

Ministry of Education: edCentre

edCentre (www.edcentre.govt.nz), the Education Sector Portal, went live on 25 January 2005. edCentre is New Zealand's online gateway to education information. It provides structured and organised access to educational services and information for organisations and people at all stages of their lives.

edCentre is the result of a joint initiative by Career Services rapuara, the Education Review Office, the Ministry of Education, the National Library of New Zealand, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, the New Zealand Teachers Council and the Tertiary Education Commission. The project was coordinated by the by Ministry of Education.

edCentre is more than just a simple "pass through" portal; it is a special interest portal with the principal aim of assisting its primary audiences to navigate and coordinate information from (primarily) government-hosted education sector websites.

Importantly, edCentre fits with the Education Priorities for New Zealand as one of its primary aims focuses on improving access to information about education for families and communities. Improving access to information is aimed at increasing learning opportunities and improving learning outcomes.

Following a government report that identified the difficulties stakeholders had in navigating and obtaining coherent information from the many government agency websites in operation, the education agencies were tasked with developing a portal that would facilitate access to New Zealand education information.

The Business Case for edCentre was developed between January and July 2004. Considerable canvassing and analysis went into the Business Case and it sets out the objectives, scope and nature of the portal .

Development of edCentre was carried out between September 2004 and January 2005.

edCentre was built using the tertiary education portal platform (www.ted.govt.nz) which combines the latest technology available from both the private sector (shrink wrap portal "front end" and content management) and e-Government (Autonomy Search Engine and Topic Map).

edCentre's key target audiences are parents, learners, educators, researchers, communities and governance body members.

The project set up a formal parents' interest group to identify and articulate parents' interests, to ensure that these were effectively reflected in the content and structure of the portal.

The project team delivered on the objectives of the project, as specified in the Business Case, within the tight timeframe. The 'Post Implementation Review' is very positive and reports that the portal interface is well designed, laid out and easy to use, that information is readily navigable, well structured and relevant, that the linkages are relevant and well-structured and that performance is good. The review describes edCentre as a "significant success" for sector collaboration.

edCentre was delivered within its formal budget. However, it is acknowledged that there are costs to be considered outside the formal budget, in particular the time committed by individuals from the contributing agencies, who were not part of the core project team.

Currently edCentre is getting approximately 5,000 hits a week.

As the edCentre portal is a multi-agency initiative, it was necessary for all agencies to work together to deliver the portal. edCentre is one of the first education sector projects to require such a high level of agency collaboration and consultation and there were some challenges along the way. The issues that were worked through, to successfully deliver the portal, included:

- The significant effort required to work across agencies and the initial underestimation of this.
- Governance structures - governance required sector ownership and sponsorship as well as business ownership to drive successful completion.
- Clarification of roles and responsibilities.
- Competing priorities between internal agency work (business as usual) and delivering edCentre.
- Establishing procedures and policies, where they didn't already exist.
- Clarification of 'sector ownership' of a project and lead agency responsibilities.
- Communicating with the right people, at the right time and building effective communications networks.

These issues have resulted in significant 'lessons learnt' which will be of great benefit in future sector initiatives.

The involvement of the Communications Managers from all the agencies added significant value to the project. Collectively they undertook the task of organising and mapping audience requirements onto existing agency website information and provided quality assurance in the resulting developments. The project gained strength by leveraging the Communications Managers' vested interest in the dissemination of agency information via their organisation's websites.

Now that edCentre is live, the key focus is on maintaining relevance, consistency and currency of the information it offers. The Portal Charter is currently under development and covers audience definitions, contents and services provided, governance arrangements, communications and promotion, high level operating procedures and monitoring and reporting processes.

National Library is working to ensure that edCentre is viewed as a key communications channel for the sector and used accordingly.

The edCentre project has made a significant contribution to understanding what is required to build and maintain effective sector relationships. The agencies are also more aware that multi-agency initiatives require significant effort to achieve alignment and collaboration. Also, that the sector should be seeking to further refine its governance arrangements:

- to run such projects effectively,
- to identify and apply suitable tools to facilitate collaboration, and
- to ensure that adequate staff time is allocated.

It is considered that the achievements and lessons from this project will be of great value to future projects and that this project marks a more connected and collaborative way of working for the agencies and the sector.