Topics for Consideration when Selecting an LA Vendor

1. Introduction

Some institutions may choose to drive their analytics strategy by purchasing a bespoke system from a third-party vendor. This resource offers guidance on some of the questions HEIs would be well-advised to explore when deciding whether to invest in a given platform. The document was compiled with the input of Irish HE staff with considerable experience in tendering for and implementing new systems, including LA systems.

2. Know what you want to achieve

- Have you decided *exactly* what you want to achieve?
- What is the timeline for the implementation (and can the vendor commit to meeting them?)
- Are your own systems in order?

The experts say:

"You should have a vision about what the longer term big picture is. Eat the elephant using small implementations but plan ahead to ensure that you don't run into road blocks or require significant reinvestment that could have been avoided.

Hindsight will always be 20:20 but a well-planned strategy should help you to make better decisions. Don't tie yourself up in knots trying to over think it though; our flexibility with the software and with the vendor has served us well. Your senior management also need to understand this. A good risk register is also essential."

3. Which vendor?

- Is this the first vendor you have met?
- Should you consider meeting others?

The experts say:

"Be brave if you can - maybe the new kid on the block has the better solution. Technology is moving all the time – the older, more established vendors may have the history but have they the right solution and will their processes keep up with your development trajectory?

Of course, you have to be mindful of risks associated with vendor collapse or vapourware but if you have the resources to partner up and be an early adopter with a vendor it may be the better solution for you."

4. How suitable is the platform to your aims?

- Does the software do exactly what you want it to do?
- If not, does the functionality offer sufficient other benefits to make proceeding worthwhile?

The experts say:

"Beware of alluring interfaces that look great but provide little or no useful information. Always be thinking 'How would we USE this?' "

5. Beware the small print

- Does the software meet your needs *now* or is it planned to do so in the future?

The experts say:

"Beware of false promises regardless of the size of vendor. Sometimes, their 'we have just what you're looking for' is only available in the US and, 3 years later, it's still not ready for your particular SIS or environment."

6. Cost/Budget

- How much have you allowed for this?
- What do you anticipate your overall spend will be?
- What are the iterative licence fees?
- What other costs exist (eg out of hours support, billing hours etc) and how much will these cost you?

The experts say:

"Make sure you know the costs associated with the full implementation. Additional costs for what you might consider basic services can mount up quickly"

7. Implementation/Support

- How long will it take for the new system to be up and running?
- What do *you* have to do? Is it an out of the box product that works relatively easily or is there a lot of work on the institutional side?
- End user training – who is responsible for training the staff who will be using the system?
- Does the supplier have a clearly-defined SLA?
- What iterative vendor support is provided?
- What is the expected response time to a query?
- What exactly is the vendor responsible for e.g backup of data, disaster recovery?

The experts say:

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"Check if the vendor has previously worked alongside another HEI using similar systems. If so, what were the lessons learnt, problems encountered etc? Liaise with the HEI in question to get some feedback.

Do site visits and listen to the users, not the techies or the senior management."

8. Compatibility

- How well will the software package Integrate with your existing systems?
- Do you need to buy an extra plug-in for it to talk to one of your systems?
- If you were planning on changing one of your platforms, will the systems still be able to communicate?
- Migration of data from your current system to the new platform – If you were changing your SIS, how would you import your current database into the new platform and ensure the data remains intact and accessible?
- Accessibility across multiple operating systems - Can the system be accessed from various platforms - Windows\Android\Apple device etc?

The experts say:

"Investing in an LA platform without exploring how it integrates with your existing systems is like planting a cactus in a rainforest; just because it looks good when viewed in isolation, does not mean it will be compatible with its new environment."