

'CAKE' student consultancy projects at UWE Bristol – an introduction

Overview

Free consultancy is available to local organisations in exchange for hosting a small team of students learning on the job as part of their final year undergraduate degree at the University of the West of England, Bristol (UWE Bristol).

The scheme is core to the curriculum on UWE Bristol's BSc Information Technology Management for Business degree in our Department of Computer Science and Creative Technologies. Students take on consultancy projects via an academic module entitled "The Information Practitioner 3", focused on effective use of information and communications technologies (ICT) in their business contexts.

This guide introduces the scheme for prospective client organisations, as a summary of the full details available on our web site via www.uwe.ac.uk/et/cake. It's one of our '**CAKE**' (**C**ommunity **A**ction and **K**nowledge **E**xchange) schemes.

Please read on for an overview of how the scheme works, including examples of the sort of web development, software design, social media, feasibility study and other projects that client organisations can benefit from, and how to register your interest in getting involved.

Aims

The projects aim to provide for **client organisations**:

- A consultancy service spread over about five months, provided by a team of 4-5 near-graduates involved in the application of ICT in organisations. The nature of the consultancy varies with the business needs, but may involve:
 - either* a feasibility study and recommendations on future ICT use;
 - or* detailed analysis and design of a specific information system;
 - or* improvements to office systems;
 - or* piloting innovative approaches to marketing, communications, advocacy and grass-roots organisation using web tools, social media or mobile technologies;
 - or* web site design or review work;
 - or* enhancing organisational effectiveness by optimising non-computerised systems;
- training, discussion and increase in ICT awareness through discussion with University students (and staff), and greater insight into effective management of systems projects;
- fresh ideas and insight into progressing strategic objectives and organisational effectiveness.

The projects aim to provide for **students**:

- a practical, real world experience to complement their theoretical studies;
- an opportunity to apply theory and to reflect on the relationship between theory and practice;
- an opportunity to collaborate as a team of consultants working directly for a real client;
- an opportunity to complement the student's previous industrial placement experience (where applicable).

They also provide **University staff** with:

- an opportunity to increase their awareness of 'e-enabling' and information practice;
- an opportunity to maintain and develop links with local organisations;
- links with research interests and professional practice.

Process

Students work as consultants in teams of typically four or five, with University supervision and support. The projects begin around the end of October and run until March. Students devote up to half a day per week to this work although the actual effort varies.

Much of the work is carried out at the client's own premises at mutually agreed times, but after the early stages of the project, tasks are usually divided up amongst team members. This means that not all team members are always present at the same time each week. Some client work takes place at the University or elsewhere. Students also attend workshops in timetabled classes at UWE Bristol.

Project Timetable

All organisations interested in hosting a project are asked to complete an initial online application form (see deadline below).

Please note that over the last few years, competition has been keen and you may have to respond quickly to communications from us during processing and short-listing in September. A careful selection process operates, at the same time as tutors brief students initially. Short-listed organisations are expected to come along to project talks with students at UWE Bristol's Frenchay campus – dates and times are confirmed following shortlisting.

Projects are allocated and start soon after, then operate over the following phases:-

- **Initial analysis:** By the end of this preliminary phase, students should have achieved a sound understanding of the client organisation, explored your needs, opportunities, expectations and business priorities, discussed and identified project objectives, agreed written terms of reference and project deliverables, defined individual responsibilities within their teams and established a project plan (completion typically the end of November);
- **Project body and handover:** By the end of this second substantive phase of the project, all of the agreed client activities will be carried out and completed, and a final report, together with other agreed deliverables, submitted to the client including handover and follow-up recommendations (completed by mid-March);
- **Write-up:** By the end of this phase, students prepare an academic report to University tutors (by late April) and a poster exhibition takes place (in late May).

Students then take their final examinations. Clients are invited back to the University to take part in the exhibition, and contribute feedback, which is taken into account during assessment. Assessment of their project contributes 25% to most students' final year mark.

Project Management

A UWE Bristol tutor acts as academic supervisor, but student teams are expected to be largely self-managing. A project plan including a schedule of meetings is negotiated and agreed.

Students take on individual speciality areas of interest or expertise and delegated tasks. However, we also expect teamwork delegation not to reduce the overall coherency and direction of any project from a client perspective, so this is an area that tutors monitor carefully.

The University tutors are committed to a "customer care" policy that recognises that, as well as carrying out an applied teaching programme, we are providing a service. Part of the project supervision philosophy is therefore to help students build in quality and continuity considerations.

We have limited or no resources to support client organisations when projects end, but the project selection process considers management of risks like this – see “Key Considerations” below.

Responsibilities

The **student** team is expected to provide some or all of the following:

- documented and tested deliverables whose scope is negotiated in the initial analysis phase and defined in the agreed terms of reference;
- high standard written reports to the client as also defined in the agreed terms of reference;
- training, discussion and advice aimed at increasing awareness of and confidence in ICT, where appropriate to the agreed terms of reference.

In return, the **client** is expected to provide:

- a single contact person who will be involved in the project throughout its lifespan
- contact time with staff of up to a half day per week for up to 20 weeks
- access to relevant information and persons to support their project
- where possible, a contribution to travel expenses as appropriate
- written feedback on project outcomes, together with oral contributions as needed.

The **University** provides:

- supervision and support to students
- computing facilities where appropriate
- expert advice to student teams (and/or signposts to other sources of expertise and advice)

History and Examples

This consultancy project scheme dates back many years and has evolved considerably throughout. Clients have included community and voluntary organisations, small businesses and public sector organisations, based mostly in Bristol and the surrounding area.

Past projects have provided clients with advice on the introduction or development of ICT or broader aspects of information management. Many have involved tailor-made computer systems and work on Web technologies and networks. Recent projects include:-

- **Social Access** www.socialaccess.org.uk a team calling themselves “Quad Consultancy” produced a stakeholder database that can produce reports that the client can use to identify marketing patterns to inform resource allocations in their community transport work.
- **Cruse Bereavement Care** www.crusebristol.org.uk students worked on several small projects across a broad range of tasks, delivering an initial web site rebuild, contact database, file sharing advice and social media development work under the name ‘Innovo’.
- **Community Repaint** www.communityrepaint.org.uk this consultancy team extended and enhanced a major database to enable the organisation to process data faster and more efficiently.
- **Windmill Hill City Farm** <https://www.windmillhillcityfarm.org.uk> students build a multi-user web-based booking system, online payment processing and training for staff, which increased revenue for the farm.

Key Considerations

We view the consultancy scheme as a three-way working partnership, involving client organisations, the University and our students. This is usually a “win-win-win” arrangement, but there are inevitably some risks, for all three parties. All prospective clients are asked to consider actively some key issues and risk factors as a pre-requisite to a partnership with the students and us.

For example, managing the scope of the project so that neither students nor clients develop unreasonable expectations is a major consideration. In addition, it is easy to underestimate the time required for ICT changes to become sustainably embedded in the client organisation’s work routines and processes.

Furthermore, in cases where projects are located in organisations with little or no experience of ICT or the management of consultancy projects, a crucial issue (even at the start of the process) is **what happens when the student team finishes its project?** We may be able to help clients find follow-up expertise and support, and we assess student teams on their ability to build sustainability in to their work, but **continuity of input necessarily remains the client’s responsibility.**

Related to this, there is often a tension between the temptations of a ‘quick-fix’ solution and a longer-term, strategic, approach to ICT and its alignment with organisational objectives and business development. A partnership-based approach to these considerations is usually necessary.

Interested? What next?

If you are interested in finding out more, please go to www.uwe.ac.uk/et/cake and our criteria page and more past project examples. Then, if you would like your organisation to be considered for a project, complete our online application form.

The deadline for receipt of completed applications for the annual projects round is shown on the “Apply now” page on the above web site.

After the deadline, we will draw up a shortlist and contact you to discuss the possibility of working together, but please note that it is the students’ responsibility to negotiate and agree the terms of reference of their projects **with successful clients**, following project allocation and initial analysis. It is important for tutors not to pre-empt this at this stage, only to establish that initial ideas are broadly suitable for both your organisation and the students, and that the proposed partnership is mutually viable.

We are also developing additional ways of working with students in partnership with local organisations including those in the community and voluntary sectors and beyond. For example, we run IT volunteering schemes in partnership with UWE Bristol Volunteering. Applicants not successful for the Student Consultancy scheme may therefore be able to consider other forms of support.

Further information

Please see www.uwe.ac.uk/et/cake and study the details about the scheme (“Student Consultancy” section) before raising questions by phone or email. It is best to register your interest by applying online. This does not commit you formally to anything at this stage! We can then discuss eligibility, suitability, etc. later.

To find out more, contact our project team cake@uwe.ac.uk or speak to Corra Boushel 0117 3281598.

