Park Lane College implements a Managed Learning Environment using JISC infoNet's Project Management Approach

Park Lane College decided recently to undertake a project to develop a Managed Learning Environment (MLE) and wanted to use a structured project management methodology. The college chose to use the methodology promoted by JISC infoNet in their Project Management infoKit (http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/InfoKits/project-management).

Cheryl Reynolds, a lecturer in Biology and the College MLE Manager, co-ordinates and manages the project. The Principal is sponsoring the project with the support of the Vice-Principal and the rest of the Senior Management Team. The Sponsor has given his personal support to the project and is committed to helping clear any internal barriers, although there is a recognition that the project has to be within limited budgetary constraints. From the outset of the project the intention was that focus, commitment and support from the Project Sponsor would help maintain the Project's profile and would encourage colleagues in other areas of the College to get on board. The Project has no full-time allocation of staff resource so it is vital that time is spent as effectively as possible on various aspects of the Project.

Whilst Cheryl is the Manager of the Project she does not have line management responsibility for the team, a situation which can cause some challenges but is not unusual in the sector.

Park Lane College is the largest of the further education colleges in Leeds. It was given Beacon College status in 1999 and its most recent two Ofsted Inspection Reports have been outstanding.

There are approximately 3,200 students on full-time programmes, of whom nearly two-thirds are aged 16 to 18. There are in the region of 30,000 part-time students. The college offers a variety of provision including Higher Education courses. The college's mission is "...Enabling individuals and organisations to achieve their potential through quality education and training provision"

Project Documentation

"The project documentation has been really useful - it's helped people to think realistically and to temper 'wish lists'". Project Team member.

Cheryl completed a Project Initiation Document (PID) outlining the Project's objectives, scope, risks, organisation, control, reporting, stakeholders, and planning and presented it to the Senior Management Team. Feeding back on the experience Cheryl commented that she produced the PID in isolation and was very much in support of the JISC infoNet recommendation that the document should be written as a team – this would definitely be the approach she'd favour in future projects.

Cheryl found the Project Management infoKit very useful in providing pointers and giving templates for use on her Project. She also attended a Project Management Workshop delivered by JISC infoNet early on in the Project. She used the infoKit templates for her project documentation and was generally impressed with them.

She suggested that others within the College would find the infoKit very useful, however, it became apparent that, due to other commitments colleagues were suggesting that they did not have the time to familiarise themselves with the infoKit. This was a shame as JISC infoKits are specifically designed so that they can be easily read in 'bite-size portions' and therefore Cheryl's colleagues may well have found on closer inspection that familiarising themselves with the Kit was not as onerous a task as they assumed it to be.

Project Development Plans were distributed to all department heads with the request that they be completed with information on objectives, scope and risks. This information was then co-ordinated by Cheryl. Future

planning was based around each department's development plan. The proformas were made available on the staff intranet and were also sent to all Heads of Department. This process was not an entire success. It is thought that this is due to lack of staff time available to allocate to the planning process or to the implementation of the plan. It was apparent that some of the staff involved viewed the planning process as burdensome and this meant that it hadn't been a successful way of stimulating progress. As a result of the mixed response Cheryl went back to the drawing board and produced a document that asked staff to sketch how they'd like their course to be structured on the MLE. Staff were much more amenable to these 'Project Outlines' and found them very useful, they also managed to avoid the potential pitfalls involved in producing 'wish lists'. The information gleaned from this exercise was then fed into more detailed plans. The Stakeholder Analysis was written as a combined effort by parties involved in the project. This was found to be a useful exercise, with positive feedback received.

> "*the stakeholder analysis gave me a chance to negotiate and agree the level of my contribution. Usually it's just assumed that you'll do whatever's asked of you. People don't always know what your job entails and they just bunch you together as techies. The network's nothing to do with me - I could say this at the start and it was recorded properly. Then if anyone asked me something that wasn't my job, I felt better about telling them so".* (Feedback from a Team Member).

Reactions to the project documentation generally differed amongst the ILT Champions. One person admitted that they

> "*didn't use the change request form at all. I just rang… (the Project Manager) up when I had a suggestion. Filling in an extra form would just take up more time".*

The documentation proved to be something of a stumbling block with a colleague,

> *"I think the documentation put me off. It just made me think that being an ILT champion is more trouble than it's worth".*

Another member of the team, after completion of their involvement in the project, claimed not to remember anything about the documentation and said*,*

> *"I don't feel like I was a part of the planning process at all"*

– although they had been a member of the team at the time.

And, whilst another Champion admitted that they'd "*leafed through'"* rather than read the Project Initiation Document – because *"it's too long"*, they did view the process as a whole as positive,

> *"I think the real benefit to me of that exercise was discussing parts of it in meetings. - like the roles of different people and the possible issues that might come up. At least it made us focus on the nuts and bolts. I think it was all reassuring because it meant we were planning things properly for a change".*

The Project Team

> *"Discussing the risks at the start was good. I could flag up problems without sounding negative, feeling that I was making a positive contribution to the process because I was helping to plan for eventualities. Before, I've said things in meetings that haven't been recorded and then when things go wrong, it's as if you didn't foresee it".* (former ILT Champion).

The College employed a delegation strategy with regard to managing the project, appointing a small team of committed subject experts "empowered to undertake work on behalf of the wider community". At the outset of the project this team would incorporate ILT Champions, the Network Team, Systems Developers, the Project Sponsor and the MLE Manager. There were originally 19 representatives, all from different Departments (the next level of organisation below 'Faculty' at the College). This structure was

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later rationalised to one representative from each of four of the faculties, along with three representatives from Adult and Community Education – 7 in total. Their role was to give the Departmental perspective on the implementation as well as taking back to the Faculty the knowledge and experience gained so that it could be cascaded throughout the Faculty. This approach was slightly changed later in the project – resourcing issues meant that the initial Champions were not able to meet more than once a term. The dissemination of good practice continued to be an important goal and this was supported by the Senior Management Team as the best way forward.

Project Controls

The Project Controls Database has proved to be a useful and well used tool throughout the progression of the project. At first the recording of issues was done by Cheryl but the Database was then rolled out to the whole of the Project Team giving them a resource that was straightforward to use and gave a snapshot at any time of the issues arising in the project. Technical developments planned for the year are documented in the database. The Controls Database also acts as a Journal of issues that have been dealt with and can be updated as and when particular progress is made. Whilst at the time of writing the database was used only for technical issues it was the intention that its use should be extended to also include curriculum issues and the wider project team were being encouraged to use the database accordingly.

To help promote the Database and encourage use of it it has been installed on the MLE for access by all Project Team members and is available, on request, to other interested (and appropriate) parties.

Members of the Team have reacted positively to the use of the database. The recording of issues had proved to be useful,

"You don't realise how far you've moved on unless you've recorded it. You forget it." (Team Member).

"The database was handy for recording issues".   This user did not use it as much as they felt they could have done due to a set-up issue (that was arguably quite straightforward to solve)

"I think I could have used it more consistently - sometimes I emailed (the Project Manager) instead because the icon was on the MLE homepage and I had to logon to the MLE before I could use it. It would have been better to have an icon on my desktop".

Another ILT Champion liked the structure of the database –

"I think the database is good as it keeps a log of the work done and it's not scattered about in different memos and emails."

The Team is looking at customisations of the Database to better suit developing requirements. Many of the JISC infoNet resources are designed so that such tailoring to meet the needs of individual projects is possible and, indeed, positively encouraged.

Staff Perspective

It was recognised that some staff felt vulnerable and unnerved by the introduction of both the Project and the technology it was introducing. The speed of change was disconcerting for some and there were real mixed feelings about the likely outcomes of the Project.

"Staff have to see the added value of the Project – so that it outweighs the struggle. This is still a sticky one as hearts and minds have not yet been won." (ILT Champion talking about the feelings of some staff 'on the floor'.)

There was, in some quarters, a

> "*fear of de-skilling amongst some staff with the introduction of e-learning – a lack of trust*".

The major resource missing in the project was identified as staff time. In recognition of this, staff were directed towards working on MLE projects as part of their 'Directed Scholarly Activity' – an annual two week period of remission for clearly defined projects.

According to one team member progress was a case of

> "*Chip, chip, drip, drip. Everything moves on so quickly.*"

Successful communication was vital, the staff (and the students) needed to be kept up to date with developments.

Staff Development

"We need to address the basics first". Project Team Member.

"It is important to excite students but we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that we also need to excite staff!" Project Team Member.

The importance of Staff Development has been recognised – not only in the use of the systems but in the actual Project Management approach. Staff Development sessions have been made available. Cheryl is available every Wednesday to support staff. The ICT Workshop staff who, until recently, supported student users are being trained in order to allow them to also support staff users of the MLE. It has been recognised that there are areas in which there is a lack of IT skills and resources generally amongst staff. An ILT skills audit has been conducted to establish training needs, and training sessions have been scheduled.

As a result of using a structured Project Management approach it became apparent to the college that facilities were required for those members of staff involved in a Project Team. The college has therefore made provision for a Staff Development Suite for use by project staff. The suite has 11 networked PCs, a Starboard and Projector, DVD, printer and radio mouse and keyboard and it opened in early 2005.

It has been recognised that there is some requirement for relevant Staff Development for HoDs and ILT Champion equivalents but this has been difficult to set in motion given time and budgetary constraints. There have, however, been nine training sessions scheduled for the first six months of 2005. These will be for Heads of Department and be used to initiate Departmental staff development plans. The programme of training sessions will be tailored to the needs of each department.

The challenges

There are a number of barriers to the successful completion of the project. One challenge involves perceptions on what the Project's about and why it is happening. Some members of the college are more enthusiastically supportive of the Project than others. This is a classic management of change issue, and can be seen time and again in organisations in all sectors.

As mentioned previously, the Park Lane project has no full-time staff resource input. Cheryl is a Project Manager working part-time on a Project with a team over which she has no authority, however regular feedback to the Senior Management Team on progress has enabled staff to be encouraged further to be involved.

There are limited time, staff and financial resources available at Park Lane. Staff involved in the project are also involved in teaching, course administration and a variety of other tasks so their time can be very stretched. There is a need for further progress to be made in the expansion of the availability of resources. To meet some of the needs a request was made for faculty representatives to be given an afternoon each week – free of teaching commitments – so that they could focus on the project.

Whilst there was a will from the Senior Management Team for the Project to succeed and targets had been set for content to be in place on the MLE, there was a lack of buy-in from a small number of Heads of Department and this had an impact on the progress of the Project. It was suggested that buy-in needed to be linked to accountability and that the HoDs should be actively engaged in the process. With this in mind Cheryl drew up a schedule of meetings with individual Heads of Departments to encourage collaboration and progress on specific targets in relation to e-learning at the College.

IT resources are also lacking and, as previously mentioned, another big problem identified is lack of IT skills and resources generally amongst staff. One team member felt that whilst some rooms in the college were fitted to a very high IT specification they were not necessarily targeted correctly and that this provision could be exploited more effectively.

Progress of the MLE Project

Some delays were experienced with the implementation of the MLE due to technical difficulties. There have also been some staff changes within the college since the beginning of the Project which have had an effect on

progress.

The Principal of Park Lane has given an undertaking that 10% of provision should be available on the MLE by the end of the academic year 2004/05 - though defining exactly what this means in terms of amount of material available and the number of students using the system, has been one of the difficulties of the Project and one that has not yet been satisfactorily resolved. This target is something of a challenge given the resources available. Some faculties are making good progress towards the target, others less so. As previously mentioned this progress can depend as much on the will of the management in each area as anything else.

MLE Implementation Project Evaluation

Constant feedback and evaluation is available from the Faculty Champions and the users - both staff and students. Mid and end-of-year reports are completed every academic year. This will involve use of a Reporting Tool developed by systems developers to assess the number of courses serviced by the MLE, the amount of materials uploaded, the number of students supported on their course by the MLE and the extent of their MLE activity. There is also a qualitative review against pre-defined quality standards to assess the accessibility, content and presentation of the materials used. Cheryl will be responsible for carrying out the post-project evaluation in consultation with the faculty representatives and the Project Sponsor.

Feedback on the Project Management Approach

"You need clear objectives; you need the structure of a Project Management approach". (ILT Champion).

At the time of writing (early 2005) the Project at Park Lane College is continuing to work towards completion. During the progress of the Project at Park Lane it has become clear that using the JISC infoNet Project Management approach has resulted in a number of positive outcomes, for instance:

- Greater sharing and understanding of expectations between the Project Manager (Cheryl), as well as the faculty representatives, the Systems Development Team, the Network Team and the Project Sponsors (i.e. the Senior Management Team (SMT))
- Greater clarity around measures, timescales and critical success factors for the Project
- Improved focus for Project activities - priorities, responsibilities etc.
- Establishment of greater buy-in from the SMT
- A focused framework for the co-ordination of the Project – this has helped build confidence in the management and progress of the Project.

It is clear that from the outset of the Project the College has not always had all staff on board at all times, however the adoption of JISC infoNet's structured Project Management approach has helped support those involved in the Project and has helped bring focus to those with the enthusiasm and commitment available to complete the Project.