Framework for Academic Engagement in IT Projects

Overview
It has been argued that IT systems development at the University does not always meet the needs of the community. It is our view that structured engagement with the academic and student community during the development has the potential to greatly improve outcomes, particularly in cases where there are alternative potential approaches and a solution is likely to be unique to the University.

Approach
We suggest that these issues can be addressed by:

- Communication with the community at defined stages of projects.
- Consultation to test the value, understanding, and progress of projects against the needs of the community.
- The flexibility to change in response to feedback, and to not prematurely commit to the detail of larger deployments prior to validation.
- Clear ownership and lines of responsibility with the academic community of input into, and review and oversight of, IT developments.

Regarding communication, we suggest a matrix approach, in which a set of elementary issues is addressed at each of the stages of project development. Broadly, there are six stages:

- Conception (or determination that the project will proceed),
- Early validation (of concepts),
- Late validation (of implementation),
- Deployment,
- Post-deployment,
- Termination or de-commissioning.

At each stage, we suggest, a set of straightforward questions could be addressed:

- What the objective of the project is,
- Who is affected,
- What the narrative of the project is (that is, what is its scope, how it will be done, what the implications are of doing it or not doing it),
- Why it is necessary, minimal, and appropriate,
- When it will take place,
- What changes of practice will result.

It is our view that a communication strategy of this kind should have the dual benefit of helping to ensure that developments are effective, and of helping to persuade the academic community that the developments are valuable and necessary.

With the broad questions addressed, the community should have expectations around engagement and socialisation:

- How the communications are published and circulated,
- How users and owners are identified (that is, who needs to provide input),
- Understanding by academics that their engagement should be constructive, responsive, and focused,
- Understanding of what the community’s role in the development is,
- How loops will be closed after input and feedback are provided,
- How validation will be accomplished.
**Remarks**

We have no wish to erect bureaucratic barriers to development, and indeed want to encourage nimbleness and lightweight processes; nor do we expect an implausible level of clarity over aims and specifications (experience says this is unachievable and thus counterproductive). What we wish to do is help create transparency and to ensure that from an early stage solutions are on track to do what they are intended to do.

Many of the elements noted above are in place, but there are gaps. For example, there do not appear to be clear roles with academic ownership of IT: there are associate or assistant Deans (and so on) of other similar areas, but not of IT. Thus we are unsure as to how project proposals are initiated and considered, and by whom; and of what the faculty structures are that will enable reliable and appropriate communication and discussion of IT developments. Nor are we aware of formal mechanisms for feedback where systems are not meeting needs, or for ongoing monitoring of performance.

Communication mechanisms need not be limited to documents, web channels, and forums. Prototypes are a critical example that seems to have had low visibility in the University’s IT communication strategies, in particular low-fidelity prototypes that can be readily created and discarded. A related issue is that we should not assume that requirements are fixed (the rapid change in how our students access the University is a good example of why this is a fallacy), that requirements can be sufficiently captured in pre-implementation documentation, or that formal documents (potentially jargon-laden) will be consistently understood by both users and IT professionals.

There are cases where it appears that University developments have fallen short of goals and a plausible contributor is either lack of proper assessment of academic needs, or a lack of sufficient, and sufficiently early, engagement with likely users. Specific factors noted include lack of validation of the extent to which developers have understood academic needs, and lack of clear articulation and identification, at critical stages, of who would be affected, and how these communities might provide input into the project. It is our view that use of this framework should help prevent recurrence of such issues.

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