Building the business case for digitising the campus

Build it or buy it?

A myday White Paper

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Introduction

To be successful, academic institutions have to appeal to prospective students and be respected by employers. The changes made to higher and further education funding continue to drive requirements for improvements, however, said improvements need to be delivered on a budget.

There is undoubtedly a need to invest in developing new and innovative approaches to meet the future needs of students, employers and society. Yet there is also limited government funding, and not all establishments are able to borrow more.

External borrowing is projected to rise for universities and colleges in England and over the long term, institutions will need to maintain and grow their student numbers, including those from outside the EU, to fund increased investment. Consequently, universities and colleges will need to closely address student engagement and satisfaction to enable them to attract the numbers required for survival and success in an increasingly competitive market.

Many institutions already understand that digitising their campus via platforms such as myday deliver improved student engagement, both quickly and cost-effectively but often struggle to understand the full business case for outsourcing and due to this fail to successfully implement an in-house solution.

This white paper outlines the considerations for implementing your digital campus.
What are the main considerations when building the digital campus?

Not all education institutions are equal. Some have Russell Group status, some have access to funding that others don’t, some have small, but efficient IT departments that simply don’t have the capacity for large development projects - others have substantial resources at their disposal.

Whatever the institution and its status, all must make a choice when digitising their campus environments for students –

“Do we build it ourselves, or do we buy an existing solution?”

There are advantages and disadvantages to both. There is also a third consideration – a hybrid approach. Ultimately, most companies opt for a mixture of both in-house and out-sourced strategies. Deciding what your IT team focus on requires attention within four key areas:

1. Control over the finished product
2. Time required and speed of deployment
3. Resources and skills required to define and deliver a future roadmap.
4. Costs – immediate and ongoing

There are many points to note within each.
Control

Many senior leaders and project managers looking to implement their digital strategy will understand the need to be governed by appropriate controls and alerts. This is often thought easier to do by having all resources in-house.

“We want to develop it ourselves because then we have more ‘control’ over it.”

There are many elements to creating a digital campus and many elements of a project of this size to control. For example, “How do you know the current status of your project? How is the current status of the project communicated to your organisation’s management team? When do you introduce change or corrective action into the project based on the project’s current status? When do you decide to allow the project to continue “as is” with no changes being introduced?” (1)

Understanding what ‘controls’ or inputs you want and need are vital in order to understand how many of the responsibilities you need to be accountable for and more importantly how much of the task you can delegate.

There are many dangers to building your student platform using your own resources alone and potentially many lost hours to research and investigation. This requires full ownership of the roadmap to research, create and sustain.

Taking a hybrid approach enables you to optimise your IT resource. Outsourcing part or all of the project alleviates some of this pressure and allows staff to focus on their mission-critical tasks. Utilising the myday platform means time can be allocated to customising and building applications - with your own code. Time is then saved on initial research stages and timely ongoing maintenance. Change requests, changing priorities and keeping the platform relevant are all crucial to your institutions success and resource to accommodate this may not be within your budgets.

Students use a vast range of tools – including their own devices and services – and how they use these tools matters. Students need a flexible environment that lets them experiment and learn from each other. A 2014 JISC study found, “students appear to expect general technology provision to improve as they enter HE’ and there is a ‘steady transitioning of key technologies sliding from the category of ‘enhanced’ provision to ‘entitled’ provision.” (2)

Students expectations are increasing and expectations outside of the institution spill over into education, but regularly the vision or the ability of the institution to meet those expectations falls short. This is often due to a lack of strategy or a digital roadmap to follow. Ensuring you are ahead of the game helps meet those expectations sooner, and continue to meet them going forward.

myday customers are thankful for the months of time saved on research as Collabco’s knowledge has been gathered across many years and many educational institutions, and sharing that knowledge makes the product market leading. The myday solution is praised for its shared roadmap and the security of ongoing maintenance not being chargeable extras that you need factor into budget plans.

Having ‘control’ prevents learning from drawbacks. Implementing myday means you can control your future, be led by what’s already possible ensuring a quick speed of deployment and easy wins with your students.
Time

Speed of deployment is significant when deciding on your approach. Lead time is a primary factor when implementing a digital campus and ensuring that your student platform development is aligned to your academic year is critical to its success.

Developing your solution in-house requires you to correctly estimate the length of the project and all that it entails and people often underestimate the amount of time needed to implement projects, particularly when they’re not familiar with all that includes.

“Only 37% of teams in the U.K. reported completing projects on time” (3)

For instance, they may not take into account unexpected events or urgent high priority work; and they may fail to allow for the full complexity of the job. Clearly, this is likely to have serious negative consequences further down the line. Costly consequences.

When implementing myday, Collabco will assist on the project’s integration scope and pre-requisites and review the timeframes and tasks for the implementation in detail. You can expect to go-live within six months if not sooner. It can be done faster (and has been), and in some instances may take slightly longer based on the establishments request, but six months is a ‘best practice’ guide regardless of the size of the university or college, the number of campuses or users. This means that you can expect to start seeing a return on your investment within the same financial year. Pleasing key stakeholders and members of the SLT.

By comparison, leading a project of this nature without previous learnings will take considerably longer. Two years to design, plan, research, roadmap, develop, test, soft launch, tweak and go-live isn’t an overestimation and doesn’t take account of any unexpected set-backs encountered along the way.

Ongoing time also needs should be factored into budget requirements if you choose to build your own solution. Maintenance and delivering the future roadmap must be consistently delivered.

Time is a commodity. If you’re a small IT department with finite resources, then other projects that require your teams attention needs to be factored into your overall requirements and priorities.
Resources and skills

An in-house team project would require most of the following skills (all on-going) to take a digital campus project through to completion (assuming an establishment of approximately 5,000 students):

- A solutions architect
- Approximately four developers (front and back end)
- Server maintenance and support
- Server hardware
- Server software licences
- Maintenance/amends/updates

One of the biggest costs is that of a solutions architect. Finding that particular skill for many education institutions is difficult and expensive - it's a premium skill, and it's very much required in order to put in place the all-important roadmap.

Importantly a project manager must also give the team time to develop. Academic institutions with infinite resources suffer the consequences of staff turnover less but still benefit heavily from deploying these skills to 'value-added' components rather than building the platform itself.

“"The Project Manager must acquire suitable skills to firstly identify the skills required [and then] build the project team by motivating the team members by providing leadership and inspiration in order to achieve high performance in order to achieve the project's objectives.” (4)

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Costs

Control, time and resources all have cost implications. Many of which have been suggested throughout this white paper.

Every educational institute is different and every set of requirements for each digital campus will be individual. The below table provides a broad summary in terms of the resources and hardware needed in considering the costs for each scenario.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BUILD IT COSTS</th>
<th>BUY IT COSTS</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• A solutions architect</td>
<td>• Subscription price per FTE is between £1.10 and £2.80 depending on establishment**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg £47.50 per hour</td>
<td>• Onboarding is a one off implementation fee of £2,500 £10,000 depending on the requirements of the project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Pre- project consultancy (plan, design, research)</td>
<td>** Full subscription costs can be found on the GCloud10 framework. Please visit <a href="http://www.digitalmarketplace.service.gov.uk">www.digitalmarketplace.service.gov.uk</a> for full listing or contact Collabco directly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Approx. 300 hours</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Sever maintenance &amp; support</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Approx. 2 developers front end</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg £40.00 per hour</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Approx. 2 developers back end</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Avg £48.00 per hour</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Testing</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Server hardware</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Server software licenses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Support and enhancements</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>25% of 1 FTE</td>
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**SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

Collabco’s team has:
- A large and continual growing team of developers and testers
- Over 10 years of experience
- 24 hour support available
- Regular updates and full maintenance
- Highest levels of security boasting a 99.9% availability
Conclusion

Your decision on whether to ‘build or buy’ your student platform will ultimately come down to cost. Cost to build, affordability of the time taken from the initial investment made to the expected returns realised, and lastly, the ongoing maintenance expenses.

Infinite money and resources internally would enable a successful in-house implementation but would not seem prudent in today’s cost-cutting environment. It would still prove difficult, slow and be unproven in its objectives.

Buying a solution from a provider such as Collabco ensures swift delivery of a platform that is experienced and proven to meet student and staff expectations. It has been created from customer feedback over many years and provides access to a researched roadmap and a diverse and highly skilled team.

Taking a hybrid approach with a bought solution that is configurable enables your developers to deliver the value added components meaning you meet student expectations faster and continue to deliver on them addressing some of the most pertinent questions included within the National Student Survey.

Deliver your institution’s top priorities via a digital campus in a user friendly way.
Notes


2. "Incoming expectations of the digital environment formed at school", David White (University of the Arts London) Joanna Wild (Independent consultant), September 2014


4. “Project Managers – Developing your Project Team,” 2020projectmanagement.com

For more information on myday please visit www.myday.co.uk. Alternatively you can call 0845 050 7380 or contact Collabco by emailing info@collabco.co.uk