The Selection of a New Student Administration System at University of Southland

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This decision case describes the process of requirements definition and selection of a new student administration MIS to replace the existing legacy system. It provides a detailed account of the initiation of the project and how decisions have evolved. The case focuses on the interests and roles of internal stakeholders and the effect of unexpected external events. Finally, the case describes the evaluation process to select a vendor which best suits the needs of the university. The vendor proposals have been evaluated and a decision is imminent after 4 years of delay, indecision, and disagreement among the parties involved. The culmination of years of work now rests on the selection of the proposal which best suits the needs of the University of Southland.

Keywords: information systems development; IT evaluation; IT planning; requirements analysis; software selection, stakeholders’ involvement

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Established in 1873, the University of Southland is New Zealand’s second oldest university. The university has a total of 12,500 students and 490 academic staff. The University of Southland offers undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Arts, Commerce, Education, Engineering, Fine Arts, Forestry, Law, Music, and Science. Its vision is to be a premier research-led university serving as a powerful source of intellectual energy for New Zealand and international communities.

The governing body of the university is the University Council. It is advised on all academic matters by the Academic Board, which is the principal academic body in the university, co-ordinating the work of the faculties and all departments. The Budgetary Advisory Committee makes recommendations to the council and academic board, while the senior management team is the advisory committee to the vice-chancellor. The university is currently comprised of 38 academic departments grouped into seven faculties. Decision-making at the university is very decentralised, collegial, and consultative.
In 1999, the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Resources) Phil Barrett, in conjunction with the vice-chancellor’s office, began a series of projects to improve the infrastructural support of the university and these were called The University of Southland Management Information Systems (MIS) projects. The projects, which included Human Resources, Finance, and Student Administration, were aimed at providing better support for teaching and learning and to provide increased efficiency. A formal project structure was set up with Phil Barrett as the MIS projects sponsor and Mike Andrews as the chief project manager. Reference groups, headed by the reference group chair, were set up for each individual project and a sponsor and project manager were assigned. At this time, Phil Barrett was also involved in securing a $100 million loan for the university, so in 1999, its financial position was secure and the MIS projects had been initiated.

The outgoing vice-chancellor fearing that the $100 million in cash reserves would be appropriated by the government, committed to a substantial building program. The university overspent by around $15 million so by the time the new vice-chancellor began his tenure, the financial environment had changed. It had gone from an environment with few financial controls, governed by a vice-chancellor who was able to make unchallenged financial decisions, to one of deficits and financial accountability to money lenders. This, combined with changes to government funding and increased competition from other tertiary providers, led to the university experiencing serious financial difficulties. In 2001, a Financial Recovery Plan was drawn up to restore financial viability.

SETTING THE STAGE

MIS Project Initiation

The need for the new systems became apparent when the new vice-chancellor, Daniel Layton began his tenure in 1998. The existing Oracle Financial System was not giving the new vice-chancellor the financial records he required to run the university. This was the initial driver for the MIS projects but it also highlighted the need for other systems. There was no centralised HR system so there was no way of ascertaining how many staff were actually employed on campus. Individual departments used spreadsheets to keep their own HR records but there were no centralised HR records which provided an overall picture of the university’s human resource status.

The student administration system (US Student) that had evolved, and was developed in-house by the information technology department over 15 years ago, was regarded as being based on technology that is reaching the end of its life. The system had been developed with nearly obsolete programming languages such as COBOL and the hardware platforms were being discontinued. The system was typical of academic in-house systems developed at the time, in that there was little professional rigour in the way in which it was developed and it was not adequately documented. There were no controls in place in terms of how it evolved. The system was also very dependent on the three key Information Services staff that had developed the system. It was very much records orientated towards the needs of the administration and was not designed to be client run. If, for example, Mike Sinclair, who runs the Record’s Office, wanted a report he had to request that report from Information Services. It was also never intended to support academic staff. Over the years, staff could be described as detesting the system and at enrolment they would have to spend hours manually checking piles of printouts to see if students were eligible for enrolment in a particular course.

Furthermore, the system was unable to be manipulated to deal with changes such as the introduction of summer school and semesterisation.
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