

MANAGING STUDENTS' OPTION CHOICES WITH TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract

This poster outlines the system which the Business School Undergraduate Programme has developed to manage the choice of options by students studying on its programmes. This involves the production of a networked computer package which presents students with the options available to them and leads them through the process of choosing their options on-line. The reasons for developing this system are outlined and the advantages which it has brought to the administration of large numbers of students are discussed.

Introduction

For many years Aston Business School's undergraduate degree programmes have depended on a complex network of optional and core modules. These are available to different groups of students on a series of degrees and in a variety of different combinations. The option scheme has allowed the School to maintain the flexibility of its offerings, thus strengthening traditional products like the BSc in Managerial and Administrative Studies (MAS), but also allowing new degrees to develop on the back of existing modules (for example, the introduction of MAS+6 in October 1996).

The Business School Undergraduate Programme runs around 150 modules. On the whole students study fixed packages in the first year of their studies. This has been designed to introduce students to as many of the main functions of management as possible so that they are as well informed as possible before making their option choices. During the second term of their first year the Programme runs weekly counselling sessions, each one presenting the modules available in a different subject area. (A typical programme for these Counselling Sessions can be found in **Figure 1**.) The sessions are supplemented by a Counselling Document which gives details of all the modules available and which are pre- or post-requisites for each degree, career of

professional accreditation. More recently a Counselling Fair has been introduced to help second year students to update their option choices for the final year. By the end of term 2 all first and second year students must have registered their choices.

The System

Until three years ago students registered for their options by filling in a form and bringing it to the Undergraduate Office. Once all choices had been received clerical staff entered the option codes into the Undergraduate Programme's computerised student record system. This was time-consuming and involved a great deal of paperwork. It was also not possible to carry out analyses of the options chosen to facilitate the production of timetabling, room booking and future deployment of academic staff resources.

The new computer program, written by Dr Paul Robins, has now been operating for three years. The program is written in dbase and is made available to all students via all the machines in the Business School's computer workshops and to Undergraduate Office staff on their own terminals. This has been possible to placing it on one of the School's file servers.

The Process

Having decided on the options they wish to take the following year, or when they return from placement, students go to the computer workshops to register their choice. Instructions on how to do this are contained in the Counselling Document (see Figure 2) and are also explained at the final Counselling session. It simply involves typing in a password to get into the system and then, as a security check, typing in their own SUN number in order to gain access. Having specified the programme they are on, their year of study and whether they will be going on placement, students will gain access to the list of core and optional modules available to them. By clicking on the modules they wish to study, as specified in Figure 2, students register their modules and these can be picked up in the Undergraduate Office.

Implications

The new option system has created a much more robust method of helping students to make their subject choice. The implications are as follows:

1. Students appear to find this way of choosing options user friendly. They make their choice on-line much more readily than handing in a form. There has thus been less chasing up of students who have not given their choices in.
2. The system is very dependent on the University network not breaking down. A few times no students have been able to register their options because of this.
3. The system will lend itself to being available via the University's new intranet and this will make the system much more accessible to students and staff.
4. The Undergraduate Office no longer has to type in the option choices. This saves a considerable amount of clerical staff time. The choices are easily transferred to the Undergraduate Programme Student Record System.
5. The package can produce lists of students by degree programme and the options which they have chosen. It can also produce 'clash lists' to facilitate the timetabling of lectures and examinations. Lists can also be produced showing the number of students on each taking degree taking each module. All these are invaluable for administering the Undergraduate Programme and in planning for the future.

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