

SunGard Higher Education Helps the University of Nottingham Build a Unified Digital Campus

The University of Nottingham is an international research-led institution, offering an exceptional research and teaching environment. Ranked consistently in the top 10 UK universities for the quality of its teaching, research, and facilities, Nottingham remains the most popular university in the country for undergraduate applications with more than 36,000 applications for its 5,500 places.

The University has a student body of more than 32,770 (including overseas campuses), of which 6,500 are postgraduate students, including 2,400 postgraduate researchers. Around 6,000 staff are employed by the University, including 2,000 academic and research staff members. Nottingham aims to attract, retain, and motivate high-quality staff and undergraduates, recognising that its people are its most valuable asset. With a large student body and staff population, the need for efficient record keeping, communication, and access to learning resources create ever-present challenges.

In 2000, Nottingham began an initiative to address these challenges. Dubbed eNottingham, the initiative centred on the strategic importance of portal technology to realise the University's vision for a "Connected Campus". A key objective for the initiative was to web-enable the University and provide access to all relevant services and information from a personalised web page.

In 2000, the University set up a project team to create a portal using the open-source JA-SIG uPortal technology. By 2002, a pilot was live, with 1,500 students on the system. However, the University wanted to scale the number of users significantly and move the programme forward more quickly, and it set some ambitious targets for September 2003. A portal team was created which began looking for a solution that could provide extra functionality beyond that possible with uPortal.

Commenting on SunGard Higher Education's Luminis product family, Alison Rothera, head of web services at Nottingham said, "We were excited by the possibilities that were offered by the Luminis Platform over and above those of uPortal. In particular, we liked the prospect of added functionality over and above what we had, for example, group functionality and the possibility of single sign on. All of this sat on top of uPortal, meaning that our previous work and effort would not be lost."

Results with SunGard Higher Education Solutions:

- A "connected campus" delivering streamlined faculty support & services online
- Centralised, time-saving student and staff management
- Virtual teaching, research, and results
- Online student elections and course payment systems

The future capabilities of the portal were also a deciding factor according to Ms. Rothera, "At this time we expanded our thinking to adopt a cradle-to-grave approach to managing our relationships with students, from enquirers all the way through to alumni. Our prospective students' portal is a first step toward that. It guides applicants through what can be a complex admissions process, providing them with targeted information en route to commencing their studies with us. We also wanted the ability to scale the environment and to increase the value of our external and internal websites significantly. We planned to do this by putting the control of our web content back into the hands of the content managers. We were happy that the Luminis Platform was the right tool to enable us to do these things."

In 2003/2004 the University rolled out a comprehensive portal for students and staff using the Luminis Platform. The deployment was very rapid with a beta version in June 2003, a development version in place by July, and a production system for 75% of the student population live in September that year. Despite the aggressive timescales, the portal team met its challenging targets comfortably.

Some of the results were surprising according to Ms. Rothera, "The portal held a magnifying glass to existing institutional problems that had never been tackled. Certain things became more apparent and in particular the need for data cleaning. The new portal also flagged other concerns including access and identity management issues, because some users had many identities rather than just one."

University of Nottingham
Nottingham, England
Enrollment: 32,770
<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk>

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The portal team therefore had valuable feedback, allowing them to make highly effective improvements to the portal. In 2005, this work was recognised when the University and Colleges Information Systems Association (UCISA) gave Nottingham an 'Award for Excellence' for its initiative to include information and services for prospective undergraduate students in its portal.

Since then, Alison Rothera's team has continued to add new channels to the portal, exploiting the flexibility of the Luminis platform to enhance functionality significantly. The framework that SunGard Higher Education has introduced has enabled this to take place easily, quickly, and in a robust manner. Many different portal channels have been implemented including:

- A service which makes undergraduate and postgraduate degree results and details of graduation dates available online. This service is particularly relevant to overseas students or those who are travelling at the time when results are announced.
- An online payments service has been introduced allowing students to obtain information on incoming funds and outstanding debts. Students can use the service to pay bills and even arrange for part payment of University invoices. As a result, students no longer need to visit the finance office in person, but can securely enquire online for information regarding their personal finances. This has in turn reduced the amount of time that the finance office spends on handling student enquiries.
- Students' Union elections are now held online, with voting functionality built into the portal. This initially resulted in a 40% increase in the number of students voting and the trend has continued with the University claiming the UK's highest level of students voting for their representatives online.
- The portal has made virtual teaching a reality with many of the staff now using it as an additional learning environment.
- Research is also benefiting, because the portal has now provided a mechanism for the University's senior management team to model and build the best possible case for ongoing funding. The ability to monitor its research performance closely has proved invaluable when submitting data for the official Research Assessment Exercise, upon which research funding depends. The necessary statistics are produced easily and demonstrate how well the university has performed. Advance warning of poor performance is also provided so that weaknesses can be addressed long before they are likely to impact on the University's assessment.

As for the immediate future, the undergraduate prospective students' portal is firmly in place and a new post-graduate version is scheduled for launch in early 2007. In terms of implementation, the post-graduate prospective students' portal has drawn from the experience of building the undergraduate one. Alison Rothera explained, "We now have a robust framework to build on and SunGard Higher Education has made this possible. We've done our own development work to make sure that the new portal will work seamlessly with our existing on-line applications system, but Luminis Software Development Kits (SDKs) have been helpful. Support from SunGard Higher Education has never been far away and throughout their help has proved invaluable."

Further down the line there are two areas that Ms. Rothera wishes to build on. "We want to use SunGard Higher Education's integration technologies so that we can move data around the system efficiently. The next major challenge that we need to address is to fully implement a single sign on for both internal and external entry points. We want to move toward using standard protocols and we'll be seeking SunGard's advice to help us to achieve this level of integration."

With regard to future co-operation with SunGard Higher Education, Ms. Rothera concluded, "We expect that the value that SunGard will continue to deliver will be very much based on its own insight into technology trends and interoperability. We see our SunGard Higher Education team as key facilitators in this regard. Its own advances and knowledge leaves us time to focus on delivering the best web enabled environment for our users."

The eNottingham initiative has been going from strength to strength ever since the initial implementation of Luminis Platform back in 2003, and has now developed into the University's "Connected Campus" vision. With ongoing adhoc support from SunGard Higher Education, Nottingham's web services team can be assured of a robust model upon which to build innovative web solutions in the future. The University of Nottingham therefore deservedly remains at the forefront in using technologies to support and deliver a truly Unified Digital Campus.