

## Building an IT Community: BIT- WEB

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A website is seen as the public face of an organization. In an educational institution a website for a particular course or programme plays the same role. It is an important vehicle for attracting potential customers, mainly students in our case, but also, in these politically charged times for tertiary education: industry and politicians. An equally important role is that of providing a service for current students. Happily these roles coincide. As UIE (1999) describe, a focus on branding on websites is detrimental to the value of the brand, or as Nielsen (2000) argues, the best way of giving the appearance of a good service is to give a good service. The focus of a course website should be to service current students.

The BIT has had a presence on the web since its inception (the degree and the 'web are of similar vintage). The 'corporate' part of the site consisted of several hundred html files of varying quality and presentation format. The course content areas were many thousand files and several gigabytes. Feedback from students was consistently that 'they couldn't find anything' while staff struggled with the difficulty of updating content while maintaining a consistent appearance.

Following the successful development of the Otago Polytechnic Research Web (OPRW, Mann and McGregor 2000), it was decided to develop a new site for the BIT following a similar approach. The new pages are dynamic, delivered from a database using cold fusion. Using CSS and frames, only 18 cold fusion scripts are needed for the whole site. While having a strong graphical element, the content is the focus (Figure 1).

The site has the following features, all of which are dynamically generated:

- Papers: Basic course information and links to online information
- Profiles Staff, student and alumni (including portraits)
- Showcase of student successes
- News items

- Links (and the ability to suggest links)
- Projects, current, past and potential future (with ability for industry to submit suggestions)
- Research – direct links to OPRW
- Integrated links to other services, email, course evaluation, online marking
- Messages, including links to items
- Course handbook.

A new feature is the profiles. We are hoping that by people adding information about their professional background and qualifications we can help raise the profile of the degree, its students and graduates. With increasing numbers in our course it is also a useful tool for students and staff in getting to know the people around them.

Another new feature is the message boards. There are a general message board area and every article on the site is a seed for further discussion (Nielsen 1997). This enables users to give feedback on items on the site, from news items to projects. Users can also start or contribute to discussions on individual courses and papers. This is seen as important in our goal to empower.



### References

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