

The Organisation

The University of Hertfordshire is a lively and diverse community of some 22,000 students and 2,000 staff based on two campuses in Hatfield, together with a small city centre site in St Albans. The university offers excellence in teaching and research, with undergraduate and postgraduate degrees and research opportunities in a wide range of subjects ranging from art, design, and humanities to business, health, engineering, and computing. High quality teaching is supported by outstanding study facilities. The state-of-the-art learning resources centres are open 24/7 and a groundbreaking student information system, StudyNet, provides online access to individual study resources and university information from anywhere in the world. In September 2003 the university's £120M de Havilland campus opened. The university's turnover is £160M per annum, including significant income through research and consultancy. In 2004 the university was awarded the Queen's Award for Enterprise for outstanding achievement in International Trade.

Web Reporting

In the late 1990s the university implemented a new integrated management information system. At this time, it was apparent that there was a need for a flexible and comprehensive reporting solution. "We considered a number of reporting options and applications, including Impromptu," said Joy Pears, Senior Computer Analyst. "After evaluating all the options, the university's MIS team felt that Cognos provided everything we needed and was the obvious solution."

The university went live with Impromptu Web Reports (IWR) in 2000, initially providing reports for the finance department, budget holders, the student admissions office, and admissions tutors. IWR is now an enterprise-wide deployment that provides management information from all the university's main operational systems.

The university's main focus to-date has been the delivery of standard reporting for management and administrative functions. The reports available currently serve a number of purposes. They go hand-in-hand with day-to-day

administration and management; they provide key statistical information and enable the monitoring of key criteria; and they highlight exceptional conditions.

Web reporting user numbers have grown steadily to reach over 500 users spread across 60 or so operational and academic departments. The MIS department drove this growth to a large extent, but consumer demand was also a factor.

"It is not unusual for users to introduce their colleagues to web reporting – who then, having seen it in action, quickly appreciate its benefits," commented Pears. "Over the next year or two we anticipate there will be more than 700 users."

The Benefits

"Impromptu Web Reporting is an all-round success story at the university," said Pears. "From the user's perspective, one of the biggest benefits is ease of use."

The experience at the university has been that users find the Upfront interface intuitive, and running and saving reports very straightforward. In addition, reports are delivered quickly to the user's desktop. Previously scheduled reports open almost instantaneously, and most interactive reports render in just one or two minutes.

From the MIS perspective, Series 7 reporting provides an efficient, flexible, and low-maintenance solution. Its zero footprint interface means that report consumers require no client software other than a web browser. In addition, the level of user support required is negligible. Every new user at the university receives a brief guide on using Upfront and running reports. There are also contacts within the MIS department to deal with queries, but in practice there are extremely few.

At the university, web report production is centralised, and therefore only a handful of Impromptu catalogues need to be maintained for all web reporting. It also ensures that reporting results are consistent across the university.

The Future

Like almost all other higher education institutions, the University of Hertfordshire has changed and developed considerably over the last decade or two. While



maintaining its focus on excellent education underpinned by a strong research ethos, the university has become a much more complex and diverse organisation – with numerous links, for example, with the local community, health authorities, commerce, and industry. In this context, business intelligence and effective corporate performance management are of crucial importance.

The university's strategy for the immediate future is twofold: to upgrade the Cognos Series 7 reporting installation to Cognos 8, and to extend its business intelligence capabilities.

“A key factor driving our decision to upgrade to Cognos 8 is the comprehensive functionality provided by Framework Manager – the metadata modelling component of Cognos 8,” commented Pears. “This will enable us to create a single definitive business model of our institution's data. This is a valuable resource in its own right, and says a lot about what makes any business ‘tick’. We also see a definitive business model as critical in terms of the delivery of high quality and consistent reports and analyses.”

In parallel with the migration to Cognos 8, the university is also conducting a business intelligence audit. It has two main objectives: to identify areas where information might be more efficiently processed, and to identify any potential for enhancing the monitoring of key performance targets. The findings of the audit will feed directly into the university's Cognos 8 implementation, which will be able to capitalize on the new software's extended capabilities.

“Cognos 8 is so much more than a database reporting tool,” said Pears. “It will transform our current managed reporting implementation. In the future, our Cognos users will be able to access not only the standard reports currently delivered via Series 7, but in addition, scorecard reports, dashboards, and tools for analysing data. Another key component of Cognos 8 we will be using is Event Studio. This will be used to track any significant changes to the operational data and automatically alert those who need to know (and need to act).”

Pears believes the gains from the completed implementation will be significant. “We are confident that the solution we are implementing has much to offer in terms of added value. Not only will it extend our BI capabilities, but information will be pushed out more proactively to those who need to know.”

The new Cognos software also enables a flexible solution, where business intelligence can be tailored to meet the requirements of individual users and groups.

When asked when the university's Cognos 8 implementation would be complete, Pears replied, “In one sense, there is no end point. No business, no institution in the higher education sector can afford to stand still, but must continuously evolve its corporate performance management strategy and constantly optimize its business intelligence.”