

"A good healthy dose of reality" - Delivering the mode two agenda at the Caledonian Business School: consultancy informing learning

1 Introduction

How to combine 'theory' and 'practice' was the issue for Dr Kevin Grant and Dr Peter Duncan (Division of Strategy, Innovation and Enterprise (SIE), Caledonian Business School, Glasgow Caledonian University) and Mr John Wright (Director of Knowledge Management and e-Health for NHS (National Health Service) Ayrshire and Arran), following a meeting about some work the University were doing for NHS Ayrshire and Arran. As the conversation progressed, it became clear the issue was concerned with how to establish a nexus between consultancy work and learning within a University. Following the discussion, the academics and practitioner developed a consultancy role-play based coursework assignment as part of a module entitled Strategic Information Management.

The Strategic Information Management module is a core Semester B subject for students undertaking the PgD/MSc Management of Information Systems (MIS), at the University; the PgD/MSc MIS is a deepening, specialist postgraduate level programme. The PgD/MSc MIS is part of the Caledonian Business School's strategic intention to provide cutting-edge programmes, ensuring that the learning environment is of direct benefit to career development for students. The MIS programme is designed for career preparation in a clearly defined type of job or profession, and to meet the need for dedicated and professional information systems managers who understand the interface between business, management and technology. The primary aim of the programme is to prepare individuals to be operationally effective in the specialist subject area, or as a preparation for an academic career in that subject area. The philosophy of the programme is based around the concept of a 'hybrid manager', someone who is a contemporary manager of information systems, who understands and is driven by the needs of the organisation, and not merely by the technology available to the organisation. They essentially operate as a 'bridge', via a set of activities relevant when developing the function of information systems, for linking and aligning business/organisational needs with the technological opportunities available and, ultimately, satisfying those needs in an appropriate manner.

2 The Strategic Information Management Module

The Strategic Information Management module focuses on the nexes between student learning and consultancy activity, and between theory into practice. The module is designed to equip students with the conceptual, theoretical and practical skills required to support and inform modern organisations in responding to new business/organisational opportunities available from the strategic, tactical and operational exploitation of information, systems and information systems.

The module is delivered via a one hour formal, interactive based lecture, followed by two hours of problem based inquiry activities, sessions and events. In addition there is directed reading (both provided and suggested), opportunities for personal reflection, online e-activities and student poster sessions.

The learning outcomes of the module are as follows:

1. Evaluate different methodologies for undertaking Strategic Information Systems Planning (SISP).
2. Critically assess the organisational and informational issues surrounding SISP.
3. Formulate relevant conceptual frameworks and tools for organisational analysis to support SISP.
4. Formulate relevant IS policy strategies to support business objectives.
5. Appreciate the complexity of policy implementation and evaluate implementation protocols and strategies.
6. Synthesise and evaluate appropriate strategic IT options for SISP.

In brief, the taught content of the module relates to: strategic information systems planning (SISP); information technology/information systems (IT/IS) strategic options (for example outsourcing and radio frequency identification (RFID) technology); IT/IS implementation; IT professionalism and governance; strategic analysis; organisational analysis; the IT/IS sector; IT/IS leadership; strategic IT/IS alignment; and the application of IT/IS systems to bring about change, value and transformation. A range of contexts are considered across the private and public sectors, for example, small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

One of the key aspects of the module is the intended development of key transferable skills, namely;

- Self management/independent learning skills (reflected in management of project work, e-seminars and directed learning activities);
- Learning skills (reflected in the use of library and online activities to support student-centred learning activity);
- Communication and dialogue skills (reflected in seminar discussions, group work and presentations and consultancy based activities);
- Reflective, analytical, and problem-solving skills (through analysis and discussion of published papers, case studies and consultancy based coursework);
- Evaluative, interpersonal communication, presentation and team working skills, commercial and academic writing skills (through the reflective research based coursework);
- IT skills (reflected in the use of the Internet, the Blackboard virtual learning environment and Web 2.0 technologies);
- Maturity of thought and managing a complex and complicated, highly political and sensitive area such as the National Health Service.

3 Underpinning regarding the Consultancy Process

The Strategic Information Management module itself did not teach the consultancy process, as this is undertaken by a sister module entitled Research Methods and Information Management Consultancy (RM and IMC). The RM and IMC module is undertaken in Semester B by all PgD/MSc MIS students. The module gives a judicious balance between developing students' understanding of, and competence in applying, research skills, approaches and frameworks (philosophies, methodologies and methods), coupled with several key consultancy frameworks

(Cope's 7 Cs, McKinsey's 7 Ss and so on) and the nature and application of the consultancy process (problem identification, client management, cultural and political awareness, exiting strategies, and so on). The consultancy element in the RM and IMC module is designed to support students entering the MSc phase of their studies (having completed the PgD 'taught' element), and who may wish to undertake an applied consultancy project rather than the more traditional dissertation.

The applied consultancy project involves a real organisation willing to allow the student significant access to investigate an emergent/existing problem faced by the organisation. The student adopts the role of a professional consultant with the intention of diagnosing the true extent of the problem and designing practicable solutions for the consideration of senior management. The applied consultancy project *report* constitutes the output from the conduct of such an investigation, which is presented in the style of a consultancy report but with due attention given to the academic requirements for the award of an MSc, in line with Glasgow Caledonian University's regulations.

The applied consultancy project report requires students to, inter alia: demonstrate an understanding of the case subject context and phenomenon/problem(s) investigated; be able to demonstrate detailed knowledge and understanding of the key body of theory and related core concepts, frameworks and issues that relate to the problem; be able to implement and defend their chosen consultancy approach; be able to demonstrate the ability to design creative, insightful, value-adding and practicable solutions to real organisational problems; and finally, be able to provide a reflective and, if possible, a reflexive awareness of personal development and learning, and maturity.

To help prepare students who might wish to undertake an applied consultancy project, the Strategic Information Management coursework allows students to 'role play' with an organisation (along with academic input), to see if the activity and experience of consultancy fits their character, personality and intended career pathway.

4 The Coursework

The Strategic Information Management 'role play' problem based case study coursework, was set within NHS Ayrshire and Arran's, e-health and knowledge management department. NHS Ayrshire and Arran provides a comprehensive range of high quality health services and healthcare to a population of around 367,000 people across a geographical area with differing health needs. The organisation is seeking innovative ways of developing e-health and knowledge management to enhance the service offered to patients. This complex and demanding organisational context provided students with a challenging and realistic assignment.

The coursework required students to act as a 'consultant' working for a well-respected global company specialising in providing (IT/IS) consulting services for a range of both public and private sector organisations. Their 'client' was Mr John Wright, the Director of E-Health and Knowledge Management of NHS Ayrshire and Arran Health Board. The 'consultancy brief' was to evaluate NHS Ayrshire and Arran's Information Management and Technology Strategy (IM & T Strategy) in terms of both its process and outcomes, and to highlight ways in which the strategy could be developed and enhanced for the future.

This brief required the students to reflect on the issues surrounding strategic information management in healthcare by evaluating NHS Ayrshire and Arran's Information Management and Technology (IM and T) Strategy. They considered the strategy in terms of its 'fitness for purpose' given the organisation's strategic goals and targets, some of which are set locally and others nationally. All corporate material was provided by NHS Ayrshire and Arran.

The students, many of whom are from the European Union and overseas (Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Poland, Macedonia and the Philippines), were required by the 'consultancy brief' to develop a *presentation* to be pitched at executive level - with Mr Wright (Director of E-health and Knowledge Management, NHS Ayrshire and Arran) as the eventual audience. In addition, students were to prepare a supporting written *narrative account* explaining and justifying their thinking, and their use and application of theory. This narrative had to give a robust defence and justification of their evaluation of the strategy, including their decisions and recommendations regarding the strategic alignment of existing technologies to the IM and T Strategy, and any suggestions made on the introduction of a range of 'newer' technologies to improve the delivery of health care.

5 Presentation to the Director of Knowledge Management and e-Health

The academic teaching team evaluated the presentation slides developed (40% weighting towards the coursework mark) and the narrative account (60% weighting). As part of the student learning process the two highest graded students, Ms Vlora Ademi and Ms Carren Ferrer (for the 2006-2007 session), were invited to present and explain their work to their student cohort, to show their approach and thinking. It was hoped that the two students reporting back to the cohort of students would allow those in the audience to reflect upon their submission and to determine why these students had been awarded the highest marks for this assignment. Mr Wright kindly agreed to attend this session to give a realistic critique of the students' work, and to offer some insights into the contemporary issues he and his organisation are currently dealing with, or have dealt with. Mr Wright also awarded each presenter a £50 book token, kindly sponsored by the Dean of the Caledonian Business School.

The constructive feedback provided by Mr Wright to the individuals presenting, and to the group as a whole, was insightful and enriching. This led to a substantive discussion in which the interactions between theory and practice, and the related realities, were explored - resulting in useful insights for all present. Mr Wright found the exercise to be of use and value to him and his strategic thinking, providing a 'critical friend's' view on the current strategy. In several cases Mr Wright found the suggestions provided by the students, based on their application of academic frameworks to practice, to be insightful and potentially useful when redeveloping future strategies and policies within NHS Ayrshire and Arran.

6 Applied Consultancy Project with NHS Ayrshire and Arran

One of the two student presenters was subsequently 'employed' as a consultant by NHS Ayrshire and Arran (as part of their MSc Management of Information Systems degree) when they opted to undertake the applied consultancy project for 'real', rather than the role play offered by the Strategic Information Management coursework.

The student's subsequent consultancy work was focused on a strategic review of the CHI project. The CHI project considers the utilisation of the Community Health Index (CHI) number on clinical communications within community-based services, including Allied Health Professionals (AHPs), nurses and multidisciplinary teams. The CHI project within NHS Ayrshire and Arran aims to achieve the target compliance of 97% CHI utilisation. A CHI number is a unique number assigned to each patient and its use provides considerable benefits for patients, clinical staff and public health. The student found the 'role play' coursework an ideal vehicle to develop their understanding of the size, complexity and scale of the Scottish NHS, and the use of information, systems and information systems allied to the strategic need for organisational change and transformation. As a result of this work many of the student's recommendations are now being followed by NHS Ayrshire and Arran.

Interestingly, as this case narrative draws to a close, as a result of the role play consultancy exercise (the coursework) and the MSc applied consultancy project option, the student concerned now works full time in a permanent paid post for a major consultancy firm in Europe. According to the student, this has come about due to the problem based consultancy exercises undertaken within the Caledonian Business School, as until then they had not consider a career as a consultant.

7 Conclusion

On reflection, the teaching team perceived that the Strategic Information Management coursework provided students with the opportunity to develop and enhance all of the transferable skills detailed in Section 2 above. In particular, the nature of the coursework significantly enhanced students' reflective, analytical, and problem-solving skills, their evaluative and commercial/academic writing and presentation skills, and their maturity of thought in relation to managing a complex, highly political and sensitive area such as the National Health Service.

Bringing this 'good healthy dose of reality' to the students' coursework has been one aspect of an on-going, mutually beneficial relationship between academics in the Division of SIE and practitioners at NHS Ayrshire and Arran, with both parties working in partnership, and in collaboration, on a range of initiatives. The relationship has benefited staff in SIE (with one of them acting as an advisor on the National Knowledge Management NHS strategy and another as a member of the national IT/IS professionalisation task force). Future students will also benefit as the Strategic Information Management teaching team are hoping to repeat the format of the coursework, especially given the recently published new E-health strategy for the whole of the United Kingdom NHS.

Finally, this case narrative shows how academics engaging in consultancy can inform and enrich the curricula and students' learning, and help students to achieve their personal and professional goals. It shows how consultancy engagement and the relationships and insights which emerge can, and does, add value to students' learning. In this case (via the coursework) the added value relates to providing students with the opportunity to develop, sharpen and enhance their key graduate skills of problem formulation, engagement with key theoretical concepts and core constructs investigated, and augment their understanding of how theory, practice and policy all intertwine and interplay - all set within a real, live, complex and ever changing environment.