<title>

BRIEFING PAPER

</title>

<subtitle>

Student Oriented Administration

</subtitle>

Introduction

Institutional administration systems still, in many cases, play a role in defining the characteristics of distance programmes they support. This may be deliberate, accidental or unfortunate. Part of the evidence for making this claim lies in the fact that many distance programmes are still very much tied to the need to involve a tutor (increasingly on-line), involve the student in a cohort, have them start at one of two dates each year, or insist they buy into the whole programme up front. Many students actually choose distance learning to break from many of these characteristics and to take up a flexible option that adapts to their circumstances, i.e. they want self-directed distance learning.

Of course, many programmes are deliberately designed to include tutoring, perhaps on a cohort basis, but many more run with this lack of flexibility built in because their support systems do not permit otherwise. In other words, distance learning is, by necessity, often run to suit the deficiencies of a campus-based administration. This is certainly true in some of our higher education establishments, and it is also true in many professional associations that operate traditional, and often quite inflexible, members' databases.

One big attraction of distance learning is that it should offer **much greater flexibility** of study than traditional on-campus programmes. This means the flexibility to start study at any time, to regulate the quantity of study at any point in time, to timetable the courses and exams on a personal basis, and to be involved, or not, in collaboration with tutors and fellow students. In short, distance learning should be able to be tailored by the individual, and it should be free of unnecessary institutionally-imposed restrictions. Lack of administrative flexibility imposes unwanted restrictions.

Student oriented administration: What is it?

CAPDM Ltd. was a spin out of the larger group who developed the on-line distance MBA programme at Heriot-Watt University, in Edinburgh. At the launch of that product, late 1990, there was no flexibility in the then university administrative systems, but we were determined to build into the new distance MBA programme the ability for students to determine their own study patterns, including the ability to begin study at any point in the year. This, and the many other 'business driven' administrative needs, just did not feature in the institutional view of administration. These needs included:

- Courses within a programme would be sold modularly;
- Global external examination centres would be set up and managed;
- Student communication would be supported via couriers and mail;
- Learning content, and language variants, would be formally managed in an information environment;
- Ad hoc information requests for management decision making needs had to be well supported.

CAPDM Ltd.

One cannot also overlook the needs and workings of the Finance Department. One of their great problems is invoice chasing. If this is a predictable problem then ideally it should be avoided and replaced with and efficient alternative. The airline industry has streamlined itself to allow instant look-up and booking of flights, so why not let students pay for immediate access to a programme of study (provided their credit card clears of course). One senior management accountant of a university earmarked an afternoon to talk about invoice chasing, and how it should be handled it. The discussion only lasted two minutes – the time it took for him to understand that there wouldn't be any. The business model was designed to exclude this.

Many years ago we were presented with the challenge of developing the administrative systems for the Heriot-Watt MBA programme – now a substantial distance programme with over 11,800 students and 19,000 alumni - more than the on-campus numbers at that university. There was no option but to meet this challenge, as the business need was not supported by any alternative. The system which was designed and implemented, and is still the basis for administration of the distance MBA students today. It was entirely driven by the business processes. It did not inherit the baggage of traditional administration - it couldn't, as distance learning administrative requirements can be quite different from that of on-campus needs. Though large and quite complex, the system design and implementation did have some very simple, but wide reaching aims, including:

- A seamless, holistic design for the overall set of business processes;
- A mapping of this need to the contemporary capabilities provided by IT;
- A paperless operation;
- Easy grouping of students and bulk emailing/reporting;
- A total commitment to obviating the need for any valueless task, including filing;
- The need to act both as a record keeping system and as a highly function MIS system;
- Low cost, rapid development to meet business objectives;

and, of course, a student centred view of administration – not a course centred view (as some would suggest), or an institution centred view, but a student centred view.

How does this fit with the debate about the advantages and disadvantages of home-grown systems versus the off-the-shelf options? Where is the choice? If the need is bespoke, and when the solution can be a significant factor in gaining competitive advantage, there can be little point to battling to fit the need into an inappropriate framework. In this paper, we are promoting student orientated administration, not from some abstract third party perspective, but from past experience and success at it. There are many UK higher education failure stories about centralised administration initiatives – such as the MAC initiative – and one meets very few academics extolling the virtues of their institutional systems.

This is inappropriate in a business environment, and particularly one where changes have to be understood, interpreted and implemented rapidly.

Barriers

There are many technical barriers put in the way of innovative and highly functional administration, but these can all be overcome.

For example it is easy to achieve a paperless (internal) system as every bit of paper produced for a student, examination centre or whatever will have a reference on it. Paper has to be produced for students at some point, e.g. examination results, but that is straightforward. Bulk reports go to a printer and then to an envelope stuffing machine. However if we re-interpret the printing process, where every individual page of a bulk report is interpreted for its content – including reference number – then pages can be e-filed accordingly as part of the process.

This can also be done for the ad hoc, one-off letter sent to a student by doing similarly through standard tools such as Word. In a student orientated system correspondence from the student can be quickly scanned, e-filed in the right place (as the system knows about the student) and the original thrown away. The advantage that a truly paperless system offers is enormous – literally weeks of manual filing can be replaced by minutes of computer time. What's more; when the information is then needed all information is instantly available through standard desktop tools (web browsers) to everyone at all times. When processes that take unnecessary time and effort are replaced in this way, the time and cost savings become significant but the customer service is improved immeasurably.

Interestingly, one of the biggest integration challenges comes from email – a communication that is, by definition, electronic and paperless. However email is generally unstructured, uncontrollable and badly used. Some students will fire off an email rather than think for themselves, and it is a challenge to integrate the management and handling of email into the business processes and systems. After the initial tie up of an email to a student this process can be neatly integrated too, though it can be enhanced by judicious 'training' of the student.

The key is to understand how to integrate the business processes through a coherent IT strategy to produce a single system approach to all administrative needs. The temptation to buy disparate and very expensive systems and tools should be avoided. Many such systems are inadequate or worse still, a distraction because of their lack of difficulty to integrate with, usually because they have to be the dominant system. The only dominant system should be the one directly supporting the business need. Once integration is seen as central to the system – and efficient process implementation is mastered – then all sorts of extras become possible. You can go way beyond the traditional record keeping requirements. It is possible to combine functionality and ambition, for example to collect all examination results (every answer to every multi-choice question, etc) to build an integrated research database rich in data and in attributes. From

this same database statistical profiles of all questions can be generated – one of the many functions that continually ensure that quality improvement is always an issue.

Of course integration is relatively easy if you are always looking for it, willing to embrace it and knowledgeable enough to achieve it and this illustrates an important issue with student orientated administration – perhaps the most important point of all. Any administration system is only as good as the people who use it. It was vital therefore to communicate the goals and the principles behind the goals to the people who were going to use the systems otherwise they would not see the advantages to the business and to their working environment.

We often hear the statement: "you should involve the end user". This is a great aim, but if the end user is not able to see the big picture and not able to see where advantages can be gained then there is little to be achieved by doing this. If, however, they are capable, then there are big advantages to be gained. In moving to a student orientated administration system we found it highly advantageous to move to creating a student-orientated administrator.

In presenting this view there is one obvious change from the norm. We are talking here about systems that are designed firmly around the business needs and the interpretation of the implementation of these needs by knowledgeable IT people. It is not an interpretation dominated by administrators – they cannot be expected to know how to implement efficient systems and to achieve the benefits of today's technology.

Functions

In any system (distance and on-campus) there are a number of common functions, such as recording and maintaining:

- Student details:
  - Matriculation number, name, address, email, etc.
  - Previous qualifications
  - Agent information
- Programme and Course management:
  - Programme specification
  - Courses and options
  - Exemptions
  - Assessment and Examination make-up
- Course assignment and progression:
  - Register student on a course and track progress through assessments
  - Course examination and assessment management
  - Assessment scheduling
  - Assessment management

Distance programmes do have a particular set of needs, over and above that of the on-campus, for example:

- Student Communications
  - Paperless filing of all reports and communications
  - Grouping and bulk emailing capability
  - Assessment results
  - Academic and administrative support
  - Package tracking
- Tutor management
  - Assignment to a Tutor
  - Tutor assessment summaries
- External Agent management
  - Name and address, etc.
  - Approved tutor lists
- Payments
  - Fee and other payment structures
  - Course registration, including new student
  - Assessment payments

If all goes well then these processes can be readily handled. If there are many one-off exceptions, then either they have to be eliminated (i.e. the cause of exceptions dealt with) or there has to be some very slick processes in place to resolve them. The former is always better, and is always clearer for the student to understand and accept.

On-Line Distance Learning implies integration with a VLE

Today all students in higher education and many in professional associations, get some support through the institutional online learning environment (the VLE). In the case of on-line distance students almost all of their support is provided this way. Integration, therefore, includes integration with the VLE. Some institutions seem to find this difficult, but often because the two systems are managed by two different groups. There are obviously no technical barriers, so this is another lesson to be learned in the student orientated administration story. Since this combination now represents a managed learning environment (MLE), we might expect to see additional modules for VLE management, for example:

- New course instance setup;
- Student, tutor, other usage summaries;
- Revenue summaries;
- Agent breakdowns;
- Assessment summaries.

CAPDM Ltd.

We might also expect to see support for Marketing:

- Student source analysis;
- Promotion analysis;

though this clearly implies the need for departments to integrate in some way.

What we probably would not see is something that is close to our administrative hearts, namely course content management and administration:

- Domain and syllabus perspective for regular summary and review;
- Authoring management;
- Product releasing and distribution;
- Updating and revision tracking data management.

All of these management and administrative processes should be part of the integrated whole – the MLE. It should therefore not be a surprise to find VLE management functions within the administration environment too.

Summary

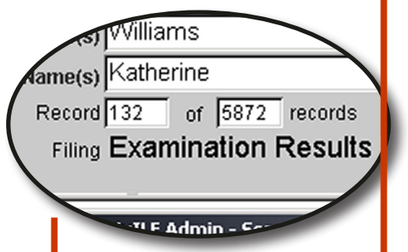
Student orientated administration represents a quite different view of administration from the norm, and provides significant benefits to an institution. However it does not come easy and it takes courage to make the decisions to commit to its implementation. As a result, the benefits offered are continually at risk of erosion. It is very easy for staff to 'go native', i.e. to revert back to the practices of 'traditional' administration, in which case all advantages are lost, more staff are needed to cope, and innovation is stifled.

Competitive advantage comes from flexible and efficient administration too, but it has to be worked at to maintain it, and it should be student oriented.

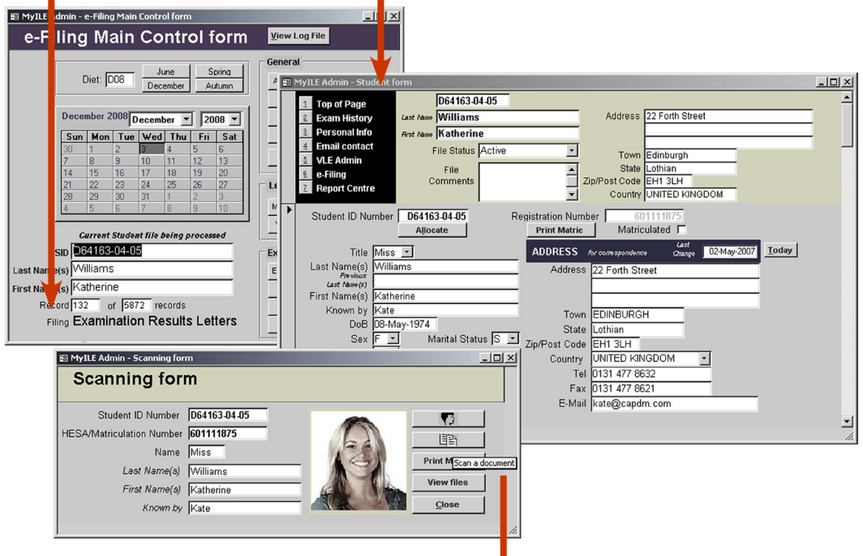
Example

The following screenshot collage is taken from a working administration environment, and highlights some of the key features that being student-oriented environment can offer. Modern computer **rapid application development** environments make implementing optimised administration systems like this much more affordable. The increasing standardisation of record data has enabled easier interchange and integration with other administration systems. This makes it much easier to implement some or all of the administration process support modularly, mitigating the need to have one "all controlling" and usually expensive administration system.

Student-oriented interface allows administrators direct access to what they need, when they need it. This could include access to "external" systems such as VLE, assessment engines, etc.



Electronic filing of 1000's of reports within minutes, saving days of manual effort. Doing so will help to meet data audit requirements as well as provide students access to letters via online services which speeds up correspondence and reduces potential administration issues when replacement documents are required.



Not all items that you need to deal with are electronic, e.g. letters, copies of certificates/ diplomas, etc. By integrating document control processes, including scanning, all e-documents are part of a fully integrated, paperless management system.

CAPDM Ltd.

Visit http://www.capdm.com/resources for more CAPDM briefing papers.

CAPDM Ltd.

22 Forth Street
Edinburgh
EH1 3LH
United Kingdom

capdm.com
enquiries@capdm.com
+44 (0)131 477 8630
@capdmltd