

Bloomsbury LMS: development of a specification

Part 2 – Why?

(Especially if you're planning an open source solution?)

1. Context

In 2012 a group of the Bloomsbury Colleges and Senate House Library Services found they had a common vision for a 21st Century LMS shared service.

As captured in Part 1 of this case study, the project team worked through a robust but agile process of developing a Functional Specification – agreed and prioritised to suit all 6 consortia partners.

Part 2 of this case study is a more generic view on the purpose of a Functional Specification. This is at a time when possibly HE libraries are questioning their value in a marketplace where all next generation systems can claim to deliver the same functionality.

Checking the value is more than valid - the time, effort and commitment required to develop a Specification is significant. Even adapting another institution's or adopting something like the "Unified ('Next Generation') Library Resource Management System" still takes time to validate and tailor the content.

2. What is the purpose of a specification?

A 21st Century LMS is best seen in the setting of enterprise IT – part and parcel of the business and administration systems that underpin the purpose of a university.

A specification is not simply about the selection and tender process for a commercial supplier (whether for software, consultancy or other services).

The specification is an important part of any selection process, but offers far more to the institution in terms of a successful implementation and operational service.

Specifications underpin critical factors such as:

- Process mapping and understanding.
- Ownership and stakeholder engagement.
- Cultural change.
- Testing, above all.
- Acceptance and sign off.
- Operational services.

3. Does an open source solution need a specification?

Unequivocally, yes.

As above, specifications have a far wider role to play than basic selection of a new commercial system or service.

In some ways, the specification is more important as there may well be more development or implementation work to get an open source system fully operational. You as the owner of the system need to know your requirements inside out to make sure they work as

needed, or can be adapted within the constraints of the software – or developed using a third party product.

The benefits of having a specification as listed above are equally valid for open source, in particular:

- How do you know what to implement without having clearly unpicked critical processes?
- How do you know what to test?
- How will you be able to support the operational system?

You don't have the same safety net on the open source front that you have with a commercial system.

Commercial support and other services related to previous or next generation LMSs may be poor in reality, but you have a contract. In theory at least, there is legal comeback as a last resort.

That said, unless an institution is fortunate enough to have a full blown systems development capability, external support services in some form will be required for successful implementation of this enterprise solution. Even if that just takes the form of an IT contractor or three.

Once more the value of a specification comes into play – so all parties involved in developing the new system are working to the same script.

Open source or not.

Sharon Penfold
BLMS Project Manager
07/01/13 v1