

# Breaking the Ice: Organizational Culture and the Implementation of a Student Management System

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*This case explores the challenges of implementing an enterprise system (ES) across a university with a diverse organizational culture. This teaching case describes the process through which Southern University sought to implement the Delta student management system (SMS) and the challenges encountered due to the university's organizational culture. The project team ran into a change resistant culture with organizational units that enjoyed autonomy in their business processes. Rather than attend to various needs by customizing the system, the project team implemented a plain version of the system. Although this approach ensured the project team was able to complete the implementation on time and within budget, it left behind many dissatisfied users and organizational members, and created resistance within the organization toward the system. Therefore, this case provides opportunities for students to discuss the impact of organizational culture and user resistance on IS implementations as well as the merits and limitations of the strategies employed by the project team to ensure the new system was implemented on time and within budget.*

*Keywords: Academic Administration IS, Enterprise Systems, IS Implementation, Organizational Culture, User Resistance*

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## INTRODUCTION

This teaching case examines Southern University's implementation of the Delta student management system (SMS) and the challenges encountered due to the organization's culture. The Delta SMS was deemed a central system for the university and involved an organization-wide implementation effort. The university had recognized a need to replace its legacy system because the Vice-Chancellor at the time felt that he did not have the financial information needed to effectively run the university. The legacy system was also unstable and no longer cost effective to

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maintain, while the new Delta SMS could be expected to deliver an improved student experience, while automating enrollment and improving efficiency.

A steering committee was established to investigate possible options for the university and develop a request for proposal for system vendors. The committee then evaluated several different systems before selecting the Delta SMS as the preferred system. The proposal to implement the Delta SMS was drawn up, and in 2004, the decision made to go ahead and implement the system. In late 2004 the implementation began and the SMS went live in October 2005 in time for the new semester's enrollment. The project was wrapped up in 2006 and passed over to a team in the Student Administration department who were responsible for its ongoing management. A chronology of the Delta SMS implementation is presented in Table 1.

## **Organisational Background**

Southern University is an established university in Australasia with about 13,000 students. Approximately 11,000 of these students are undergraduates and the remaining 2,000 are post-graduates. The university offers degrees in Arts, Commerce, Education, Engineering, Fine Arts, Forestry, Law, Music and Science from its six major colleges and schools. Southern University is a public organization, funded by the national government. As such, the university operates under a governance structure that is different from most commercial organizations. The governing body of the university is the University Council which is advised on academic matters by the Academic Board, which, in turn, coordinates all of the academic affairs of the colleges, faculties and departments. The Budgetary Advisory Committee makes recommendations to the University Council and the Academic Board, while the Senior Management Team (SMT) is the advisory committee to the Vice-Chancellor.

The University is comprised of over 30 academic departments which are supported by various service units such as the Finance, Student Administration and IT departments. The Vice-Chancellor is the central authority figure, but most of the decision-making in the colleges, faculties and departments is left to unit heads to run their units as they wish. Where major decisions need to be made, a committee is often formed to discuss the decision and act as an advisory unit to a central decision maker. The result of this is a university which is very decentralized, collegial and consultative in its decision-making process.

## **Setting the Stage**

The Delta SMS shares many features with traditional enterprise systems (ES) which have been used by firms to centralize diverse systems into a single system and reduce the duplication of data. ES have become important for higher educational institutions because they can improve access to information, enhance workflow and efficiency, tighten control, streamline processes and integrate existing systems (Swartz & Ogill, 2001). For these reasons, ES have been very popular replacements for existing legacy systems (Kvavik, 2002) with Allison and Deblois (2008) reporting that ES have been among the top three issues for IT leaders in higher educational institutions since 2003. This is because ES projects are expensive, time-consuming affairs, where issues such as user training and business process modifications create many challenges for implementers. Given this, it is not surprising that there have been many reports of ES implementations that have not met their objectives (Salopek, 2001).

Organizational culture is a key factor in explaining ES success (Kayas et al., 2008) as some authors have argued that it is important to ensure fit between the ES and the organization's culture if there is to be a smooth implementation (Wang et al., 2006). Where there are differences in fit, resistance can occur as users oppose systems that may not meet their needs. User resistance has

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