QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST

"WE'VE DEFINITELY RECEIVED RETURN ON OUR INVESTMENT IN COGNOS' TECHNOLOGY. THE ADMINISTRATION IS RUN MUCH MORE EFFICIENTLY NOW THAT STAFF CAN CONCENTRATE ON THEIR ACTUAL JOBS."

—ROBERT ROULSTON, HEAD OF ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT, QUEENS UNIVERSITY BELFAST.

In 1988, the UK Government set up an initiative for universities. It was called the Management and Administrative Computing (MAC) initiative and was implemented to improve the sharing of information and reports in this sector.

Universities were facing more and more demands for statistical information from various government bodies, all demanding different data at different times. However, the limited technology available made it difficult for them to keep up with the requests. The government therefore set up a scheme offering money to universities so they could invest in new systems. The aim of this was for the government to be able to monitor set performance indicators, to ensure universities were meeting required standards. Examples of these include pupil/teacher ratios and the amount of floor space per student.

Queen's University of Belfast adopted the scheme in 1989.

CHALLENGES FACED

Before becoming part of the MAC initiative, the university used an old ICL mainframe system. One of the issues it faced was freeing up access to all necessary information for its users. Administrative staff and faculty heads would require reports on different areas of the university, for example, course numbers or research success, and it took the IT team incredible amounts of time to provide this. This was due to them having to write the software, write the reports, collate the information, and try to turn them around within a deadline. They were never able to deliver on time.

"We wanted a tool that would enable us to give ownership back to the users. The way we were working just wasn't effective. We would write a report based on what the staff requested but, due to backlog and poor technology, it was six months down the line when they would finally receive it. By that time, chances were it wasn't relevant," said Robert Roulston, head of administrative support at Queen's University, Belfast.

The university also had problems tracking students throughout their careers: which courses were dropped, which were taken up, and whether students missed exams for medical reasons. All this was too time consuming to follow up after the event and used up far too much of the administrators' and professors' time.

The other issue faced was that, on a regular cycle, every academic was screened to find out what areas they were active in and how their faculty was performing. It was imperative the core systems were up-to-date.

SOLUTION CHOSEN

The university looked at five or six solutions, from all the large business intelligence vendors. After analyzing them, it chose Cognos Impromptu®.

"As you can imagine, with the exception of the IT team and some early adopters, the users had limited technical knowledge. Many of them wouldn't put sensible queries

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into the reporting system," commented Mr. Roulston. "If users were too vague, they were prompting the system to provide endless information, often causing the machine to crash. The Cognos business intelligence solution was guaranteed to prevent this from happening."

The Cognos solution provided users with access to information from their own desktops. The IT team was able to build a quick and efficient environment, enabling individuals to create reports without requiring constant IT support.

"We originally thought our users would like to write their own questions and report templates, but they ultimately proved that this wasn't of particular interest to them. The Cognos tool enabled us to develop a portfolio of standard reports which were then deployed across campus."

THE OUTCOME

The Cognos solution provided the administration, faculty instructors, and clerical staff with instant access to information as required—processes that in many cases used to take days to complete. "We've gone from having upwards of 200 reports on stationery and lined paper this time seven years ago, to having no paper anywhere—just reports available on request. This significantly cut down the stationery order for lined and headed paper, which is much appreciated by the finance department," commented Mr. Roulston.

The Cognos solution allows the university staff to monitor the progress of teachers against the criteria set by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). This ensures that standards are kept up to the required level and gives the QAA representative instant access to up-to-date records on performance.

Queen's feels that the users have now been empowered, as they have access to information whenever they want, rather than having to wait for the business cycle.

"All universities are subject to assessments by the QAA. This is where any faculty professor is liable for reviews on quality and performance from experts elsewhere. The agency assesses materials used, quality of pastoral care, pass/fail ratio, among other factors."

Now instead of the QAA naming particular subjects at review time, and the professors and administration staff having to spend valuable time pulling together reports, all areas can keep the required information up-to-date with very little effort. The information is then audited to ensure the department is running efficiently.

Another issue that was solved was student registration mix-ups. Many faculties have a complex course structure and for a variety of reasons they lose track of which students have dropped out of classes and which have joined. This used to cause a big problem for records. For example, a course could have 16 registered students but 23 people turning up.

There are also factors such as student excuses at exam time that need to be considered. If students provide a medical certificate, then they are exempt from exams. The university used to find it very difficult to keep an up-to-date record of these. Now, however, it keeps current, detailed records on all its students, with minimum effort from faculty staff.

"We've definitely received return on our investment in Cognos' technology. The administration is run much more efficiently now that staff can concentrate on their actual jobs," said Mr. Roulston.

TRAINING

The university trained 200 of its staff on the Cognos system but found that it was still too time consuming for the IT team to get around to all of them and put the tools on their desktops. To combat this, it moved to a solution where the IT team now controls the clients on the Citrix server. This is a central server, but allows the solution to run on each user's desk.

As the tools are simple to use, Cognos trained the IT staff who in turn trained the academic and administrative users.

FUTURE

The university is looking to roll out the Cognos solution in a number of different ways.

"We're already using it to help us be more targeted in our catchment areas. Previously, for example, we only had a gut feel of where our intake came from. Now we have exact postcode analysis and can target those areas for future students," said Mr. Roulston.

The university is also now looking to run the systems across the Web. This way, access will be even easier and it can start looking at cross-selling ideas with other universities on a regular basis.

In terms of security to prevent non-registered users accessing the solutions, each machine is password and location authenticated. Therefore only the person with the correct password, using the right machine, can access the solution.

The solution is also increasingly being used for estate management. For example, it allows the monitoring of vandalism across the various sites, by analyzing the number of windows broken into. It can also clearly show recruitment rates, retirement ages, and trends, highlighting where staff retention may be poor and needs addressing.

"We are looking to build on the Cognos solution we have in place by rolling it out across all departments. As a reporting and analysis tool, it's first rate," concluded Mr. Roulston.

WHY COGNOS?

Only Cognos delivers a complete range of integrated, scalable software for corporate performance management. Cognos products let organizations drive performance with enterprise planning and budgeting, monitor it with scorecarding, and understand it with business intelligence reporting and analysis. Founded in 1969, Cognos now serves more than 22,000 customers in over 135 countries.

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