HIGHER EDUCATION

Students, and perhaps academic research, should be at the heart of everything that a university does. However, the student experience is often overlooked – dare I say ignored – in most projects. The opportunity to transform learning and bring the university experience into the 21st century seems like the last thing being considered by many who attempt to introduce digital technology into HE.

Research conducted by **YouGov** on behalf of **TechnologyOne**, has revealed that students are most concerned with a trustworthy, consistent digital information flow from their university. The survey of more than 1,000 students showed that reliable online access to course materials, exam results, admissions information, and timetables is a high priority for more than 90 percent of UK students. Further, a majority (88 percent) rated consistent, multi-device and location access to this information as important. However, despite these being high priorities for students only six in ten respondents said that their university offers this digital kind of experience. The research also indicates

PHIL COSTLEY / DE MONTFORT UNIVERSITY

THE CHALLENGE OF IMPLEMENTING A FULL ERP SYSTEM SHOULD NOT BE UNDERESTIMATED AND THE NATURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION ADDS ANOTHER LAYER OF COMPLEXITY

that although students have widespread access to student services technology, innovation on campus is less evident. Just 19 percent use smart devices during their lectures; only three percent are able to utilise AI functionality such as chatbots through their university's website; and less than one in five students has access to a campus map on their smart device.

Given that faculty 'customers' are amongst the most digitally aware and tech-savvy demographic it should be an imperative that the university product is delivered through seamless digital channels. The opportunity to 'transform' creaky back office functions with modern cloud-enabled technologies should be the foundation for a complete overhaul of the university offering. Unfortunately many attempts to achieve this have resulted in sub-optimal outcomes.

University culture holding back successful transformation

Whilst universities should be amongst the most likely type of organisation to benefit from digital transformation, they are also the least likely to have

IAIN MARTIN / DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

CLARITY OF PURPOSE, LEADERSHIP AND A REAL UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT IS DESIRED FROM DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION ACROSS THE ENTIRE UNIVERSITY UNDERPINS SUCCESS

the skills and culture to deliver it. ERP projects can be bruising affairs and are not for the faint-hearted. Anyone who has been involved in a large-scale ERP software or transformation project knows that the process is challenging for many reasons. And if you don't have a clear vision and someone steering the ship with the expertise to navigate through and around the pitfalls, it can be almost impossible to deliver with any real benefit.

Phil Costley, director of ITMS at **De Montfort University**, said: "The challenge of implementing a full ERP system should not be underestimated and the nature of HE adds another layer of complexity for analysis, process design, change management and deployment. The journey is long and requires a unity of purpose from all parts of an organisation that can be difficult to achieve in HE. At De Montfort University we have had strong support and engagement across the organisation and having already implemented finance and HR we are into our second cycle on the student system and are building from this to reap the full benefits."

As with all large projects, clarity and vision from the top of the organisation is key to driving change and without it, most projects are doomed before they begin. Universities are full of very smart people. But they are not full of people who necessarily understand what it takes to deliver a sweeping project of

change that will affect every inch of the campus. They may also be reticent to admit their shortcomings or lack of knowledge creating a "blind leading the blind" situation. The hierarchical nature of a university means that decisions from on-high rarely get challenged.

Iain Martin, vice chancellor at **Deakin University** in Australia, said: "Clarity of purpose, leadership and a real understanding of what is desired from digital transformation across the entire university underpins success. Isolating digital leadership amongst a few in the organisation is destined to result in failure. The lessons could not be clearer."

Darren Ellis, director of public sector and managed services at **Park Place Technologies**, agrees and said: "Higher education institutions face many of the same problems with digital transformation as the private sector. The project requires not only vision and technical expertise, but also deep cultural shifts to do things differently than they've been done. The buy-in can be harder to achieve for some higher education institutions because of the nature of their governance and the need for public transparency, faculty and student input, and so on. It takes time to bring everyone along."

RUSSELL GROUP UNIVERSITIES, ALTHOUGH VERY PRESTIGIOUS, TEND TO BE LESS FORWARD-THINKING WHEN IT COMES TO IMPLEMENTING AND EMBRACING NEW EDTECH

DAVE KENWORTHY / UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

And Alex Richardson, principal in the IT and digital practice at **Berwick Partners** goes further, saying: "Persuading intelligent and challenging stakeholders, such as academics, to change the way they operate is always difficult. But to exacerbate this there is a cohort of university staff who don't 'believe' in the adoption of industry approaches and in fact many are ideologically opposed to the existence of a market in the HE sector at all. Furthermore, whilst universities are now generating large revenues, the legacy HE sector mindset where any significant level of expenditure could be open to critical public scrutiny, means universities are highly cost-sensitive."

Many of these issues are magnified further within the more established institutions where the culture is even more rooted in traditional academia.

Dave Kenworthy, director of digital services at **CoSector – University of London**, said: "Russell Group universities, although very prestigious, tend to be less forward-thinking when it comes to implementing and embrac-

senior figures being in post for decades means that university leaders are often shut off from the brutal world of technology and transformation, relying heavily on advice and guidance of external consultants to bridge the knowledge gap. Without the experience of knowing any better, it is difficult for universities to challenge and scrutinise the advice that they are given – and this can lead to good outcomes for the consultancy and very bad outcomes for the university.

Not all consultancies are guilty of profiteering from the HE sector; some have done an amazing job at shepherding a university through the complexities of digital transformation. But some have taken advantage of a situation created by the perfect storm of a naïve client with a risk-averse culture and delivered projects that no-one can be proud of.

Paul Hoskins, principal at **Curio** and former CEO at **Precedent** said: "Leadership teams, inexperienced in delivering similar projects, are prone to following advice from consultancy firms and product vendors, in large part due to protracted procurement processes, and often fail to forge a vision that delivers to the digital and educational transformation agendas. This often results in programmes led by

THE PROJECT REQUIRES NOT ONLY VISION AND TECHNICAL EXPERTISE, BUT ALSO DEEP CULTURAL SHIFTS TO DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY THAN THEY'VE BEEN DONE

DARREN ELLIS / PARK PLACE TECHNOLOGIES

ing new EdTech. The post-92 and large metropolitan institutions are well practised in appealing to students in more modern ways. They tend to be very responsive to change, and onboard with developing technology for teaching, learning, and enhancing the student experience overall."

Difficult for universities to challenge and scrutinise

I feel a certain amount of sympathy with some universities that have endured difficult ERP projects. A culture deeply rooted in academia and many

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externally derived processes and product capabilities providing little value at best, and in a few cases embarrassing and expensive failures. The **University of Reading** and the well documented criticism it received for its Professional Administrative Services project being a good example, but there are many more too."

Indeed there are; **University of Birmingham**'s (UoB) New Core project was described as the worst example of its type at a recent event hosted by ERP Today. The project was delivered late, over budget, and many of the

PAUL HOSKINS / CURIO

THIS OFTEN RESULTS IN PROGRAMMES LED BY EXTERNALLY DERIVED PROCESSES AND PRODUCT CAPABILITIES PROVIDING LITTLE VALUE AT BEST

benefits that were conceived at the start have failed to be realised, despite the huge investment. Further, several open letters to VC David Eastwood, highlight a plethora of problems with the system, that some say, renders it almost useless. In conversation with several contractors who had first-hand experience of the project, and **Unison** representatives, I was told that the problems extend to several areas of the New Core system and include student workers not being paid on time, or at all. Those that are paid are often paid incorrectly with the wrong tax deductions. Issues with expenses, tax codes, loan payments and payslips are rife. The situation has escalated during Unison's ongoing dispute with the university over Living Wage accreditation and better pay over which six days of strike action have taken place since June.

Commenting on the implications of the troubled project, Unison said: "Hundreds of staff and students have wasted entire days trying to chase payments, waiting in queues, phoning various departments, and sending emails. Many student workers and staff will be spending their weekends

with much less money than they had budgeted for, and we are worried that many will have their overdraft affected by this and will be missing deadlines for paying bills. When you do get to speak to someone it is clear that they don't have answers to questions we are asking with many being unable to access the system, or when they can, not knowing how to use it."

Phoebe Gill, a post-grad student at UoB has set up a group called '**UoB Student Workers**' to help tackle the issues being faced by hundreds of workers at the university and to put pressure on senior management to find a resolution. She said: "Many student workers have not been paid for months and there is no communication at all from the university or those responsible for the New Core project. It is important to stress that the issues that have emerged in relation to New Core are not simply 'technology issues'. They show the interlinked nature between problematic processes, a management team who do not properly consult unions and staff, and other policies which, combined with a dysfunctional HR and finance system, can lead to complex repercussions."

As Gill says, the issues are not technology related. The system that UoB has implemented should work fine. Just ask the other Birmingham univer-

sity, **BCU**, that implemented a similar solution in nine months for a fraction of the cost. As with most distressed projects it is rarely, if ever, the technology that is at fault. In the case of UoB, the **Oracle** product is mature, it has been implemented countless times in a variety of situations and is a robust and functionally rich suite of applications that should have set the university up for a bright future. However, it doesn't matter how good the raw materials are if the university leadership doesn't have the vision, skill and experience to deliver the desired outcome.

One Unison member who would go on record was Ioana Chis, branch rep at Unison UoB, and she said that the issues with New Core have pervaded virtually every aspect of university life and could have far reaching consequences for the university itself. She said: "The issues with New Core are exacerbating the wider problems of poor conditions for workers and an erosion of the agreements between the university and Unison. People can't get paid and when they do, they are rarely paid what they should be. These are the lowest earners in society and, not only has the university been refusing to seek Living Wage Accreditation, end casualisation on campus and bring outsourced workers in-house, now they aren't even paying their workers correctly. There has been a real lack of communication from those responsible and although many students and workers are now being offered vouchers to compensate for the problems most of us see that as further insult rather than any real form of compensation."

ERP Today invited UoB and their implementation partner to comment in this feature and answer some of the criticisms - they declined. However, they did send a letter threatening to 'take all appropriate action' if they didn't like our article.

UoB is not on its own and many other universities have felt similar pain with projects either being terminated before they completed or experienced significant overruns on time and cost coupled with an erosion of the benefits that the projects were

originally conceived to deliver. **Durham University**'s project failed entirely although it is now being picked up by **KPMG** who is remodelling the strategy and attempting to implement the solution for a second time. Of course it is not uncommon for large scale projects to run into some difficulties and there will always be teething problems with a new ERP no matter how well it has been implemented. The reason UoB has been singled out by many as such a bungled effort is that it could and should have been the poster-child for university transformation in the UK, and sadly it isn't.

In virtually every case the recipe for disaster is the same and all universities should take very serious note of the lessons learned by those who have been through the ringer on their projects to ensure they don't repeat the same mistakes. Talk to those who have been successful. Find a partner that understands HE and has a track record of delivering in it. As Martin from Deakin University said earlier, the lessons could not be clearer.

Successful examples of implementations

There are, however, rays of light from some institutions. As mentioned manual processes and introducing more efficient, effective and paperless administrative workflows, the university has been able to free up staff time for more higher-value activity.

Anwen Robinson, operating officer UK at TechnologyOne, said: "By automating manual processes and introducing more efficient, effective and paperless administrative workflows, the University of Dundee has been able to free up staff time for more higher-value activity. The university has introduced an enterprise SaaS solution to improve the flow of information and create a coordinated team approach to administration, allowing them to focus services on strategic priorities as well as enabling the university to foster a culture of continuous improvement."

The **University of Exeter** has a far reaching Accelerating Digital Programme to support its ambitions to become one of the UK's top 10 universities. Over the next two years the institution will implement an array of 'cutting-edge digital products' designed to enhance the user experience for students, teachers, researchers, and other staff. The university recently undertook a digital transformation project to modernise its finance function which will save millions of pounds per year.

And **Newcastle University** has recently implemented a full suite of **SAP** technologies including SAP HANAH, SAP Fiori and SAP CRM that has revolutionised the University's access to intelligent data across finance, admission, and student grades.

The HE sector is not alone in its struggle to address the challenges and reap the benefits of digital transformation. But the added complexities connected to culture mean universities are faced with a tougher challenge than most. For the UK HE sector to prosper in the digital age it must consider the student experience and build from there. Transforming back office functions with ERP technology should be allied to a much broader implementation of front-line digital services that deliver the university product in a way that students want to consume it. Just as traditional businesses in the commercial sector have seen disruption created by leaner, more agile and digitally superior competitors, the higher education sector is being shaken up by those institutions that are able to attract, recruit and engage students with a contemporary product delivered with the student experience front and centre.

Hoskins from Curio believes that UK universities can learn a lot from the example set by international institutions, and concluded by saying: "Examples of success in the HE sector are often from much farther afield, with Deakin University in Australia and **Southern New Hampshire University** in the US often cited as real innovators. Both organisations identified the opportunity early, experimented, learnt and developed clear visions with measurable student satisfaction at their core. Both use this data to continue to innovate in a way that works for them. As late starters on this journey, UK universities often try to emulate these successes without a deep enough understanding of where they want to get, leading to unfocussed programmes and poor outcomes." ∎

THE UNIVERSITY OF EXETER HAS A FAR REACHING ACCELERATING DIGITAL PROGRAMME TO SUPPORT ITS AMBITIONS TO BECOME ONE OF THE UK'S TOP 10 UNIVERSITIES

ANWEN ROBINSON / *TECHNOLOGYONE*

above, Birmingham City University implemented an Oracle Cloud ERP solution in rapid time, on budget and without any major issues. David Wilkin, who led a similar project for **West Midlands Police**, spearheaded the implementation of a full suite of new digital technologies including finance, procurement, HR, payroll and PBCS (Oracle's cloud-based planning and budgeting) tools.

The **University of Dundee** has a robust business transformation programme in place, that focusses on improving operational effectiveness and levels of service. By automating