

ISC10D024

Recommendation for upgrade to the Virtual Learning Environment

A full review of Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) provision at UEA had been planned. In advance of this review, and in response to the changing environment, the Web Team have assessed the technical aspects of current Blackboard VLE provision, investigated alternatives, and explored routes for possible migration to new systems.

In light of this experience;

- we strongly recommend upgrading the Blackboard Teaching System (VLE) from v8 to v.9.1 in early summer 2011.
- consideration of replacement of the Blackboard Content System (The Portal) with Liferay Portal.

Further work is required to determine schedules for this work; the upgrade to the VLE is the priority but the upgrade to the Portal may be deferred subject to workloads and scheduling.

The paper on the following pages was submitted to the ISD Education Board and provides background detail to these recommendations. The ISD Education Board did not have sufficient time to fully consider this paper, nonetheless a decision is required and we seek approval from ISSC to progress with the project planning for this work subject to final confirmation of go ahead from the next ISD Education Board.

Subject: Technical Review of VLE Provision at UEA
Origin: Robin Keith
Date: 17 January 2011

Recommendations

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In light of this experience;

- we are strongly recommending upgrading the Blackboard Teaching System (VLE) from v8 to v.9.1 in early summer 2011.
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This paper outlines the rationale for this recommendation.

Rationale

UEA's corporate VLE is Blackboard v.8.0. The current version was installed in 2008 onto new hardware. The annual licence for Blackboard is around £69k, split between the Learning System that provides the VLE, and the Community system that provides The Portal. As with all software, Blackboard versions have a lifecycle, with support dropping from 'actively patched' to 'not patched' to 'not supported'. Our version of Blackboard was reclassified by the vendor as having a reduced level of support in October 2010, and is anticipated to be unsupported from October 2012. Last year we took the view that it would be better to focus efforts on moving other projects forwards rather than upgrade to BB v.9. BB v.9 has an updated user interface, and we anticipated that there will be a need to retrain users to use the new version effectively.

A number of factors have changed, which influence the decision to upgrade to Blackboard v.9 this year.

1. The introduction of Windows 7 on campus includes an upgrade to Internet Explorer 8. This has presented a number of Blackboard issues, which will not be patched in the current Blackboard version.
2. Blackboard is heavily used off campus, where we have no control over which browsers are used, and a number of issues have been raised with recent browser upgrades, which again will not be patched in the current Blackboard version. This issue is likely to be compounded as time goes by.

3. A request has been made to support online submission of coursework, which may be implemented through Blackboard. Blackboard 9.1 provides a framework for handling online coursework submissions and this has been successfully implemented by other institutions. This functionality is not available in our current version and will not be made available as an option.
4. Recognising the concerns of HEIs over the amount of work involved in moving from v.8 to v.9 (especially user retraining), Blackboard have invested heavily over the last year in the migration path. As well as a cohort program for system administrators, video tutorials for most features of the system, and improvements in the user interface should reduce the effort required to move.
5. Blackboard have acquired the top 4 commercial VLE's, and are planning on migrating those users to the main Blackboard product. This only leaves the open source VLEs Moodle and Saki as alternative VLE products.
6. The Web Team has been involved with the provision of a Moodle server for MED's MS Oncoplastic Breast Surgery, which has provided valuable insight. Several infrastructure and functionality differences between Moodle and Blackboard would present challenges. These are not insurmountable but would require changes to how we support the VLE and would require close liaison and negotiation with academic colleagues.
7. It has become clear that a 'big bang' approach to VLE migration would be problematic, and any migration would need to be phased over several years. This implies that Blackboard will be used by UEA until at least 2013/14, which would take us beyond the supported life of the current version.
8. Any migration would involve transferring course content from Blackboard to the new system. Blackboard 8 tools for export are limited and unreliable, but much improved in v.9. So an upgrade to Blackboard 9 would make migrating away from Blackboard in the future more viable if this were the chosen route.
9. A like for like migration of The Portal to the open source product Liferay Portal, could save £30-£35k per year in licence fees. Liferay is standards based (unlike Blackboard) and includes similar (arguably richer) functionality.
10. Liferay is being piloted for Research Websites. If the pilot is successful (and early indications are positive), UEA could move to providing Research Websites and The Portal via a single system, which would have efficiencies.
11. A prototype implementation of The Portal in Liferay has been created (<http://ueaweb12.uea.ac.uk:8080/web/the-portal/home>), and areas requiring further development identified. Initial portlet development (migrating the eVision portlet to Liferay) has been positive. . The existing skill set of the web team can be utilised efficiently.
12. During 2011 we will be starting to introduce OpenAthens as a single point of authentication for web systems. The current version of Blackboard doesn't support this type of authentication, which prevents any non-UEA users from accessing Portal content. Moving to Liferay will (by late 2011) allow for OpenAthens authentication, allowing a wider set of users access to that functionality.