

# CASE STUDY: EGRET

## INSTITUTIONALISING A LISTINGS SERVICE FOR INTELLECTUALLY STIMULATING TALKS, SEMINARS AND EVENTS IN CAMBRIDGE

### SUMMARY

The EGRET project successfully institutionalised Talks.cam, a user-generated content and events syndication system. Talks.cam was designed as a clearing house of user-generated event information, to help academics easily publicise seminars they organise, and to learn about intellectually stimulating events in Cambridge which they might be interested in.

From its origins as a grassroots software experiment created by academics, but with potential value to the whole institution, Talks.cam now has been successfully and completely absorbed into CARET, an innovation unit within the University which supports teaching, learning and research activity. This is an exemplar project, demonstrating the process of service handover, from initial idea to full institutional service.

### THE CHALLENGE

The challenges to the institution of institutionalising a software project are substantial where centralised control of IT and information is generally expected and services are initiated and developed within centralised IT systems as a rule.

Talks.cam broke this model, being a grass-roots development project initially, created by academics to meet a need they themselves perceived. As such, it broke several of the traditional tenets of institutional software design and development; it was not built by a central IT provider or with thought to an eventual place within institutional systems; it was not built following traditional “large IT system” planning and processes; it was not launched as a short formal pilot before a careful evaluation; it had no concepts of hierarchical authorisation or fitting into university structures: instead it allowed all users to be equal.

The Talks.cam creators identified their personal needs and rapidly prototyped a system which met them, deploying it on local computers which they had access to through their departmental computer officers. They shared the existence of the software with colleagues within their departments and across the university, allowing others to try the system out, give feedback, and therefore the system to be improved. There was no official support for the system, only that provided by the creators in their “own time.”

Usage grew through word of mouth, and Talks.cam was adopted by more users as the creators evangelised their system - a great deal of the take-up was simply because Talks.cam began to hold valuable information, and shared it in a very easy-to-use manner. Some departments and thematic research initiatives began to use Talks.cam wholeheartedly and provided some modest and fairly informal support to the system in terms of staff time.

In the long term, this was found not to be sustainable as Talks.cam grew popular and people began to depend on it, without realising in many cases that it was not a fully official and supported system. The EGRET project began shortly after the baton of Talks.cam was passed to CARET so that Talks could be institutionalised - a first for the University of Cambridge of this kind of process.

Talks.cam and the EGRET project therefore took a fresh view of the development of university administrative systems in terms of the processes used to develop software and roll it out to users. But Talks.cam also represented a first foray into the world of user-generated content systems for the university; a paradigm perhaps more familiar in the consumer systems of Web2.0 such as Flickr, YouTube, and so on.

The EGRET project has examined the implications of user-generated content, as Talks.cam moves from an unsupported system to an institutional one.

## THE SOLUTION

The Talks.cam system has been institutionalised at the University of Cambridge through adoption by CARET, an institutional IT innovation unit. CARET now offers operational running and maintenance of Talks.cam along with trained helpdesk staff, updated and maintained user documentation, and user training when required.

The project investigated the implications of this handover process, from small roots to a substantial, heavily used system which is close to a fully institutional system, and proposes framework guidelines for stages of institutionalisation of software projects of this ground-up type. Thus, EGRET has shown that this new model of software development within higher education has the potential to deliver genuinely useful and powerful applications, getting functionality to users more quickly than via conventional IT systems development, and also meeting more specific needs which might not fall within the purview of common IT provider organisation or university IT decision-makers.

## RESULTS AND BENEFITS

Talks.cam has been completely and successfully integrated into the institutional IT fabric of the University of Cambridge and, as a result, the usage of Talks.cam has grown and flourished both within the University and beyond, in the Cambridge area. The system's successful integration into the institutional IT infrastructure is illustrated by Talks.cam events information being included in over 40 different websites within the university, including high profile departmental web pages.

From the user perspective, the success of Talks.cam stems from its rapid uptake. To a great extent this is due to the simplicity of getting started with Talks.cam, whether as a talks attendee or a seminar series organiser - anyone can do this and there are no tedious authorisation checks. For a seminar attendee, though, the appeal of Talks.cam is the richness and completeness of the information on the site. Additionally, the ability of anyone to enter their event into the system was a strong motivator and thus, Talks.cam very rapidly became a useful, detailed and full resource.

The added value of Talks.cam to research is substantial. Researchers across conventional departmental and group boundaries can find seminars they are interested in wherever they might occur within the University, and through this can meet and get to know other academics with related interests. This is a huge improvement over the previous methods of publicising talks and lectures, which were rarely able to attract anyone outside the immediate department where they were held.

Outside Cambridge, the EGRET project has spurred interest in events syndication and the benefits this can bring to researchers and research outputs as a whole. As well as other universities and organisations (such as the British Neuroscience Association) expressing interest in getting Talks systems into other academic organisations, the project team are continuing to investigate how a national research seminar listings system might work.

## LESSONS LEARNED

The knowledge and the framework developed by the EGRET project offers support for Higher Education Institutions addressing issues relating to the institutionalisation of software projects. This work will allow more novel and useful software projects to be developed in ways which support eventual institutionalisation, permitting universities to benefit from their own innovations.

It is worth noting that a well understood institutionalisation process does not guarantee success of projects. Although some projects will successfully meet the criteria and move “onwards and upwards”, other software tools will fail to progress. This does not mean that these tools are lost; merely that they will remain in a less supported state, potentially with a set of happy users. It is important to see that this is part of a healthy evaluation of tools; not all software projects, even if much-loved within a niche, will be suitable or appropriate for full institutionalisation.

Software tools proposed for institutionalisation will always include a range of those which, with work, may make it; those which may look suitable but which settle at a lower stage of growth; and those which although their authors are passionate about them, may never achieve the requirements needed. A robust process framework is a key part of ensuring that universities are supporting the best applications only, and not committing resources to those of limited utility or high running cost.

Additionally, the EGRET project has fostered interest and confidence in user-generated content within an academic environment. At the University of Cambridge, Talks.cam is the first large scale system to rely on end users supplying accurate and useful information; it has given credibility to the idea of letting users take the lead on content creation.

The challenges of institutionalising an emergent software project are substantial but much better understood due to the outcomes from the EGRET project, although this comprehension will undoubtedly grow as further examples are encountered.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Further EGRET project reports, documentation and outputs are available from:  
<http://egret-project.blogspot.com/>

JISC IRET programme  
<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/emergetech.aspx>

JISC IRET supporting studies and synthesis project  
<http://jisciret.jiscinvolve.org/>

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