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Zahid Hussain

*University of Bradford, z.i.hussain@bradford.ac.uk*

Richard Kelly

*University of Bradford, mapofindia@yahoo.com*

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# **A STUDY DESIGNED TO INVESTIGATE STAKEHOLDER REACTION TO A PROPOSED INTERNET PORTAL DESIGNED TO MANAGE STUDENT ACCOMMODATION AT A MAJOR LANGUAGE SCHOOL CHAIN IN THE UK**

**Dr Zahid Hussain**

*The University of Bradford, Bradford, UK.*

Z.I.Hussain@bradford.ac.uk

**Richard Kelly**

mapofindia@yahoo.com

## **Abstract**

*A language school company struggles in the successful provision of UK homestay accommodation for its students. This paper describes a study that investigated stakeholder reaction to a proposed accommodation internet portal solution, with the aim of enabling the company's management to decide on whether to sponsor the Portal's development and to understand what is necessary to achieve stakeholder 'buy in'. Focus groups and interviews were used to gather data. The findings showed that the participants had a good practical understanding of stakeholder theory, and that there were a range of views regarding the introduction of the Portal, including desired features and introduction issues. The conclusion recommends the company introduce a hybrid portal where users can select the level of engagement they have with it, that the company consults its stakeholders on the design of the Portal and that the change process is managed carefully and effectively.*

**Keywords:** Stakeholder theory, internet portals, human-computer interaction, information systems.

## **1.0 Introduction**

This article describes a feasibility study which investigates stakeholder reaction to a proposed Internet Portal designed to manage student homestay accommodation for a language school chain. Although the provision of homestay accommodation currently presents a number of problems to the company, it nevertheless remains popular with customers, and as the suppliers are only paid when their accommodation is used, the company considers it a particularly cost effective solution to accommodate students.

Currently, to book homestay accommodation alongside a language course, a student expresses their preferences to their agent if they book through an agent, or to the company if they book direct. These preferences are then passed through the enrolments department to an Accommodation Officer in the school at which the student plans to study. The Accommodation Officer places the student with a homestay and informs the student, via the enrolments department, of their homestay. This system of placing students with homestays is complex, time consuming, and only partially effective.

The company's management, aware of these problems, are keen to investigate other ways of facilitating student homestay placement. An option under consideration is an internet portal, similar to Airbnb or Homestay.com. The successful introduction of a portal is dependent on the understanding and resolving of issues regarding financial, technological, and human activity systems. The company's management therefore wishes to explore these areas fully before making a commitment to continue with the project – hence the need for a feasibility study derived. The feasibility study described in this paper was designed to explore the human activity systems aspect of the Portal's introduction, that is, to gauge the reactions of the company's stakeholders to the Portal, and to understand what is necessary to achieve stakeholder 'buy in' (Phillips et al., 2003) if it is to be introduced.

The paper's theoretical foundation took a threefold approach to inform the conversation between the company and its stakeholders about the successful introduction of the Portal. Firstly, it examined the literature for guidance on a stakeholder approach to management, to determine what a stakeholder and

stakeholder theory is, the relationships between a firm and its stakeholders, how to categorise stakeholders and how to manage them. Secondly, it attempted to gain understanding on why and how companies use technology to improve the services they offer. And thirdly, it investigated human-computer interaction with a view to establishing the factors that determine an information system's successful introduction.

The study conducted secondary research, in the form of a literature review, to inform the primary research it undertook, and primary research, following the interpretative research paradigm (Collis and Hussey, 2014), to provide answers to five research objectives, which were:

- To identify and contextualise the organisational need for developing a new homestay accommodation service.
- To conduct secondary research on stakeholder theory and the issues around internet portals through examples, precedents and theory.
- To undertake primary research to investigate the different reactions of the company's legitimate stakeholders to the proposed solution.
- To analyse the results of the primary research and contextualise them within the results of the secondary research to facilitate management decision making.
- To make practical recommendations for further research.

## **2.0 Context and Rationale**

Students come from all over the world to study English in the UK. Over 470 language teaching institutions are members of English UK, the national association of accredited English language centres in the UK (English UK, 2015). These institutions may be small family owned schools, private or public universities, or colleges that are part of a large international chain. In the 2008 to 2009 academic year teaching English to international students earned the UK £2.5 billion (English UK, 2015a).

The company, a registered charity, provides quality language learning for study and work and aims to contribute towards a better understanding among people everywhere by helping to bridge national, cultural and social barriers. It owns five schools in the UK and three abroad and works in partnership with over thirty schools around the world through franchising agreements.

Once a student has decided to book a language course with the company they then have the option of booking accommodation for their stay. A majority of students choose homestay accommodation. Whether the student books their course and accommodation through an agent or direct with the company, the booking is initially handled by the enrolments department, the agent's and student's pre-arrival point of contact with the company. After liaising with the student the enrolments department enters the booking onto the company's customer management software, which passes the accommodation booking to the requested school's Accommodation Officer.

The student's accommodation booking contains the following information: start and end dates, the type of accommodation required, single or twin room, and shared or private facilities. In addition, students staying with a homestay can choose between bed and breakfast or half board accommodation, and can make a number of requests, two of which, non-smoking homestay and non-pork diet, have to be provided if requested. Other requests, such as being close to the school, are granted if possible. Students of the same mother tongue are not placed in the same homestay unless requested.

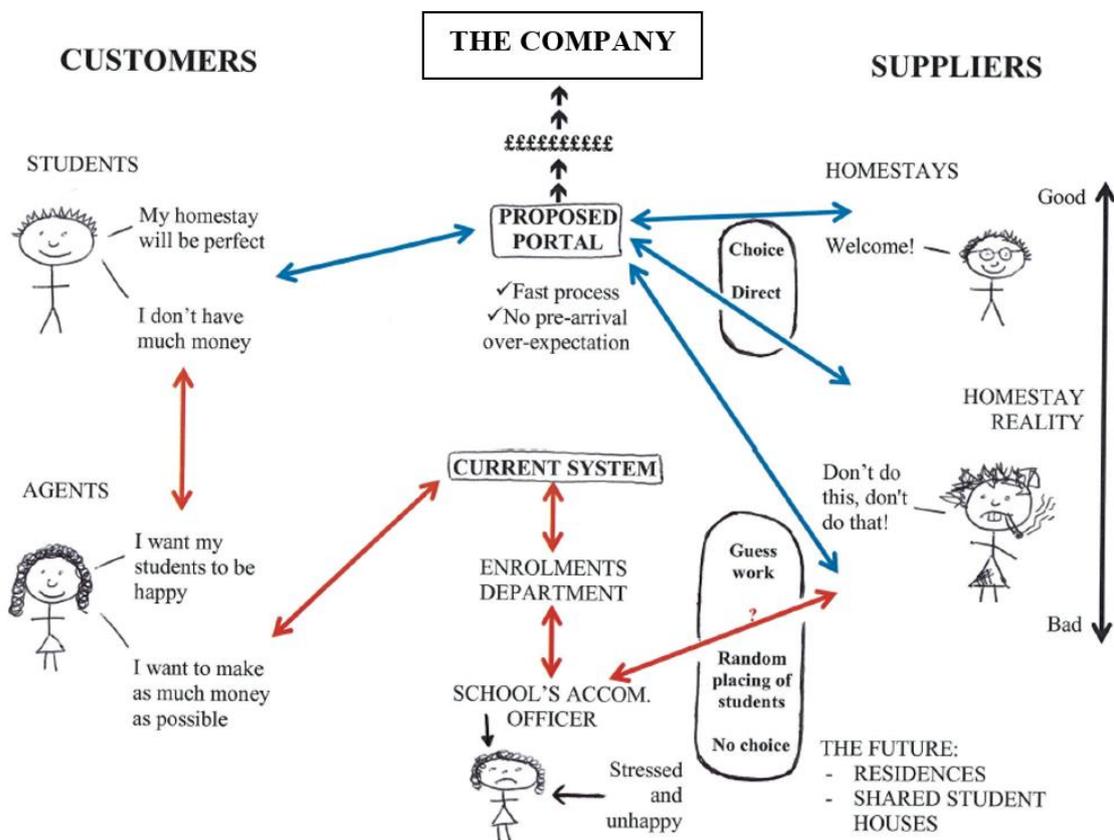
Importantly, especially when considering the problem under investigation, the student does not choose which homestay they will stay with, although sometimes requests for specific homestays are made. The Accommodation Officer will use the booking information to build a mental picture of the student and match them to a homestay as best they can, taking into consideration host availability and preferences. Quite often, the Accommodation Officer has very limited information about the student to work on and a restricted number of homestays to place them with.

The process described above fails to meet students' expectations because there is, in essence, a gap between what the student believes their homestay accommodation will be like and what it is like in reality. This gap is in part created in the student's mind, but is exacerbated by the product itself, the

competitive environment the school operates in, the structure of the company and the way its products are sold.

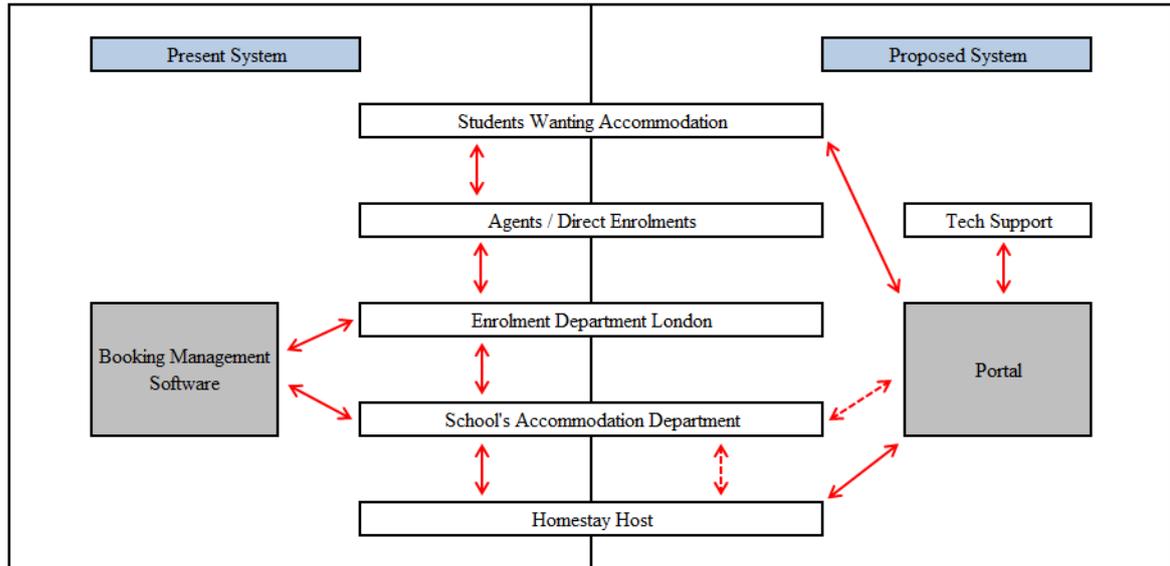
The product is a room in a British home with meals if requested. Quality varies. The majority of hosts that offer one or more of the rooms in their home do so primarily for the money. Homes are often smaller, colder, darker and dirtier than the students' back home, with stricter rules and worse food. The better quality homestays tend to be in the suburbs, further from the central location of the schools, but the students are reluctant to travel to them. Local school competition, particularly in popular destinations with a limited pool of homestays like Bournemouth means suppliers have high bargaining power resulting in little incentive to improve the quality of their offering.

Competition for students can lead to overpromising on the quality the company can deliver. As sales managers, sales teams and enrolments staff are dislocated from schools, they lack understanding of the problems and difficulties of sourcing quality homestays. Senior management is even more removed, both physically and metaphorically. Selling through an agent network further distances the reality of the product from what is being sold. Figure 1, a rich picture, is used to illustrate homestay accommodation issues due to the complex nature of the problem.



**Figure 1. Rich picture detailing homestay accommodation issues.**

Aware of the problems providing homestay accommodation causes, the company's management is considering whether they could be solved by having students book through an internet portal similar to Airbnb or Homestay.com. The Portal would allow students to directly book their accommodation with a company recommended homestay rather than the company acting as an intermediary. The procedural map in Figure 2 illustrates the current and proposed homestay booking processes. Table 1 then summarises the possible benefits to the company of using a portal to manage homestay accommodation, thereby explaining the attractiveness of this option.



**Figure 2. A procedural map of the current system and proposed Portal solution.**

Benefit.	Detail.
Gap reduction, quality and customer service improvement.	Customers dealing directly with hosts through a portal that allows pictures, write ups, feedback, etc. facilitates better accommodation choices being made (type of family, distance to school, room size, etc.) and prevents a pre-arrival expectation gap.
	Hosts that deal directly with students will be motivated to improve service quality and provide high levels of customer service.
	Providing a portal to homestay hosts prevents current quality hosts from moving to other portals and may attract new quality hosts either from other portals or those who wish to gain the benefits a portal offers.
Quality and customer service improvement.	Customers dealing directly with hosts cuts out the need for third party intervention allowing for swifter response times and therefore better customer service.
	Increasing the productivity of accommodation officers and removing the most problematic part of their job will increase motivation, retention and boost levels of customer service.
	Some staff time freed up from the booking process and problem solving can be directed to providing better levels of customer service.
Cost saving.	A reduction in the amount of staff time required for the booking process (enrolment staff, Accommodation Officers) and post booking problem solving (enrolment staff, Accommodation Officers, Sales Area Managers, Centre Managers) produces cost savings.
Other.	The company may gain some first mover advantage if it is the first language school to bring its Portal to market.
	An established and successful portal can be sold to other schools giving the possibility of further revenue generation.
	The use of technology to facilitate the better management of a potentially problematic process marks the company as an innovator in service provision to its customers.

**Table 1. Benefits to the company of using a portal to manage homestay accommodation.**

### 3.0 Research methodology

The research methodology tended towards what Collis and Hussey (2014) term a ‘broadly’ interpretivist approach. Taking into account the research philosophy, a case study methodology, based on Yin’s (2009) definition, best suited the project’s needs when considering what data was to be collected and how. The project was able to collect data from the following stakeholder groups: students, homestay hosts, Accommodation Officers, Centre Managers and the Head of Sales. Each group of stakeholders was treated as a separate population from which samples were drawn. Interviews and focus groups were used to gather data, with a defined set of questions being asked in each instance. The questions were based on schema derived from the literature review of stakeholder theory, internet portals and portal usability. In total 38 questions were asked to the participants. Table 2 gives an example of how authors and topic shaped the questions asked to the participants.

Author(s)	Topic	Questions
Donaldson and Preston (1995). Rowley (1997).	The relationship between a firm and its stakeholders.	6. How many stakeholders does the company have and who are they? 7. With regards to home stay accommodation, how many stakeholders does the company have and who are they? 8. How do these stakeholders interact with the firm and each other?
Clarkson (1995). Dix et al. (2004). Johnson et al. (2014). Mitchell et al. (1997). Willcocks and Mason (1987).	Categorisation of stakeholders.	9. Are some stakeholders more important than others? 10. How would you assign importance to stakeholders? 11. Thinking about home stay accommodation, how important are you as a stakeholder? 12. Thinking about the home stay accommodation stakeholders identified earlier, are any more important than you or less important than you?
Augustyniak et al. (2005). Cennamo and Santalo (2015). Ellis (2003). Hagiu (2014).	Strategic challenges of developing and introducing a portal.	26. What problems might the company face if it were to introduce an Internet Portal to manage home stay accommodation? 27. What could the company do to eliminate / mitigate or manage these problems? 28. How would you feel about using an Internet Portal to manage your side of the home stay accommodation transaction? 29. How could the company make things easier for you in using the Internet Portal? 30. What features would you like the Internet Portal to have?

**Table 2. Example of how authors and topic shaped questions asked to the participants.**

The project analysed the data ‘within case’, treating it as an ‘in-depth exploration of a single case as a standalone entity’ (Mills et al., 2010). The analysis followed what Miles and Huberman (1994) term a General Analytical Procedure, which involved reducing the data, displaying the data, and drawing conclusions and verifying the validity of those conclusions.

The data reduction stage discarded irrelevant data and collated data where interesting relationships existed. The data was kept in two broad categories, data concerning stakeholder theory and data concerning portals and their usage, to better manage its reduction. It was transcribed from the recordings, question by question, by selecting and recording key phrases of discourse which were used

to analyse and determine different patterns within the data. These patterns were selected manually through a system of coding of the key phrases. There were several cycles of data reduction to bring it to a manageable amount. Table 3 gives an example of the answers of one participant to questions 8, 9, and another to questions 28, 29 and 30 as shown above in Table 2.

Question	Answer
8. How do these stakeholders interact with the firm and each other?	Students make a booking and deal with the school who deals with the host. Something like that.
9. Are some stakeholders more important than others?	Yes, I think so with accommodation. The hosts are very important because they have a lot of contact with the students.
28. How would you feel about using an Internet Portal to manage your side of the homestay accommodation transaction?	Yes, I think so. There would be an adjustment but once it was up and running. It could get tricky in summer as we manipulate / move students around to keep everyone full and use all the accommodation to make sure every student has a place to stay.
29. How could the company make things easier for you in using the Internet Portal?	I'm always happy to try out new things. I would be interested to see it to see how it would work. It is important to understand how it would look to all the different parties.
30. What features would you like the Internet Portal to have?	It should be fairly easy to use. A student should be able to put in the dates, the city, facilities and it would come up with a list of the available hosts. It would be important to have pictures and a map.

**Table 3. Example questions with participant answers.**

Data displays were used to detextualise the data and summarise it in the form of a number of diagrams. Two displays were initially used. The first displayed the participants' opinions on themselves and each other as stakeholders, while the second was a matrix designed to gather reactions to the Portal by construct and stakeholder.

The verification of the data used a third display, a matrix to summarise the data collected for each construct. It planned to integrate the summary data from previous data displays and therefore required adjustment. Stakeholders were listed along the top in order of importance with the reactions of the stakeholders associated with each construct were listed in the relevant box. Further iterations of all three displays mentioned here were used as the data analysis evolved. Final iterations of the displays can be found in the next section.

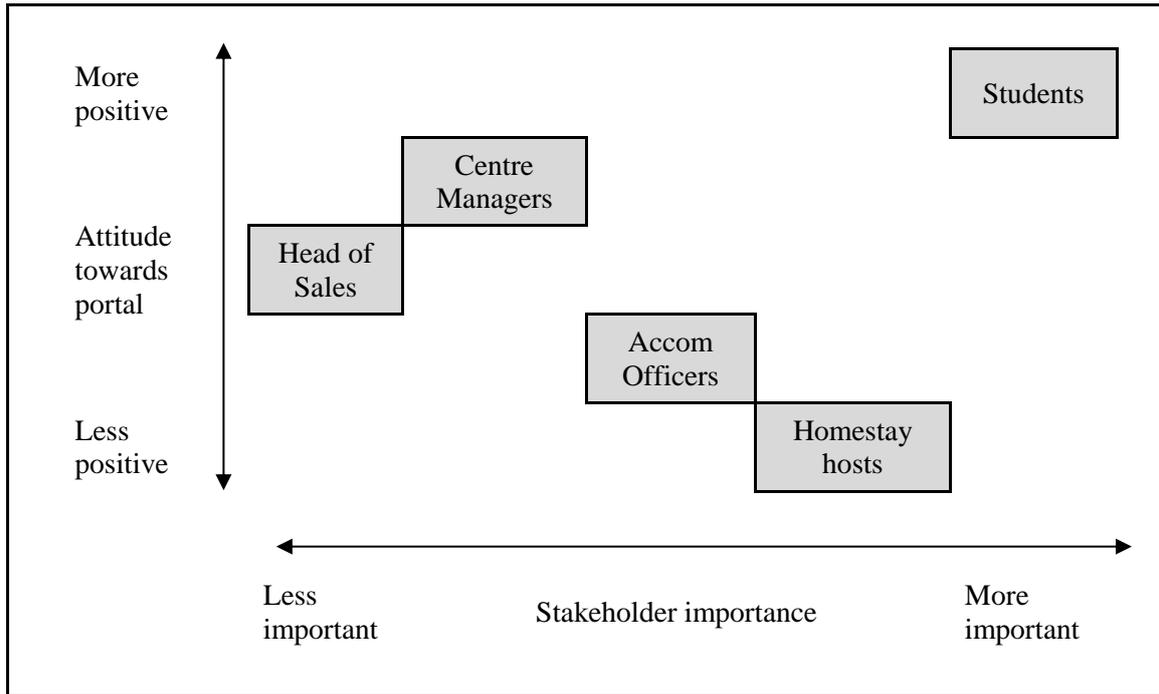
#### **4.0 Findings**

Figure 3 displays the combined findings of the research, showing the summary statement of reactions to the Portal idea of each stakeholder, ordered by the perceived importance of that stakeholder. It is followed by Figure 4, which gives a graphical overview of the research findings, comparing the stakeholders' attitudes towards the Portal with their perceived relative importance. The study also produced a large amount of data best described as neutral but noteworthy statements, which was divided into the categories of recommended and requested portal features and issues and concerns. Although the information this data provided is not directly relevant to the portal introduction decision, it gives useful guidance for company management should they progress with the Portal's introduction.

Ranking of	Stakeholder.	Summary statement of reactions.
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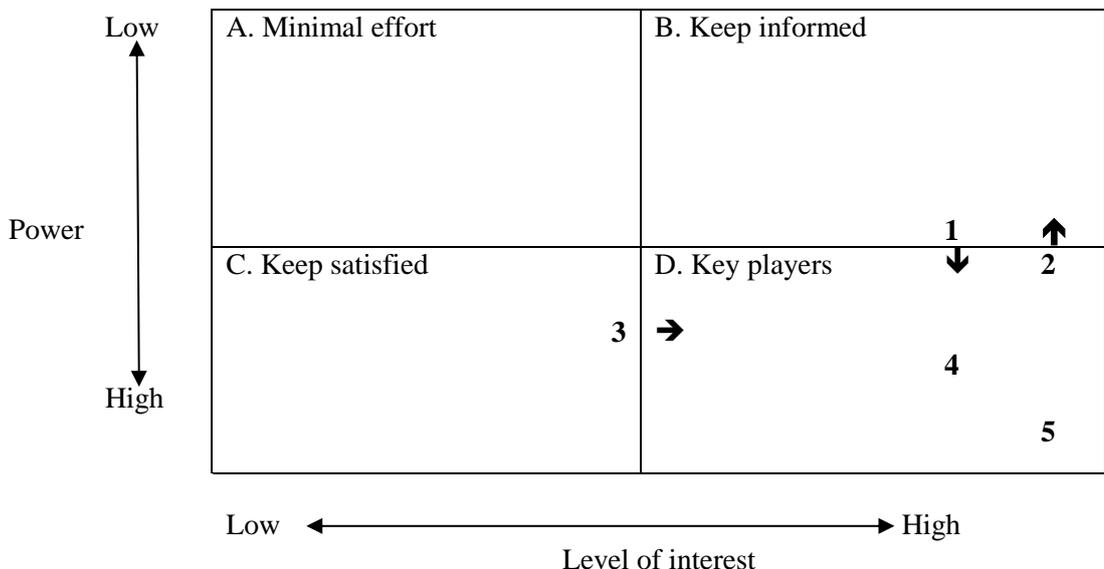
Stakeholders.		
<p style="text-align: center;">↑ More Important</p>	Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strongly in favour of a portal to book accommodation, recognising the benefits it may bring them, particularly regarding being able to choose their homestay.</li> <li>• Aware that some hosts might struggle with the technology and the impact on the Accommodation Officer role.</li> <li>• They did not consider implications of dynamic pricing.</li> </ul>
	Homestay hosts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognised some of the advantages of a portal for other stakeholders but were not convinced they would benefit.</li> <li>• Very concerned of the implications if the company were not involved in vetting students, solving problems, and acting as a mediator between students and hosts.</li> <li>• Likely to stop working with the company.</li> </ul>
	Accomm Officers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very keen to solve homestay accommodation issues and aware of the benefits a portal could potentially deliver.</li> <li>• Generally positive towards its introduction but realise the impact on the Accommodation Officer role.</li> <li>• Conscious of the difficulties of homestay host 'buy in'.</li> </ul>
	Centre Managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very keen to solve the homestay problem and excited about the benefits of doing so through a portal.</li> <li>• Recognised the need for the company to get the technology right for it to work.</li> <li>• Recognised the risks regarding homestay host 'buy in'.</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;">Less Important ↓</p>	Head of Sales	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keen to explore the possibility.</li> <li>• Understood the benefits to customers and young people are comfortable with booking services over the Internet.</li> <li>• Saw the benefit in attracting business, monitoring sales and reducing costs.</li> <li>• Concerned about the difficulty of convincing agents that it would simplify their workload rather than add to it.</li> </ul>

**Figure 3. Combined findings of the research.**



**Figure 4. A graphical overview of the research findings.**

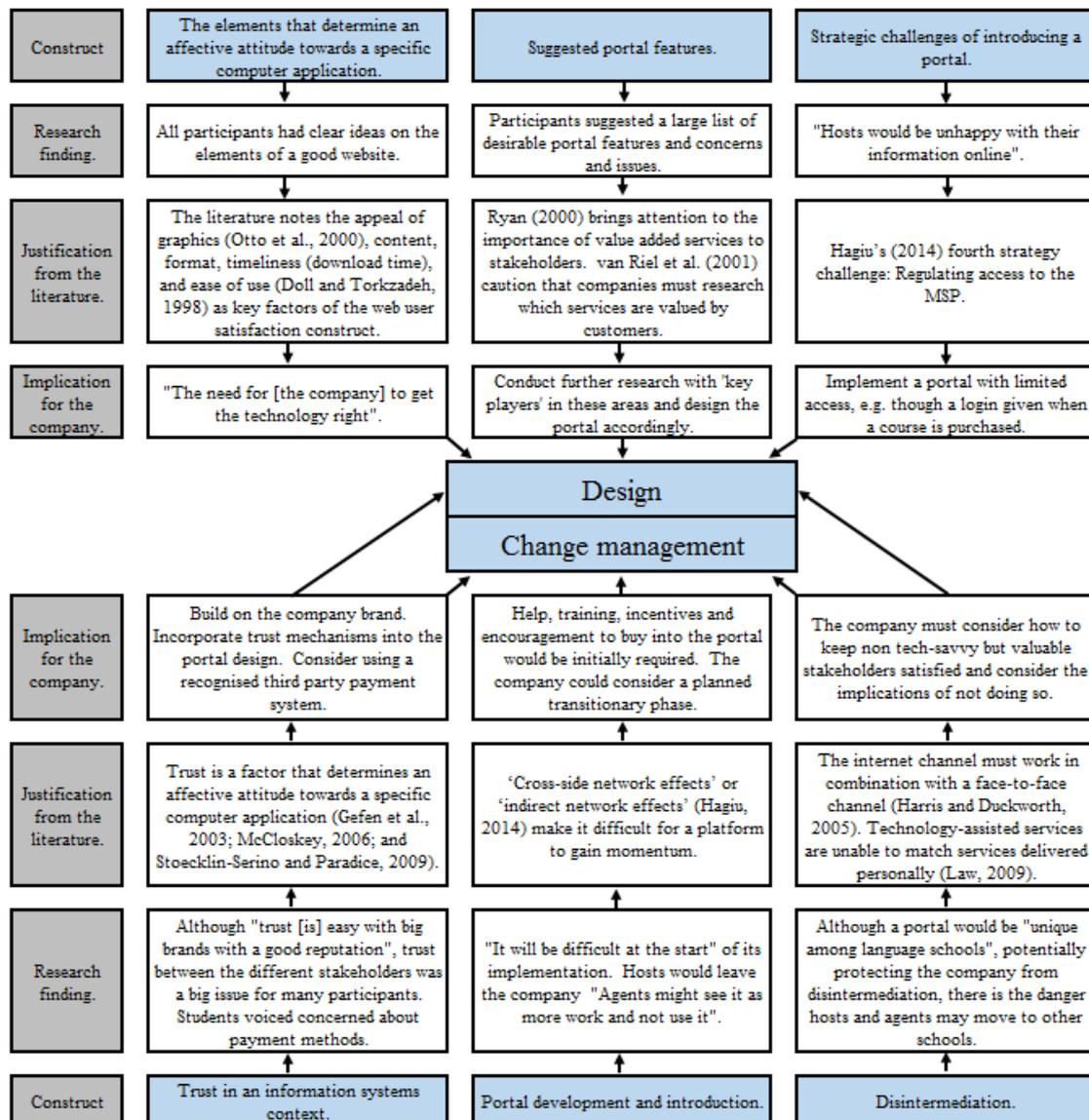
The findings showed that although unfamiliar with its theoretical background, the participants had a conceptual understanding of stakeholder theory, its implications for themselves as stakeholders of the organisations they come into contact with, and its implications for those organisations. Focussing on a contemporary typology, Figure 5 represents a diagrammatic attempt to categorise the identified stakeholders according to Johnson et al. (2014, p.124).



Key:                    1. Centre Managers                    2. Accommodation Officers  
                              3. Head of Sales                        4. Homestay hosts  
                              5. Students (also acting as a proxy for agents)

**Figure 5. Stakeholder mapping: the power/interest matrix (Johnson et al., 2014, p.124).**

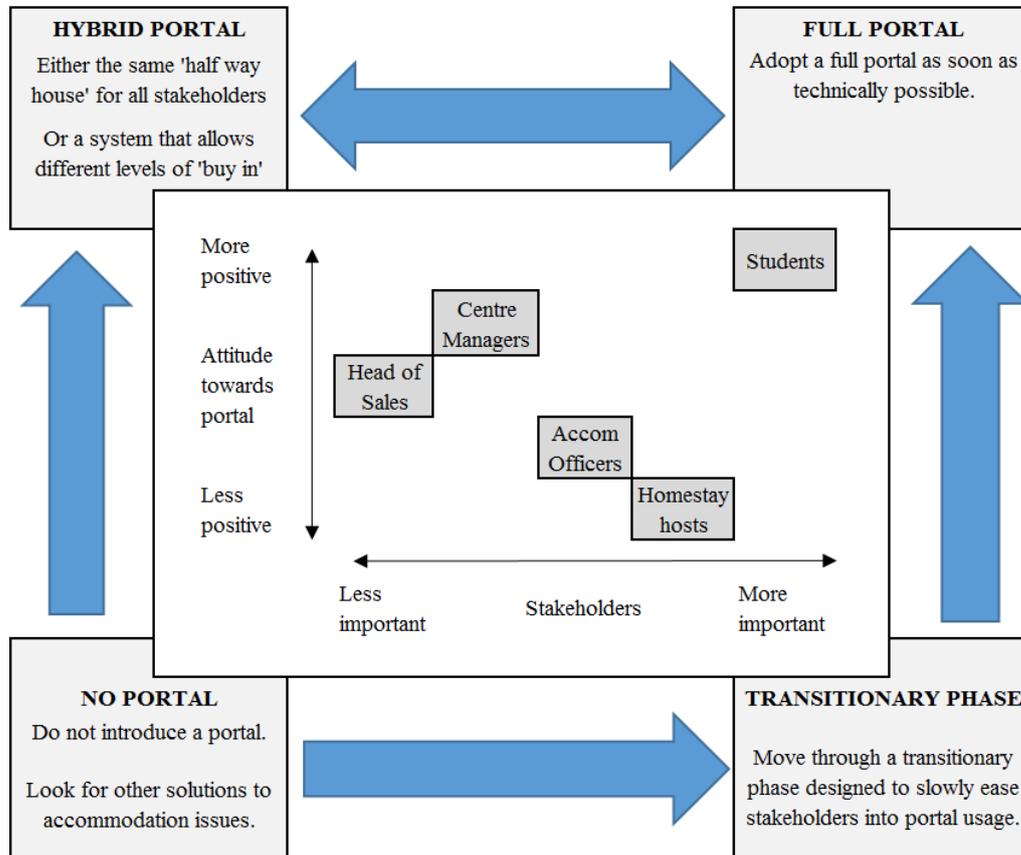
When considering the introduction of an Accommodation Portal it is clear that the company needs to carefully manage all the stakeholders in Figure 5, as all have relative high levels of power and interest. Particular attention should be paid to the students and hosts because of their placement on the matrix and their bargaining power in a crowded, competitive marketplace (Porter, 2008). Figure 6 integrates the findings on attitudes towards the Portal with the corresponding sections in the literature review chapter to draw out two key themes. The diagram identifies the construct, then moves through the research finding and a corresponding justification from the literature to arrive at an implication for the company. The implications feed into the key themes for the Portal's successful introduction: its design and the change management relating to its introduction. Quotes taken from the raw data are given in quotation marks.



**Figure 6. Key themes from portal findings.**

Five ways forward are outlined in Figure 7. At one extreme, the company can choose not to implement the Portal and continue with the current way of booking homestay accommodation while considering alternative solutions to homestay issues. At the other, it can choose to adopt an 'introduce the Portal

and be damned' approach, with the stakeholders being left to either use it or not. However, Cennamo and Santalo's (2015) third strategy trap warns against an organisation overlooking its partners' value propositions. A successful platform creates a proposition that produces value for the suppliers, the customers, and the platform, with all three being essential to the platform's longevity. Therefore three alternatives are presented: two hybrid options and a transitional phase option.



**Figure 7. Diagram showing portal options**

The first hybrid option advocates a 'half way house', which would implement the features the 'key players' saw as the benefits of the Portal without the drawbacks. Such a system might have, for example, online host family profiles with students choosing their homestay but with the booking managed by an Accommodation Officer. The second hybrid option proposes a portal where users choose how much they want to interact with it. Students could use the Portal to book their accommodation or they could use an Accommodation Officer. Hosts could manage their profile and bookings through the Portal or have an Accommodation Officer do it. To incentivise the students and hosts to use the Portal, and to cover additional costs, a charge could be made to those who require support. The transitional phase would take the form of a period of support for those who require it, giving them time to move over to fully using the Portal, either after a set period of time or as and when the users became independent. The exact details of these three options would need fully thinking through before implementation.

## 7.0 Recommendations and Conclusions

The key findings of the study are as follows:

- The participants in the study had a good understanding of their own and other participants' importance as stakeholders.
- When considering the implementation of an accommodation portal, three 'key players' stand out: students and agents (customers) and homestay hosts (suppliers).
- Students responded positively to the Portal, homestay hosts expressed reservations. Agent reaction requires further investigation.
- All participants made valid contributions to ideas on the Portal's design and potential issues it may face.
- The company has five options on how to proceed: to not introduce the Portal, introduce one of two hybrid portals, go through a planned transitional phase, or introduce a full portal as soon as technically possible. Upon consideration, one option stands out.
- The Portal's design and the change management in moving to the Portal will be crucial to its successful introduction.

Bearing these in mind, the study made 5 recommendations to the company:

- Introduce a Hybrid Portal, where stakeholders can decide on the level of interaction with the Portal that they are comfortable with. Charge to cover the cost of the additional support required by those who find it necessary.
- Periodically consider whether the 'key players' would benefit from full portal implementation. If/when this situation arose phase out the hybrid features of the adopted portal.
- Conduct further research with the 'key players' including agents, about the design of the Portal, throughout its design, testing, piloting and implementation to ensure their 'buy in'.
- Consider very carefully the implications of the introduction of the Portal, particularly for 'key players' who might not readily adapt to or adopt the new technology. Well thought through and well executed change management is essential to its success.
- Identify then involve 'key player' stakeholders in all future company business decisions.

In addition, it made three recommendations were made to academia:

- Revisit this research project's subject when an iteration of the Portal has been introduced to be able to reconsider it through action research methodology and therefore complete the action taking, evaluating, and specifying learning stages discussed under the soft systems paradigm.
- Conduct more research on the application of stakeholder theory in organisations other than large, publicly held ones as a small step in helping it come into its own as a theory of strategic management (Phillips et al., 2003).
- As a subject for further research look for other instances of an organisation considering the introduction of a small scale internet portal similar to the one discussed in this report.

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