



# Getting the best out of your Student Management System

By Marc Washbourne

**M**any Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) will now be using a Student Management System (SMS) in one form or another. There are various software options available in the marketplace today, as discussed in a previous issue of this magazine, but regardless of the quality of the systems themselves, their use often produces varying degrees of success. I would like to share some advice on how to optimise the use of your system, ensure that it delivers a significant return on investment and wins you the competitive advantage.

Many RTOs only utilise the basic functions of their SMS, such as student enrolment and record keeping for AVETMISS claiming purposes. Others go further by tracking sales opportunities, resource management, timetabling and performance reporting however on the whole, I would estimate that most companies only use about 20% of the functionality available to them in the SMS. So, how far should you go in pursuit of quality and business improvement through the use of your SMS?

### Silver Bullet

Firstly, RTOs should not necessarily see a SMS as a silver bullet that can solve business problems just by turning it on. Instead, like most aspects of business, the more time and effort you invest into the use of your system, the greater the rewards will be. On the other hand, it may be dangerous to try to automate the entire business through software as it can become

a drain on resources and cumbersome when you wish to change course. It's vital to strike a balance between investing in the resources that underpin your business such as a SMS whilst getting on with running a successful training organisation. Even small investments can pay substantial dividends and how this effort versus reward can be measured.

### Quick Wins

Let's start by looking at some basic things that you can do to improve your business through your SMS. Firstly, you should aim to standardise your key processes and underpin the system with well understood procedures. For example, when a new student enrolls or completes their course, ensure you have a consistent approach for data entry and other tasks, such as AVETMISS claiming and printing certificates. You may choose to establish formal checklists and procedure guides and ensure that your staff are well versed in them. Additionally, some systems will actually automate these tasks for you at key milestones, such as automatically sending an email at enrolment, so you can 'set and forget'.

If you can save 15 minutes on every new student enrolment and you enrol 500 students per year, you effectively save over 15 days by standardising one task alone. By investing time in consistent system procedures, tasks are performed more rapidly or even automatically



and you can avoid the 'death by a thousand cuts' scenario that can creep up on businesses if inefficiencies become the norm.

### One-Stop Shop

A modern SMS should allow you to create a one-stop shop for information. If you have the right system, there are plenty of opportunities to eliminate the need to use other systems or spreadsheets and to deliver higher levels of efficiency by properly employing your software.

For example, make sure you take the time to load your standard letters and forms so they are available to authorised users in your system. Additionally, most systems can save you valuable searching time by allowing you to store course notes, policies and procedures in one centralised location.

Depending on the features available in your chosen SMS, it may be possible to standardise your data and even terminology in the system. Insist that all that important conversations and events are stored within the system in a consistent way, such as 'file noting', to minimise the risk of losing communication. This also helps reduce the risk of losing knowledge and information when a staff member leaves your company. Many of the systems available also include timetabling so you can co-ordinate your resources from a central point. Encourage staff to keep their to-do lists in the system and set ad hoc tasks for each other so that nobody "drops the ball".

It is amazing how much time and energy can be saved through accurate electronic recording of information and by employing consistent procedures for the major tasks in a business. When everyone is singing from the same song sheet, your business becomes more flexible and responsive to your customers' needs.

### Help Yourself

Across all industries, online customer self-service is becoming increasingly prevalent to the point where it has become an expected way to conduct business. This has been seized upon by smart training companies as an opportunity to offer better service and reduce long-term costs and staff administration time. Many SMSs offer access to online portals for students and employers to communicate with the training organisation, view course progress and payments and even upload documents such as student assignments. By allowing customers to self-serve in this way, an RTO can drastically reduce data entry for their administration team and cut down the number of time-consuming phone or email enquiries from customers. Some may cite the risk of removing the 'human' element from customer interaction, but this should be seen as an opportunity to reinvest the time saved in customers interactions that add true value and allow you to get down to the real business of training.

### Marching to the beat of the same drum

Training organisations commonly see tensions arising between the training and administration sides of the business. It can at times be difficult for trainers to communicate effectively with administration staff and for each to appreciate the other's role due to location or lack of visibility. If you face this challenge, you might look to your SMS to alleviate this tension. By granting your trainers proper access to the system so they can, for example, access course materials and view their timetable, they too can self-serve, reducing the need for assistance from administration staff. Furthermore, you may choose to allow the trainers to record data, such as marking attendance and grading their students thus reducing the paper chase and sharing information and workload. An electronic approach, used in the right way, can get your entire team marching to the beat of the same drum.

### Training and Housekeeping

As mentioned earlier, the success of the SMS is tied closely to those using it every day. Make sure you invest appropriate time to ensure your staff know how to operate the system inline with how you want the business to be run. We are all in the training business and know the return on investment that can be gained from the power of knowledge. Commonly, we see a staff member leave a training company taking with them valuable system knowledge, so take the time to train new staff either yourself or through the software vendor. Some systems are generally intuitive and you can teach yourself the basics, but there is still no substitute for formal training on using software. See your staff as the custodians of the data. A small investment of even half a day of training will often pay far greater dividends in a confident and competent software user.

Furthermore, seek to self-audit the processes you have put in place around the software. In my view, this is all too seldom performed on systems. A simple spot-check can be performed in minutes for potentially huge gains. There is nothing more frustrating for a manager than running a report which is misleading as the data has not been entered accurately or consistently by your staff. Make sure the procedures that you have put in place are being followed closely.

### Quality and Compliance

A key aspect of any system is legislative compliance and quality control. As a minimum, good systems will support compliance by producing the AVETMISS and other legislative reports. However, great systems will do more than just reporting. They will proactively alert you during enrolment (and other processes) of AVETMISS problems. This allows you to correct issues at the source rather than during reporting, saving valuable time and improving quality.

Standardising your business processes is essential to ensure that your customers are serviced to a consistently high standard. The better systems will provide mechanisms

to support this standardisation, such as automatically reminding students when assignments are due and standardising communication to ensure that all customers receive the correct professional documents.

The ability to measure quality should be seen as a key part of any management system. Look for the ability to support this by providing reports that monitor progress, providing metrics that identify issues early so that appropriate action can be taken and providing mechanisms that monitor and manage problem cases.

### Knowledge Mining

Good managers know that they cannot manage what they cannot measure.

Use systems to assist in managing your business by providing key statistics on how your business is travelling such as:

- Actual vs. projected income from invoices
- Actual vs. projected income from AVETMISS
- Student pipeline (progression of students from prospect to enrolment to completion)

When used effectively, your SMS can provide transparency to your key business processes and financial standing.

Furthermore, understanding your customers' interests and needs is a crucial aspect of marketing. The information stored in your system about prospective and past students can be used to specifically target these people during marketing campaigns. For example, if somebody has considered enrolling in a course, the next time it is available, proactively notify them that the course is being offered again.



### The Management Triangle

Overall, good investment and properly embracing your SMS can help you achieve something quite precious in business, as measured by the Management Triangle – increased quality, reduced costs, and increased business levels. Through a combination of the above practices, the long term impact and return on investment is too great to ignore. Think about measuring the cost of the Student Management Software and time invested in making it work for you in terms of the cumulative minutes and hours saved over years, as well as the improvements to quality and service. This goal does not have to be achieved overnight but through a sensible investment of resources. This approach can set you firmly on the way to business success.

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