

Transforming Student Administrative Services: Setting up the One Stop Centre for Students at Nanyang Technological University

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Change is a reality at any organization. Transformation can take any of the following forms: structural, functional, business process redesign, staffing and resource allocation, system and workflow reengineering, and development of information systems. The impetus for such transformations, be it trivial or vital, usually is external rather than internal and typically is regarded as a necessary evil. Yet the organization that refuses to embrace change risks becoming outdated and obsolete.

Change is always accompanied by challenges, including resistance, lack of conviction, low participation, high expectations, fear of loss and control of “territory,” inability to visualize the final outcome, skepticism, resource constraints, and uncertainty, to name just a few. Across any organization, regardless of its size, transformation is almost inevitably resisted.

Nanyang Technological University’s student administrative services were in need of transformation. Not only did the structures and functions within departments need to be altered, but the department-centric approach and mindset needed to be made *service*-centric. Rapid but comprehensive consolidation was necessary, as were new perspectives on service delivery and expanding horizons by leveraging technology. Transformation would result in greater opportunities for staff and would have a major im-

pact on the university. Staff, student, and parent responses to the transformations have been overwhelmingly positive.

CONTEXT FOR CHANGE

At most universities, units that serve students tend to be classic models of Weberian bureaucracy (Kvavik and Handberg 2000). Weber argued that bureaucracy is the most efficient and rational way in which to organize human activity and that systematic processes and organized hierarchies are necessary to maintain order and maximize efficiency. In modernity, however, bureaucracy has taken on negative connotations (Raadschelders 1998, p.142). A list of the many limitations of bureaucracies would include but certainly not be limited to their complexity, inefficiency, and inflexibility.

When units operate in silos, staff and student interaction eventually is compromised. The delivery of student services becomes both inefficient and costly with an over-emphasis on non-value added and outmoded manners of work involving unwanted resources. Units function as independent entities with different values, perspectives, and information, resulting in negative consequences for students. Instead, institutional units should act and function holistically as part of a united organization. Increasing opportunities for students to advocate for themselves,

decentralizing information, and providing a focal access point for students are the key factors for enhancing productivity and efficiency.

The Student Services Centre (SSC) at Nanyang Technological University housed the Office of Academic Services (the Registrar's Office), the Office of Admissions and Financial Aid, the Graduate Studies Office, the Office of Finance, the Career and Attachment Office, the Housing and Auxiliary Services Office, and the Student Affairs Office. Located on different levels of a six-story building, each office had its own front desk providing walk-in services to students; these operated independently of one another, with no mutual support. Another two offices—the Office of Global Education and Mobility and the IT service desk—were frequently visited by students but were located in other buildings remote from the SSC. Furthermore, the SSC was located away from the main academic complex and thus was inconvenient for students to access. Students had to spend significant time and effort traveling to and from departments on different levels and to various locations on campus to resolve their issues.

The NTU 2015 Master Plan identified the establishment of a One Stop Centre as a specific initiative. The centre would deliver high-quality, innovative and integrated student services in order to enhance all students' educational experience and foster their forming of a lifelong relationship with the university. The goal was to replace the department-centric mindset with a student-centric mindset. It was decided that university-wide student service delivery should be located near the student activities hub. The "one stop" concept was to consolidate services across several administrative departments and to make them readily available to students at a strategic and convenient location.

The One Stop Centre would also act as the nerve center and information counter for visitors with general inquiries about the university. It would demonstrate the university's commitment to excellence by professionally and politely serving students and visitors. Assistance and advice would be accurate and readily available. NTU's reputation among students and the public at large would be excellent.

CHALLENGES

All change poses challenges. In establishing a One Stop Centre at NTU, four key challenges had to be overcome:

- Gathering and optimizing resources to better manage service delivery;
- Aligning processes and achieving a seamless interface between front- and back-end services provided by all offices to ensure continuity, maximum efficacy, and minimal (or even the complete elimination of) service disruptions, with no lapses between them;
- Managing and meeting customers' expectations and demands; and
- Shaping the mindset of all involved to work toward a common goal/objective.

These challenges had the potential to affect the project timelines, schedules, and operations. Nevertheless, I maintained a positive attitude. As Winston said, "A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty" (Churchill n.d.).

- **Resources:** Resources are the backbone of an organization's success, capability, and functional strength. They include staffing, budget, and physical space, so it is not surprising that they should constitute a significant challenge. Redeploying resources from various administrative departments had to be carefully evaluated and tactfully executed. Service processes had to be re-engineered in order to remove non-value-adding works while minimizing resource consumption. This helped eliminate waste and resulted in some staff being transferred to the One Stop Centre to support its operations. One Stop is also a catalyst for rethinking staff assignments so as to maximize the benefit to the organization.
- **Alignment and Interface:** Because all front-counter services at the SSC would migrate to the One Stop Centre, sub-processes within service flows had to be streamlined in order to optimize and enhance the services being delivered. Non-value-adding or -contributing works had to be removed or simply rerouted through other processes. Services would become leaner, operate with fewer variations, be more efficient, and meet customers' needs. Given the radical redesign of service processes, products and services offered by One Stop are now standardized and well-integrated, and they champion new initiatives without compromising service levels.
- **Customers:** Approximately 90 percent of our customers are students. For that reason—and so we could understand their expectations of this project—we sought

feedback from student leadership groups. Some expressed clear expectations while others merely presented suggestions. Regardless, student input was collated and discussed. Students' perspective was varied: whereas some thought of the pending improvement as dramatic, others perceived it as incremental. Regardless, it was clear that establishing the One Stop Centre was a much-needed improvement for NTU.

■ **Mindset:** Implementing the One Stop Centre would result in a change of operating model. Staff who had been in the organization for a long time had become accustomed to a style of working and a certain tradition and were content (or at least familiar) with the then-current culture. Resistance to change had to be overcome through regular change management workshops, stakeholder meetings, and project discussions. It was imperative to communicate the vision so as to promote everyone's adoption of it.

Another One Stop initiative was to operate in a cashless environment. Although One Stop was designed to be cashless, cash transactions remain common elsewhere on campus, and this has resulted in some inconvenience to students and staff. It is worth noting, however, that the use of cash is decreasing as a result of the popularity of other payment modes, such as General Interbank Recurring Order, Telegraphic Transfer, and cheques. It was timely for NTU to use the advent of its One Stop Centre to promote awareness of the institutional goal of becoming a cashless campus.

Other education institutions worldwide are also seeking to become cashless campuses. (The government of Singapore is advocating for a cashless society, and many

One Stop serves as the benchmark for service excellence; providing leadership and guidance for undergraduate and post graduate students on all matters. It offers a wide array of seamless and integrated student services in areas of academic services, exam matters, admission and matriculation services, replacement of cards, financial aid, accommodation, insurance and medical claims, issuance of certificates and certification letters, document verification, lost and found, career guidance, general enquiries, and all payment issues. Overall, it serves as a focal point for financial transactions and all student-related matters.

believe that one day, electronic payments will displace cash completely.) It is imperative for NTU to prepare its students for related changes and to become familiar with other modes of cashless payments that have become common beyond the NTU campus.

Although it was challenging at the outset to promote the vision of becoming a cashless campus, it eventually became evident that such a transformation would have widespread benefits. The advantages of cashless transactions are tremendous; they include decreased risk related to the physical handling of cash, new technological advancements in the form of smart cards, and decreased service delivery time, among others.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Because the establishment of One Stop was a key strategic initiative for improving service delivery to NTU students, we sought to implement an end-to-end IT solution that would deliver high-quality, innovative and integrated student services. As a result, students' commitment and connectedness with the NTU would be further strengthened. It is worth noting that the IT system to support the business operations of One Stop is crucial; it ensures the full integration of all of the touch points through which students communicate their requests and queries to the administrative departments.

Creating the One Stop Centre was intended to achieve the following objectives:

- **Enhanced operational efficiency:** We sought to enhance administrative excellence through shared services that would decrease the human resources needed to support counter operations and that would improve business-user productivity and student satisfaction, particularly with regard to turn-around time.

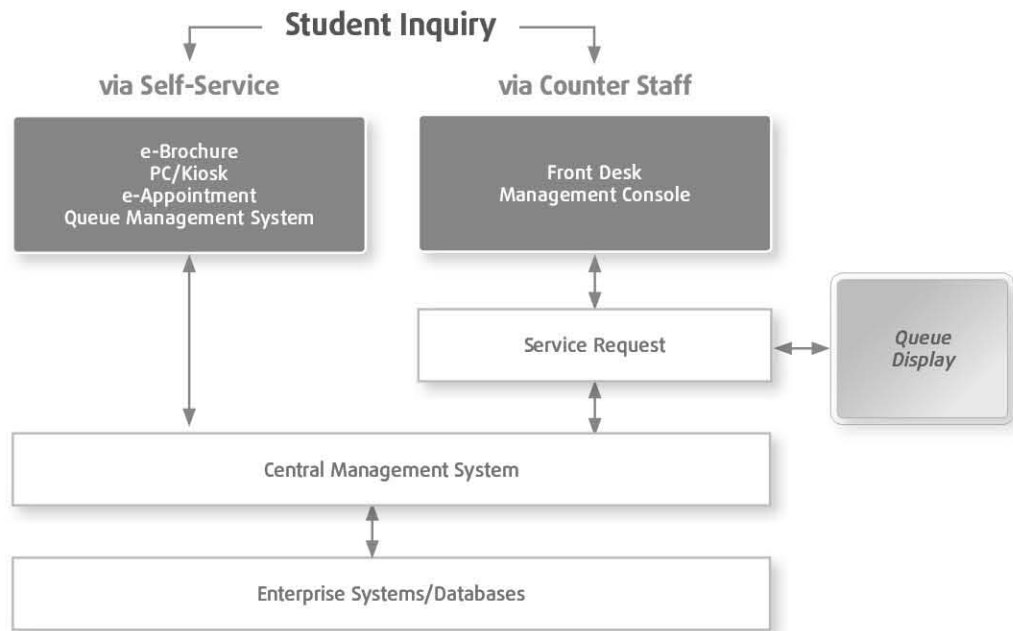


FIGURE 1. Overall IT Infrastructure

- Go cashless and paperless: We sought to promote a cashless culture campus-wide. Providing more on-line services would help reduce student demand for printing and thereby would support environmental sustainability.
- Accrue cost savings: We sought to derive cost savings by appropriately streamlining business processes and managing an efficient workforce.

We eliminated many redundancies and inconsistencies in processes and procedures during the phase devoted to streamlining processes. A Knowledge Library that includes checklists, FAQs, service catalogs, and support guides was created to support staff members' ability to respond accurately to a wide range of student requests.

The 'Central Console Management System' (CMS) tracks all student requests and thus is the core module of the IT solution. The system includes five customized workflows designed to increase service efficiency and delivery for faster turn-around. Different types of cases are routed automatically to support staff with the requisite skill sets for answering students' queries. The five work-

flows include payment, collection, application/submission, inquiries, and certification requests.

The overall features of one stop system architecture are as follows:

- The *Central Console Management System* consists of a Web portal that enables students to track their requests, thus allowing them to "self-help" in creating new requests and to get updates regarding existing cases. This added convenience also helps to reduce the need for physical visits and frees staff members' time so they can respond to more urgent requests at the physical location.
- When counter staff are not able to serve a student at the Centre, they can utilize the central *e-Appointment System* to schedule a time when the student can meet with the appropriate domain expert. The *e-Appointment System* works hand in hand with the *Central Console Management System* to allow the assignment of certain cases to a specialist (*i.e.*, a domain expert).
- Both the *Queue Management System* and the *Information Display System* handle the queue of student visitors (as, for example, for ticketing) and provide useful queue information to students waiting at the Centre.

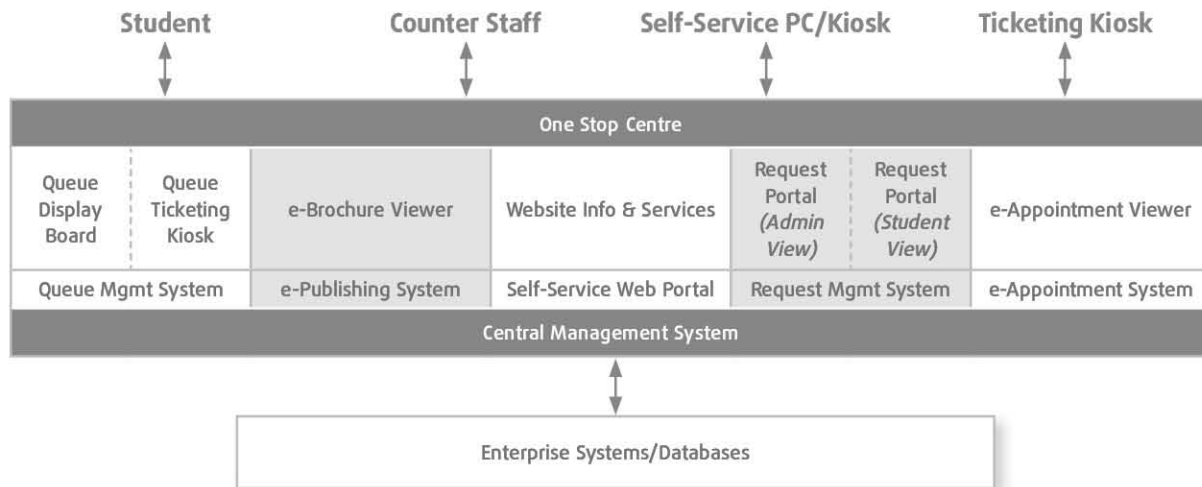


FIGURE 2. IT Interface

The Queue Management System also enables students to check their queue status through the Web portal so they can better manage their time.

- The *Central e-Brochure System* allows students to view information provided by the various departments about Exchange/Internship Programme details within NTU. The brochures are available via online portal as well as at self-service kiosks at various locations. A mobile app is also available so students can download information to their mobile devices.

The physical and virtual aspects of the One Stop Centre enhance the university’s responsiveness to its students and are more convenient for NTU students than what was available previously. This is one of the key initiatives related to NTU’s vision to be a world-class institute of higher learning.

ACHIEVING THE VISION

Although our primary goal was to administer better student services, numerous processes and workflows owned and controlled by other administrative departments were identified, analyzed, and rethought in order to fundamen-

tally improve NTU’s customer service. Technological advances have caused the world to shrink. Management and information systems and technology were critical in paving the way for innovative breakthroughs and refinement of business processes (particularly as compared to merely improvising using existing resources). Business processes were streamlined, and owners were taught to rethink and constantly strive toward redesign and integration so as to better support the organization’s mission as well as cost-reduction efforts.

New professional roles and functions had to be specified. Many more professionals were trained to multitask and to take on new and challenging assignments given their newfound ability to function in teams. The culture of service excellence was taught to all staff who was assigned to the One Stop Centre. They were cross-trained in many useful areas, including handling general inquiries, serving as customer service officers, learning new technology and systems, solving problems, and doubling as administrative officers (as needed). NTU’s customer service officers support One Stop’s operations; they are equipped with the attitudes, skills, and knowledge necessary to collaborate with

other departments so as to facilitate the “smooth flow” of processes and information even from back offices. The adage “Jack of all trades but master of none” no longer applies. (My own version of the adage as it pertains to the One Stop Centre is “Jack of many trades and master of at least one.”)

The first step in our creation of the One Stop Center was to acknowledge the importance and the need to reorganize student services. Promoting a ‘no wrong door’ philosophy while concurrently identifying gaps in staff members’ skill sets proved an important second step. The next big leap was to plan and implement the massive changes in business processes and technology. The ultimate vision of One Stop was—and is—to drive transformational change by serving as a catalyst for the elimination of gaps between processes and by allowing customers to access the Centre for all general services. Customer service professionals and customers can work together to combine their ideas and creativity; after all, the end user is responsible for the usage and management of personal data and now can engage discrete tasks simultaneously.

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About the Author

SARAVANAN is currently the Head of One Stop @ SAC in Nanyang Technological University (NTU). This is basically an integrated student services centre. Saravanan is the first to Head this Centre, which is also the first of its kind for NTU. Saravanan was the Project Manager and formed this Centre from scratch. This challenging project was undertaken to improve and enhance Student Life, and transform the way student services were delivered. Saravanan helped to streamline and consolidate a large number of administrative office functions and services provided across the University.

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