

University of Sheffield Switches On To Luminis

With a history stretching back to 1828 and a University Charter that was granted in 1905, the University of Sheffield has an enviable heritage and a reputation as a centre for world-class research in many disciplines.

Its research partners and clients include Boeing, Rolls Royce, Unilever, Boots, AstraZeneca, GSK, ICI, Slazenger, and many more household names, as well as UK and overseas government agencies and charitable foundations.

Its international academic partnerships include Worldwide Universities Network (USA, Europe and China) and a partnership with Leeds and York Universities (the White Rose Consortium) has combined research power greater than that of either Oxford or Cambridge.

Home to more than 25,000 students, from 116 countries, and almost 6,000 staff, the University of Sheffield is a popular destination for applicants, and offers a student experience that is enjoyed so much, that many settle in Sheffield after they graduate.

A positive user experience lies at the heart of the University's strategy for its online community environment. With many different platforms and machines on campus, Sheffield had long realised that web based access was key to improved collaboration amongst its staff and student communities.

Sheffield's previous staff and student portal had been running successfully for three years, offering many benefits to the University community. However, weaknesses had gradually become apparent, and these proved the catalyst for rapid change and improvement not only for the portal itself but also for its users.

Christine Sexton, Director of Corporate Information and Computing Services, University of Sheffield, explains, "The original version of our portal, My University of Sheffield Environment (MUSE), served us well. It offered single sign on access to many web based services, gave secure access to the University system from off campus, and facilitated collaboration and communication. It did have its problems though, appearing slow and 'clunky' to use. It had an unintuitive interface and it was cumbersome to configure personal settings. This was borne out in user satisfaction surveys where usability of the portal interface and its speed came under fire frequently."

In 2005, following the critique of the portal and news that the existing software vendor was updating its portal offering, the

Results with SunGard Higher Education Solutions:

- A reliable, flexible and vastly more popular university portal (33,000 users) than previously
- Access to webmail, calendar, web authoring systems, library resources and more
- Time and cost savings for information distribution
- Ease of navigation and personalisation for students

University decided to conduct a review aimed at addressing the speed and usability issues. "We were keen to choose a partner that would help us to improve the user experience and make navigation through information easier and more intuitive," Sexton said. "This was very much in line with our strategy to facilitate ease of use and seamless interoperability between services. SunGard Higher Education's Luminis Platform had not been available when we first looked for a portal. However, having since heard positive feedback from other universities about the product, we decided to evaluate it and found that it matched our needs closely."

Having selected Luminis Platform, the race was on to implement a new version of MUSE in time for the new undergraduate intake in September 2006. Neil Campbell, the University's web manager, was appointed as project manager to oversee the work and leading a team of three, with support from SunGard Higher Education, began work on the implementation phase in autumn 2005.

A planning phase set a baseline of functionality for the new online community based largely on the functions offered by the previous portal. This was used to build a baseline development environment, which led to the rapid creation of a working prototype by May 2006.

Campbell explained, "We wanted to ensure that the new portal provided all the services and functionality that our staff and students had been accustomed to. As part of this work, existing MUSE communities and their membership had to be replicated in the new portal. Luminis' open standards enabled us to migrate all functionality from the old portal to the new

University of Sheffield
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<http://www.shef.ac.uk>

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Station House | Stamford New Road | Altrincham, Cheshire, England, WA14 1EP | tel +44 (0) 161 929 2027 | www.sungardhe.com

portal quickly – just changing small parameters in order to integrate services quickly. We were working to a very tight deadline and this made all the difference to our efforts.”

By running the prototype in parallel with the old portal, it was possible to verify common features and functionality during the initial development phase. Focus was then placed on enhanced functionality to improve on various navigation, speed and presentation elements. Examples of this included work on the calendar system, enabling users to see the contents of their calendar via portal channels, rather than having to click through to a separate calendaring application – a feature now offered as baseline in Luminis Platform IV. In addition, staff surveys had criticised the overwhelming number of emails coming through to them. Enhancements were made to the email system to facilitate greater targeting of messages to groups, whilst also allowing people to opt in or out of group mailings. Campbell took a “less is more” approach to the portal interface to improve navigation and to make it easier to personalise.

Campbell explained, “We wanted to provide an elegant, tidy interface that could be easily configured and customised to meet the individual needs of our users. Our mission was to make it easier for people to use the portal and to make it a one-stop-shop for information. We felt that if we achieved this, we would attract more users and increase collaboration.”

As work progressed, the development team benefited from ongoing access to support from SunGard Higher Education. Campbell commented, “SunGard Higher Education consultants advised us on single sign-on for applications, talking us through the methodology and making sure that everything was standardised. On the occasions where we needed support, we were always extremely impressed at the speed and clarity of the response that the team provided. We knew that we could pick up the phone and that we would get a solution promptly. In addition to this level of support, we also drew on the experience of SunGard Higher Education’s developer groups who were happy to share their experience and knowledge and this helped to speed up the implementation significantly.”

In early June, the team started to raise awareness of the new portal by giving sneak peeks to focus groups of academics and senior management. Campbell says, “We received a very favourable response to the new portal, the clunky interface had gone and the minimalist interface had given people a home page that they could very much make their own. This was a big shift away from the old portal, which was very prescriptive. By contrast, the new portal was seen as far easier to navigate and personalise.”

MUSE was re-launched on schedule in time for the start of autumn term 2006. 33,000 registered users of MUSE were given accounts on the new portal and can now access web-based systems including:

- Web mail
- Calendar
- Web authoring systems
- Learning management system
- Electronic library resources
- Web-based corporate information systems.

According to Campbell, “Reliability has been nothing short of outstanding. We have thrown a lot of traffic at the portal and it has stood up to the volume. We’re getting many more users online now than we had using the old portal and this is clear evidence that our ‘less is more’ interface has hit the right mark with our users. Students have just run with the new version and are already personalising their home pages. I am confident that we have given them an environment that they will continue to use and benefit from.”

As for the future, Campbell is convinced that ‘killer applications’ are the key to maintaining interest in the portal. For students, email and the ability to check exam results are irresistible draws. Campbell wants to find a similar draw for staff and believes that the ability to check their payslips online could be step in the right direction.

“We want to build in more functionality such as the display of Virtual Learning Environment functions within the portal,” Campbell added. Other items on Campbell’s list include a portable version of MUSE, which can be accessed from mobile devices. His thoughts on giving prospective students and alumni access to the portal are still embryonic, but he sees no reason why alumni shouldn’t be allowed to retain access to useful areas of the portal. Equally he believes that prospective students would benefit from access, providing them with a taste of life at the University before they join.

Campbell concluded, “It has been very satisfying to drive through some quite radical ideas, such as a minimalist user interface and to see this welcomed with such enthusiasm. We were committed to delivering MUSE on time and we had to get things right from the beginning of the project, we also had to develop the portal quickly. SunGard provided us with an excellent tool to achieve this in the shape of Luminis and guided us through the process with the utmost professionalism. The result is an online experience that allows people to take the University with them whether working at home or abroad. The favourable comments that we have received so far have made all our efforts worthwhile and we’re looking forward to building on our success.”