simplicity and usability were guiding principles in the design of the Portal; keeping in mind that undue complexity could alienate users. The Portal thus presents a very gentle learning curve. Moreover, it makes various course processes easier for all parties – the course coordinator, examiners and students. And, it has been developed incrementally, as functionality was implemented in parallel with the needs of the actual course delivery, during the 2008/2009 academic year.

Using insiders' knowledge this paper describes processes unique to ECNG 3020 which catalysed the development of the Portal. The Portal's tools and provisions, the course web-portal design and challenges faced during the development are described. Evidence of usability, gleaned from two surveys, is presented. We explore the advantages and disadvantages of developing a customised course management system. Finally, it is intended that with subsequent ECNG 3020 offerings, the Portal will be enhanced and improved, so future plans are shared.

SERVING A COMMUNITY OF USERS

A significant suite of provisions serve the course coordinator. These processes include (1) publishing project proposals, (2) assigning projects to students, (3) scheduling presentations, (4) generating various course related documents, (5) sharing course information and (6) archiving data generated during a particular course offering.

For course participants the Portal allows them (1) ready access to course information, (2) access to published project proposals, (3) project proposal tools and (4) project selection options.

Project supervisors use the Portal (1) to draft, revise, submit and peer-review project proposals, (2) archive past proposals, (3) assign projects to students and (4) access course information.

ECNG 3020 PROCESSES AND PORTAL DEVELOPMENT

ECNG 3020 was initially coordinated using hardcopy forms that were exchanged amongst the coordinator, faculty and students. This manual, paper-based system was difficult to handle with normal problems related to missing forms, long delays in distribution and exchange of information, and difficulty in tracking information or changes. Subsequently, an electronic-based system was created using a combination of independent, static web pages and a standalone database administered by the coordinator. This system solved some of the problems in terms of broadcasting basic course information, collating some of the course data and creating a centralized data system. However, the lack of communication between the database and the web pages made for difficult handling and required

tedious, repetitive work to feed and update the information in these two major components. Generic course management systems, such as WebCT and Moodle, were not considered useful given the unique requirements of ECNG 3020.

Based on past experience a decision was taken to create an Internet portal. The Portal has been designed as a system of linked, dynamic pages and forms that can interact with users and a database that collects, stores and manages course information. The Portal has to accommodate three types of users: the coordinator, project supervisors and students. Each user has very specific needs, with a small subset of these needs common to all.

The Portal was developed using the software prototyping model in which functionality was implemented fairly quickly and then iteratively refined until it performed satisfactorily. This model was chosen because it allows a basic prototype to be developed rapidly, enabling users to assess the relevance and usefulness at an early stage, well in-advance of significant investment in the development of a system that does not perform desirably.

The Portal was implemented using free, open-source software. The database was implemented using the MySQL¹ database management system. Portal functionality was implemented using PHP² server-side scripts and JavaScript client-side scripts. It was deployed on the Faculty of Engineering's server, running the FreeBSD³ operating system and the Apache⁴ web server.

Creation and Publication of Project Proposals

Each course offering requires new project proposals. Both lecturers and final year students can propose projects. A standard form specifies required information for a comprehensive proposal. Typically, 6 - 8 project proposals are required from each supervisor resulting in 90 - 120 project proposals per academic year.

One of the most valuable tools in the Portal is the centralized system to create, store, review and publish the proposals. Lecturers can draft proposals and continuously review these using a simple editing tool embedded in the Portal, as shown in Figure 1. A completed proposal is submitted via the Portal, to the coordinator who takes it through the review process. The WYSIWYG⁵ functionality of the project proposal creation and editing tool was implemented using the TinyMCE⁶ JavaScript library.

S Doportment of	mySTA Webmail ECNG Home Faculty of Engineering Campus Directory Campus A-Z UWI Home Electrical and Computer Engineering
	20 Special Project Portal
Quick Access Menu	Project Proposal
ECNG 3020 Home	Project Title
ECNG 3020 Course Manual	Project Proposer Mr Wayne Sarjusingh 💌
👃 Student User Guide	Project Supervisor Mr Wayne Sarjusingh 🔹
ECNG 3020 Writing	Project Category Type I: Research 💽 🤡
Manual	Thematic Group Communications 🗹
Report Checklist	Project Keywords
📙 Supervisor's Manual	
Coordinator Tools 🛛	Background
🗟 Assigned Project List	Provide all pertinent background information and/or justification for the project.
Project List	
Create Proposal	👗 🖻 🛍 🛅 🛗 👫 🎼 🤊 (Ч.) 😔 👾 нт.
🕌 My Project Proposals	B Z U ≣ ≣ ≣ ⊟ ⊞ ∰ ∰ <u>A</u> • <u>№</u> • ×, ×, Ω
🗹 Review Proposals	
Project Students	
Project Bids	
Presentation Schedule	
🗹 Reports	
Search	
Change Password	
Reset Password	Path: p
😂 Logout	

Figure 1. Project proposal creation and editing.

Approval of Project Proposals

All proposals must be approved before publishing. This ensures that proposals are of acceptable academic quality, sufficiently challenging and achievable over two semesters. A review process, undertaken by the Department's thematic groups, evaluates and approves or suggests changes to proposals. Once a project is approved the coordinator indicates the change of status as shown in Figure 2.

😇 ECNG 30.	20 Specia	n F	Project Por	a	I			
Quick Access Menu	Review Projec	t Pr	oposals					
ECNG 3020 Home	2008/2009	200	9/2010					
ECNG 3020 Course	Total Projects	109	Unofficial Projects	1	7			
Manual	Total Students	62	Approved Projects	46	i			
ECNG 3020 Writing	Assigned Projects	60	Projects Under Revisio	2				
Manual	Dr Richelle Ada	ms	(8 projects)					
ECNG 3020 Final Report Checklist	Title					Status	Acti	ior
Supervisor's Manual		ulat	or for notworks of stoch	ctic f	fluid queues using JAVA	Assigned	ACU	
Coordinator Tools 0		of kn	own JAVA-based simula		packages in the simulation o	-	· ·	
Assigned Project List Project List			nalog to digital colour te policy implications	evisi	ion systems in Trinidad and	Unofficial Approved Under Revision	2	8
Create Proposal			e queue management (A erformance evaluation u		and TCP-friendly control GTNetS	Assigned	iii (8
Review Proposals	Evaluation of Diffs	erv I	Network performance us	ng G	GTNetS	Assigned	200	8
Assign Project	Multimedia traffic	mode	ling for the purpose of d	scret	ete-event simulation	Approved	- 🖹 🤅	8
🍄 Project Students 🔓 Project Bids	Design of a testbe over wired netwo		the performance evalua	ion o	of multimedia applications	Assigned	2	8
⊕Presentation Schedule ☑ Reports	Design of a testbe over wireless netw			ion o	of multimedia applications	Assigned	iii (8
Search								
🔓 Change Password	Dr Fernando Ca	ste	lanos (7 projects)					
Reset Password	Title					Status	Acti	ior
🕴 Logout			MESHED DISTRIBUTIO			Assianed		-

Figure 2. Project proposal approval.

Publishing of Approved Project List

Following the approval of proposals, the project list is dynamically generated and therefore automatically kept up to date and links to the full details of each project as shown in Figure 3.

	Electrical and Computer Engineering
Quick Access Menu	Project List
ECNG 3020 Home	2008/2009 2009/2010
ECNG 3020 Course	Dr Richelle Adams (8 projects)
Manual Student User Guide CCNG 3020 Writing Manual CCNG 3020 Final Report Checklist Supervisor's Manual Ccoordinator Tools @	 Discrete-event simulator for networks of stochastic fluid queues using JAVA (Assigned 806008642 Ramon Nugent) The effectiveness of known JAVA-based simulation packages in the simulation of communication network The changeover from analog to digital colour television systems in Trinidad and Tobago – technical and policy implications (Assigned 806003162 Ryan Marcano) The dual effect of active queue management (AQM) and TCP-friendly control algorithms - Network performance evaluation using GTNetS (Assigned 05712138 Chava O'Sullivan) Evaluation of DiffServ Network performance using GTNetS (Assigned 806003217 Joel Santoo) Multimedia traffic modeling for the purpose of discrete-event simulation Design of a testbed for the performance evaluation of multimedia applications over wired networks (Assigned 80600835 Riyad Omar)
Project List	Design of a testbed for the performance evaluation of multimedia applications over wireless networks (Assigned 806002415 Videsh Maharaj)
 My Project Proposals Review Proposals Assign Project Project Students Project Bids Presentation Schedule Reports Search 	Dr Fernando Castellanos (7 projects) ANALYSIS OF WEAKLY MESHED DISTRIBUTION NETWORKS (Assigned 05705886 Shazam Mohammed) CARIBBEAN ELECTRICAL INTERCONNECTION NETWORK DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION OF AN ELECTRIC MOTOR DRIVE FOR A BOAT SOFTWARE PACKAGE FOR THREE-PHASE ANALYSIS OF DISTRIBUTION NETWORKS ANALYSIS OF WIND DATA USING DISCRETE WAVELETS (Assigned 806000178 Nicholas Bridgemohan) ANALYSIS OF WIND DATA USING HOURLY APPROACH (Assigned 806000100 Kishan Ramdeo) ANALYSIS AND FORECASTING OF WIND REGIMES IN THE CARIBBEAN Prof Brian Copeland (6 projects)
Change Password Reset Password Cooput	 Control Systems Cyber Lab II Sound system anti-feedback strategies II RoboPan Finale – Exciter Design RoboPan Finale – System Network Design

Figure 3. Approved project list.

Assignment of Projects

At the beginning of semester one, students can consult lecturers on project proposals. At this stage, supervisors, at their discretion, can assign their own projects to students. The lecturer simply selects the student from a list as shown in Figure 4. The automatic updating of the projects' status is critical to informing students about those projects that remain unassigned and thus available. A record is kept of who assigned the project and the date and time of assignment; this log is useful for auditing purposes.



mySTA | Webmail || ECNG Home | Faculty of Engineering | Campus Directory | Campus A-Z | UWI Home

Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering

ECNG 3020 Special Project Portal

Quick Access Menu Assign Project 2008/2009

			_	
ECNG 3020 Home	Title	Student		
LECNG 3020 Course	ANALYSIS OF WIND DATA USING DISCRETE WAVELETS	806000178 Nicholas Bridgemoha	.n 💌	
Student User Guide	CARIBBEAN ELECTRICAL INTERCONNECTION NETWORK	0	~	
📙 ECNG 3020 Writing	DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION OF AN ELECTRIC MOTOR DRIVE FOR A BOAT	0	*	
Manual 🚨 ECNG 3020 Final	SOFTWARE PACKAGE FOR THREE-PHASE ANALYSIS OF DISTRIBUTION NETWORKS	0	*	
Report Checklist	ANALYSIS OF WIND DATA USING HOURLY APPROACH	806000100 Kishan Ramdeo	*	
丛 Supervisor's Manual	ANALYSIS AND FORECASTING OF WIND REGIMES IN THE CARIBBEAN	0	*	
Coordinator Tools 🛛	ANALYSIS OF WEAKLY MESHED DISTRIBUTION NETWORKS	05705886 Shazam Mohammed	*	
🔓 Assigned Project List	RoboPan Finale – System Network Design	0	*	
🗎 Project List	RoboPan Finale – Exciter Design	0	*	
Create Proposal	Control Systems Cyber Lab II	0	*	
My Project Proposals	Sound system anti-feedback strategies II	0	~	
🗹 Review Proposals	GPRS-based Remote Terminal Unit	05705341 Jameel Mohammed	*	
Project Students	Remote Controlled Athlete Tracker III	04714414 Sheldon Lancaster	~	
Project Bids	Drive-By Data Collection System	0	*	
Presentation Schedule	Automatic Seismic Detector	04703811 Angelo Modeste	*	
Reports	Voice-Activation System for the Disabled	0	~	
Search	Telephone Usage Monitor and Controller	02719254 Darrell Ramrattan	~	
Change Password	Auto-Pilot System for a Car	806007125 Kyle Hunte	~	
 Reset Password Logout 	Mobile Phone Telemetry System	01720763 Naftalie Errar	*	

Figure 4. Project assignment.

Bidding for Projects

After the project assignment stage, students who have not yet secured a project can bid for the unassigned projects by selecting up to four projects as shown in Figure 5. The coordinator, in consultation with faculty, makes a final decision on the assignment of projects.

Pepartment of Electrical and Computer Engineering ECNC 3020 Expectal Project Portal Quick Access Menu Bid for Project © ECNC 3020 Home First Choice © ECNC 3020 Vriting Second Choice Manual Second Choice © ECNC 3020 Vriting None Manual Third Choice © ECNC 3020 Vriting None Manual Fourth Choice © ECNC 3020 Final Fourth Choice Progress Submit Bid Progress Submit Bid Progress Submit Bid Project List Submit Bid © Assigned Projects Submit Bid Writinal Report Submit Bid Writinal Report Sid for Project Writinal Report Sid Sid progress © Change Password Sid Sid progress © Logaut Sid Sid progress		mySTA Webmail ECNG Home Faculty of Engineering Campus Directory Campus A-Z UWI Hom
Quick Access Menu Bid for Project Image: EcNG 3020 Home First Choice Image: EcNG 3020 Course -Select Project - Image:	Department of	f Electrical and Computer Engineering
First Choice Second Choice Student User Guide ECNG 3020 Final Report Checklist None Student Tools ? Final Presentations Presentations Submit Bid Presentations Submit Bid Project List My Project Proposals Bid for Project My Final Report Change Password	😇 ECNG 30)20 Special Project Portal
Select Project Manual Second Choice Second Choice Second Choice Second Choice Manual Third Choice Second Choice None Second Choice None Find Prosentations Submit Bid Prospers Submit Bid Project List My Project Proposals Sid for Project Shid for Project Second Choice	Quick Access Menu	Bid for Project
Manual Second Choice Student User Guide None Annual Third Choice Manual Third Choice Student Tools O Fourth Choice Image: Student Tools O Submit Bid Presentations Submit Bid Presentations Submit Bid Presentations Submit Bid Project List Submit Bid Project List Submit Bid My Project Proposals Submit Bid Bid for Project Submit Bid My Final Report Change Password	ECNG 3020 Home	First Choice
Second Choice Second Choice Second Choice Manual Third Choice None Student Tools ? Final Presentations Progress Submit Bid Presentations Submit Bid Project List Project List My Project Proposals Bid for Project Bid for Project Student Report Change Password		- Select Project -
Manual Third Choice Report Checklist None Student Tools @ Fourth Choice Improgress Fourth Choice Improgress Submit Bid Presentations Submit Bid Improject List Foreate Proposal Improject Proposals Bid for Project Improject Change Password Submit Bid	_	Second Choice
Find Choice Report Checklist None Student Tools ? Fourth Choice None Nope		None
Report Checklist None Student Tools @ Fourth Choice None None Improgress Submit Bid Presentations Submit Bid Improgress Submit Bid Project List Submit Bid Improgress Submit Bid <tr< td=""><td></td><td>Third Choice</td></tr<>		Third Choice
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Image: Progress Submit Bid Presentations Project List Project List Project Proposal Image: Bid for Project Image: Bid for Project <th>Student Tools 0</th> <th>Fourth Choice</th>	Student Tools 0	Fourth Choice
Progress Submit Bid Presentations Submit Bid Presentations Submit Bid Project List Froject List Project List Submit Bid Project Proposal Submit Bid My Project Proposals Submit Bid Bid for Project Submit Bid My Final Report Submit Bid Change Password Submit Bid	Einal Presentations	None
Assigned Project List Project List My Project Proposal My Project Proposals Bid for Project My Final Report Change Password	Winn	Submit Bid
Project List Create Proposal My Project Proposals Bid for Project My Final Report Change Password		
Create Proposal My Project Proposals Bid for Project My Final Report Change Password		
My Project Proposals Bid for Project My Final Report Change Password	167	
My Final Report Change Password	-	
Change Password	-	
	• Logout	

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Figure 5. Project bidding.

Assigned Project List

After all students have been assigned, a list based on the project assignments is automatically generated as shown in Figure 6.



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Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering

ECNG 3020 Special Project Portal

Quick Access Menu

Official Assigned Project List

ECNG 3020 Home	2008/20	09 2009/20	10	
ECNG 3020 Course	UWI ID	Student	Project	Supervisor
Manual	01720763	Naftalie Errar	Mobile Phone Telemetry System	Prof Stephan Gift
ECNG 3020 Writing	02719254	Darrell Ramrattan	Telephone Usage Monitor and Controller	Prof Stephan Gift
ECNG 3020 Final Report Checklist	03700897	Jagdish Boodoosingh	Electronic Inclinometer for Power Drill	Mr Fasil Muddeen
Supervisor's Manual	03724223	Imran Mohammed	Magnetic Field Mapping 2	Mr Fasil Muddeen
Coordinator Tools 🛛	04702069	Shayad Hosein	Development of a track following vehicle / car	Dr Ajay Joshi
Assigned Project List	04702472	Shoba Pooran	Alternate 3D Ultra Sound Analysis	Mr Akash Pooransingh
Create Proposal	04703336	Samuel James	E-mail in Project Management	Prof St. Clair King
My Project Proposals	04703811	Angelo Modeste	Automatic Seismic Detector	Prof Stephan Gift
Review Proposals	04708751	Amit Dipnarine	Mobile Training Information System	Dr Kim Mallalieu
Assign Project	04713825	David Norville	Initial Vision System for Batting Robot	Mr Akash Pooransingh
Project Bids	04714414	Sheldon Lancaster	Remote Controlled Athlete Tracker III	Prof Brian Copeland
Reports	04725981	Alvin Brown	Automatic Meter-Reading System Using the GSM Network	Prof Stephan Gift
Search	04743717	Renissa Ramdass	Generation Expansion Planning	Mr Alvin Lutchman
Change Password	04761827	Alecia Simon	Web-Based Digital Electronics Tutor	Dr Lucien Ngalamou
😫 Logout	05701017	Lorraine Acosta	Department Course Planning Assistant	Mr Sean Rocke

Figure 6. Assigned project list.

Progress and Final Presentations

Student presentations are held at two instances. The first is a progress presentation in January and the second is the final presentation in April. Four parallel sessions are hosted over two to four days, depending on course enrolment. ECNG 3020 presentations are evaluated by a panel consisting of the project supervisor, a second examiner and a moderator. Scheduling is a demanding task given the limited number of faculty and large student enrolment.

A scheduling tool, using drag and drop functionality, as shown in Figure 7 allows students, and examiners to be assigned to configurable time slots, hosted in four rooms. Post this, schedules by examiner, room and day are automatically generated and shared. The drag and drop functionality was implemented using the Prototype⁷ JavaScript framework and the Scriptaculous⁸ JavaScript library.

	zu spe	xiai Proj	ect Port	al		
Quick Access Menu	Final Pres	entations Sche	edule Edit 200	8/2009		
ECNG 3020 Home	Date 01 💌	January 💌 200)9 💌 Save			
ECNG 3020 Course Manual	Time	Room	Room	Room	Room	
Student User Guide	08:30 am 💌	05705886 Shazam Mohammed Dr Castellanos	806000100 Kishan Ramdeo Dr Castellanos	806000178 Nicholas Bridgemohan Dr Castellanos	04714414 Sheldon Lancaster Prof Copeland	Dr Adams
Manual 丛 ECNG 3020 Final	08:30 am 💌	Dr Adams				Dr Al Tahir
Report Checklist 丛 Supervisor's Manual	08:30 am 💌	05705341 Jameel Mohammed Prof Copeland	04725981 Alvin Brown Prof Gift	04703811 Angelo Modeste Prof Gift	02719254 Darrell Ramrattan Prof Gift	Mr Andrews
Coordinator Tools 0	08:30 am 💌					Mr Byron
Assigned Project List	08:30 am 💌	01720763 Naftalie Errar Prof Gift	806007125 Kyle Hunte Prof Gift	98716778 Darrel Waldron Prof King	04703336 Samuel James Prof King	Dr Castellanos
Project List Create Proposal	08:30 am 💌					Prof Copeland
🖟 My Project Proposals 🖥 Review Proposals	08:30 am 💌	05705579 Jonathan La Barrie Prof King	05706408 Kizzy Lee Prof King	05701818 Kylee Ganpatt Dr Mallalieu	04708751 Amit Dipnarine Dr Mallalieu	Dr Defour Mr Deonarine
Assign Project	08:30 am 💌					Dr Gay
• Project Bids	08:30 am 💌	05712015 Sarita Samuel Dr Mallalieu	05706088 Christopher Law Dr Mallalieu	04702069 Shayad Hosein Dr Joshi	806003224 Jason Saroda Dr Joshi	Prof Gift
⊕Presentation Schedule ☑ Reports	08:30 am 💌					Dr Joshi
Search Change Password	08:30 am 💌	806000835 Riyad Omar Dr Adams	806003162 Ryan Marcano Dr Adams	806008642 Ramon Nugent Dr Adams	806002415 Videsh Maharaj Dr Adams	Prof King
Reset Password	08:30 am 🔽				J	Mr Lessey

Figure 7. Presentation scheduling tool.

USER RECEPTION AND FEEDBACK

Abbitt (2006) identified that two major factors of user acceptance of a custom-made course management system were ease of navigation and visual perception, thus the study's survey instruments aimed to test these. Using a Likert Scale, users rated the Portal's usefulness for accessing information and its navigability. Faculty also assessed the usefulness of various tools, specific to their functions. In addition to close-ended questions, users provided qualitative feedback. In total, fifty-nine (59) persons, or 88% of the entire community of users was polled, this included both faculty and students.

To the credit of the Portal, the large majority of those polled, or 88%, found it a useful hub for accessing course related information (see Figure 8).



Figure 8: Responses to statement "The Portal was a useful resource for accessing information on ECNG 3020"

Most users, that is 90%, judged the Portal easy to use and navigate. Significantly, more than half or 54% of the sample strongly agreed that the Portal could be navigated and used easily (see Figure 9).



Figure 9: Responses to Statement "Portal was easy to use and navigate"

One underlying principle in the development of the Portal was that there must be improved access to information. Students were polled on how well they were able to view available project proposals. This information is vital to designers who want to ensure fair treatment of students in a process that involves great competition, as students do vie for projects. Most students, in excess of four-fifths of the sample, felt that they were able to easily view projects (see Figure 10). This is significant, since as projects are assigned, the updated list of available projects can be accessed in real-time allowing students to make informed decisions.



Figure 10: Responses to the statement "The Portal allowed for easy viewing of available projects"

Of those faculty members polled, many felt that the tools that allowed for creating proposals, managing proposals and assigning projects were the most useful. Two faculty members disagreed that the Portal's

proposal drafting and editing facility was simple to use. In one instance the examiner indicated that this facility proved challenging to the first time user. And in the second instance, that examiner experienced difficulty in navigating various versions of proposals, as multiple copies were created through the automatic save feature.

In their qualitative feedback, four (4) examiners were pleased that all course related information could be accessed from a central hub. In particular, one examiner felt that it was useful to browse other projects on offer. The coordinator expressed that this facility allows for easy, convenient peer review of projects – a process that is critical to ensuring quality proposals.

The coordinator selected the scheduling feature as most useful since it significantly reduced effort in the generation of several sets of schedules and reduced human error.

CHALLENGES AND REWARDS

A custom-made course management system requires a wide array of resources, chief being a dedicated software developer. Our department has a clear advantage, as our core business involves this precise type of research and development. The Portal demonstrates the department's ability to maximise available resources to solve local problems. As added advantage the Portal testifies to our capacity to design and build software products.

A customized course management system as opposed to a commercial or open source one was preferred. It may be argued that open source course management systems can also be customized to suit user needs. However, this requires a thorough understanding of the organization and operation of the various sub-systems and the technical competence to implement these changes with a consistent look and feel that does not adversely affect other parts of the system.

The most significant advantage offered by a custom-built system is user targeted functionality. It directly addresses required features without unwanted facilities. Secondly, new system functionality can be more rapidly introduced since the system internals are already familiar and well understood. Existing functionality can be iteratively refined and enhanced as the system is used and new requirements or unforeseen issues arise.

Of value to organisations, like ours that are often financially constrained, is the use of free, open source software which results in lower system costs as compared to the cost of commercial systems.

FUTURE WORK

After the first cycle of use, the Portal is under extensive review. Further development of the Portal is guided by two principles - it should genuinely simplify the process involved and new functions should be user-friendly.

It is recommended that the outcomes of student consultations be lodged in the Portal. This would help in tracking students' progress and facilitate timely staff intervention.

While the Portal allows a schedule to be created, it does not permit editing. Schedule changes are done manually by directly updating the Portal's database. Implementation of schedule editing will allow changes to be easily done without involving the software developer, thus the coordinator can be more self-sufficient. Of great use would be automatic detection of scheduling conflicts.

Additionally, while students compulsorily upload their reports for vetting by a plagiarism checker, this screening is done manually. It would significantly reduce human effort if the checking were done automatically.

Finally, supervisors have requested provisions for student-teacher interface through discussion boards and file-sharing tools.

CONCLUSION

As a home-grown product the ECNG 3020 – Special Project Portal offers specific tools for the management and administration of a complex, unique and critical course in the BSc Electrical and Computer Engineering programme. The Portal is informed entirely by course needs not vice versa, as may obtain in generic course management systems. Of particular benefit is the adaptability of the Portal's design model - it is partly intuitive and mostly responsive to user needs. Since, there is resident expertise within the department the Portal can very well evolve to meet the ever changing user demands - this is precisely the dynamism that ensures that the Portal remains relevant and therefore useful.

The Portal has significantly improved the management of this year-long course. It is a dedicated tool that has, by all indications, worked well in the short term. Its greater value, however, lies in its ability to serve the department in the long-term and it is this long-term service that justifies any initial outlay, both material and human.

What remains to be an area for further investigation is whether the Portal can be adapted to meet the needs of similar, terminal assessment courses like ECNG 3020. Within the Faculty of Engineering there are several programmes with final year projects which make similar demands. The Portal thus has the potential to improve the administration of courses that are extra-departmental, and perhaps even external to the University of the West Indies.

¹ MySQL database management system <u>http://www.mysql.com/</u>.

² PHP scripting language <u>http://www.php.net/</u>.

³ FreeBSD operating system <u>http://www.freebsd.org/</u>.

⁴ Apache web server <u>http://httpd.apache.org/</u>.

⁵ WYSIWYG is an acronym for "What You See Is What You Get".

⁶ TinyMCE JavaScript WYSIWYG editor <u>http://tinymce.moxiecode.com/</u>.

⁷ Prototype JavaScript framework <u>http://www.prototypejs.org/</u>.

⁸ Scriptaculous JavaScript library <u>http://script.aculo.us/</u>.

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