

UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN



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“COGNOS GIVES US THE FLEXIBILITY AND LEVEL OF DETAIL NEEDED TO PRODUCE ACCURATE DATA ON DEMAND.”

—ALAN JOHNSTONE, RESEARCH FINANCE MANAGER, UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

For leading UK universities, the complex mix of staff, students, equipment, and facilities has always presented a major challenge to financial managers. With the recent introduction of the nationwide *Transparency Review*—which links the possibility of additional government funding to increased levels of financial accountability—accurate financial planning has become critical.

But with a traditional approach to planning, the University of Aberdeen was anything but ready for the rigors of its upcoming Review. According to Irene Bews, Deputy Finance Director of the University, “Our planning process had traditionally been carried out using cumbersome spreadsheets that had been developed over many years. Remodeling of assumptions was causing us significant difficulty and was needlessly laborious. While we had a clear view of our income, detailed cost analysis was problematic.”

With the introduction of the Transparency Review, Bews and her colleagues felt the time was right to re-evaluate their planning process and see where improvements could be made.

COGNOS MARKET KNOWLEDGE KEY

Although they were approached by an assortment of vendors offering product demonstrations, University finance staff opted for a planning solution from Cognos. One of the key factors in their choice was the

in-depth knowledge Cognos was able to demonstrate. Says Bews, “We were most impressed by Cognos. They had a thorough understanding of the planning issues faced by universities and were also able to demonstrate the benefits we could expect to see as regards the Transparency Review.”

Adds Alan Johnstone, the University’s Research Finance Manager, “To be honest, we were expecting a mere sales pitch, but were pleasantly surprised by their informed approach, which gave Cognos real credibility.”

During the evaluation process, Cognos representatives claimed that the core planning model could be built within a week. Much to the surprise of University finance staff, the model was complete within two days, highlighting both the in-depth academic sector knowledge possessed by Cognos consultants and the rapid deployability of Cognos Enterprise Planning. Says Johnstone, “The Cognos consultant built our model from scratch in just two days and it worked exactly as he said it would.”

A TRANSFORMED PROCESS

Through the Cognos implementation, the University of Aberdeen has transformed its planning capabilities and enabled a smooth transition towards the rigours of the Transparency Review. According to Johnstone, “Calculations and reiterations can be performed in

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THE NEXT LEVEL OF PERFORMANCE™

minutes, where our old system would have fallen over from the strain! The system also gives us the flexibility to grow with ease. We are planning to model staff time allocation on top of costs, and this should only take one extra day from a Cognos consultant.”

“The new system really has delivered very significant benefits,” he continues, “colleagues at other universities who are using traditional spreadsheets are struggling under the requirements of the Transparency Review, while Cognos Enterprise Planning gives us the flexibility and level of detail needed to produce accurate data on demand.”

ENHANCED ACCESS AND INCREASED CREDIBILITY

At the University of Aberdeen, Cognos Enterprise Planning has greatly improved access to critical information. Says Johnstone, “Cognos speed and

flexibility means we can now provide a rapid response to requests for information from senior vice-principals, for the system provides a clear window on University finances. As management accounting and private sector practices become commonplace in the public sector, this ability has become vital.”

Another key benefit of the University’s Cognos implementation has been in the preparation of tender documents when bidding for externally-funded research. Such funding accounts for around 25 per cent of the annual University budget. “Using Cognos Enterprise Planning has greatly enhanced our credibility when applying for external research funding,” explains Johnstone. “The increased level of detail we can now provide really helps us present a well-rounded case and adds to our credibility. In an increasingly competitive marketplace, this is vital.”

UNIVERSITY PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

With the new Cognos system having gone live in March 2000, the University of Aberdeen is now looking to further extend the solution and reap additional benefits. Bews outlines immediate plans, “For our payroll planning model we intend to move away from a seven- year-old Lotus system—which has been causing us real headaches—to Cognos Enterprise Planning. Staffing commitments represent some 60 to 70 per cent of our expenditure and we have to monitor this very closely. Our old system was manually intense and hindered our ability to track and plan expenditure accurately. With Cognos we will have the facility to retrieve data from the payroll, incorporate changes into our main financial model, and examine their effects faculty by faculty. It will also allow us to model our future needs two or three years down the track.”

CLIENT PROFILE

The University of Aberdeen

One of the UK’s leading academic institutions with 3,500 staff, 11,500 students, and annual revenues of £115 million

Industry

Higher education

Geography

UK

Planning requirements

- Transparency Review preparation
- Detailed, accurate data for grant proposals
- Detailed cost analysis
- Rapid response to information requests
- HR system interconnectivity

Previous system

Lotus and Microsoft Excel spreadsheets

System solution

Cognos Enterprise Planning

Benefits

- Rapid deployment
- Improved speed and information access
- Greater insight into University finances
- Power and flexibility for complex modeling



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