



Selling University Goods & Services Online: The Online Store

White Paper
1st May 2008

For Universities wishing to sell their products and services online, the lack of a simple and flexible solution hinders the natural progression towards online payment processes. Where dozens of separate areas within the University all have their own existing product and service offerings, fulfilment and administration processes, the provision of a single system to cover all requirements becomes extremely expensive to set up and inefficient to maintain both in terms of time and cost.

The solution is a system that allows several separate implementations, extendable and flexible functionality and the ability to provide strictly controlled access on an individual user basis all through a single application.



THE CHALLENGES OF SELLING UNIVERSITY GOODS & SERVICES ONLINE

“Universities looking to sell products and services online face several significant challenges”

Universities looking to provide a solution to their schools, colleges, faculties and departments to collect payment and sell their products and services online face several significant challenges. These combined serve to hinder the successful implementation and institution-wide rollout of such a solution.

Traditionally One Size Doesn't Fit All

The principal issue is that the requirements for taking payments online varies between each potential user in the University, not least between selling physical products and collecting payment for services. Often each set of requirements already constitutes or has its own internal process. This can often be highlighted by looking in detail at the existing processes in place for providing short courses, conferences and events, merchandise and graduation ceremonies. Each of these areas potentially require different logic to restrict how much of or when an item can be purchased, what associated data is captured and how and to whom the information flows back upon completion of a payment.

This could easily result in a separate system and solution for each requirement and in many cases this is the status quo.

Who Pays for It?

The requirement for separate systems traditionally dictates a much higher overall set up and ongoing cost to an institution, as individual areas have to often “do their own thing”. This will often require resources from other departments such as Finance and Information Systems to set up a system and integrate with existing finance, student record or other existing central applications.

“Departments doing their own thing results in high costs per system for a relatively low income stream”

This model usually dictates that the costs are borne either by each individual area which is responsible for the provision of the products or services. The net result often being either a limited service offering due to limited budgets or a disproportionately high cost for a system that is achieving a relatively low income stream. These may also contribute to a reluctance to take the financial risk of developing or implementing a system and to change from existing processes even though these are largely manual, inefficient and provide an out-dated experience to the user.

Who Takes Care of It?

The administration and maintenance of a solution can have various pitfalls. Often a dedicated team are assigned, either in their own right or as part of their remit, to administer, support and maintain a system. Also providing first and second line support to internal users, if not actually carrying out the tasks themselves on behalf of users. This poses a significant problem in respect of both finding the resource in often already stretched areas and justifying the ongoing additional cost and commitment this represents.

Training

The higher education sector has often found itself in a position where it uses software that, although classified as being best of breed or at least well respected, was never designed for use within the sector. This often means overly cumbersome or inappropriate user interfaces that require a high level of individual user training to allow for their proper administration.

This can be extremely costly in terms of internal or external training for both time required and physical expense. If a single solution is required across the institution, training and associated time and cost requirements need to be kept minimal to ensure momentum and enthusiasm is kept by its users.

Reinventing the Wheel

It is tempting to pull together the individual requirements of all areas of the institution and to try to put together a single, all-encompassing solution. Inevitably this tends to spiral into a larger than envisaged project with initial estimates of time, cost and expectations all tending to suffer before a finalised solution is deployed.

As with any one-off development or implementation, the medium and longer term often means the solution becomes redundant and either has to be replaced or substantially updated, again at significant resource and financial cost.

WHY DOES THE ONLINE STORE HELP?

“The Online Store is a real option to roll out institution wide to all departments, faculties and schools”

Now One Size Does Fit All

The Online Store is much more than just a store. Firstly, its fundamental transactional model follows closely that of any well-known online retail website, ensuring users find it easy to use and purchase from. This includes having access to previous order data, storing multiple addresses and having a structured, intuitive checkout process. Secondly however, it has been designed from the ground up to provide a tailored solution for the higher education sector and address the specific challenges which different product and service offerings conjure up.

This means that it is a real option for an institution to purchase a single solution that can be rolled out across all its schools, faculties and departments. The Online Store, through the use of several core and task-specific modules, provides a solution which allows users to set up their own logic to restrict how much of or when an item can be purchased, what associated data is captured and how and to whom the information flows back upon completion of a payment. It also provides complete control of the administration and management reporting via a simple to use web-based interface.

One Solution, One Cost

With a single solution comes a single cost. The Online Store and its modules allow for a single set up and implementation cost which can be borne centrally or split across the interested parties. There is no limit on how many users within the University can make use of the store and this makes the solution all the more compelling with an extremely low cost per user.

“With a single set up cost and no limitations on the number of users, the store allows for easy budgeting”

The model used to charge for the annual product licence, hosting and maintenance of the product is also a flat fee that allows for easy budgeting with no transactional charges or other limits.

Minimal Central Support

The aim of the Online Store does not just cover the customer-facing functionality, but also the administrative elements of the system. While there will be a requirement for at least one member of internal staff to be fully trained and conversant with the basic system set up, the rest of the users need to have a much more limited knowledge to achieve product and order administration. Due to the store being hosted and maintained remotely by WPM, there is also no local hardware, software or dedicated staff requirement to ensure the system is available and current.

Training

The nature of the Online Store and its administration interface provide a number of specific and significant cost-saving benefits. Due to the web-based interface and the use of industry standards for the display and manipulation of data it is very easy even for a first-time user to get to grips with the system. Based on an intuitive design and user feedback, it focuses on providing several logical routes to find data.

The system provides automatically updated online user manuals and guides providing real-time help without the need to refer to an offline manual or help desk.

Full training is also provided both from the system administrator and user perspective; allowing one to focus on system set up and the other on customer, order and product administration. The appropriate training tools and aids are also provided to internally train further systems administrators and users as required.

A Tried, Tested and Constantly Evolving Solution

The Online Store provides a significant benefit over a bespoke solution that has been specifically developed or implemented for an institution. Due to its modular approach it succeeds in covering the majority of requirements, specifically tailored to the sector, with no requirement for bespoke development. Specific modules cater for specific needs and still, if a new as yet unsupported for requirement is found, an existing module can be improved or a bespoke module can be developed which neatly slots into the existing framework.

The system has been developed in conjunction with and for Universities and is completely focused on fulfilling their requirements. As the requirements evolve, so does the product offering. Due to the licensing model all upgrades are included in the annual fee meaning a clear, transparent and cost-efficient way of ensuring the products applicability for the future.

“As requirements evolve, so to does the product offering, and all upgrades are included in the annual fee meaning a cost effectient way of ensuring the products future applicability”

The Online Store was first launched in 2004 and has been adopted by over 30 higher education institutions including the Universities of Oxford, St Andrews, York, Birmingham and Liverpool.

“The Online Store is a central part of our future e-payment strategy with the focus being to provide a simple, efficient and stream-lined approach to processing payments on behalf of different areas within the University. The savings in time and resource are significant, from a process involving a huge number of low value transactions accumulating in an expected turnover in excess of £1 million over the next twelve months. We can only see these numbers increasing dramatically as the solution is made available to other areas of the University.”

Richard Shortland, Assistant Director of Finance, University of Birmingham