

T R I B A L

Durham University – transforming student recruitment, engagement and retention with Tribal

CHALLENGE

With ambitious targets to transform the way it recruits and retains students – both domestic and international – Durham University needed to replace its spreadsheets and point solutions with a CRM platform that would support timely, relevant, targeted communications from pre-application support to post-enrolment.

SOLUTION

Providing a seamless process for capturing enquiries through to application and offer, Tribal's Student Marketing & Recruitment solution, which is based on Microsoft's Dynamics 365 and the Power Platform, enabled the university to drive recruitment conversion rates, improve student engagement and retain students.

Durham University is one of the world's leading centres of teaching and research excellence. Its collegiate system and dedication to helping students create and shape their individual student experience has attracted more than 18,000 students from diverse and different cultures. The institution has been a Tribal customer for 4 years, using its software and services to support and enhance the student journey from applicant to alumni.

Recently, the university started to implement Tribal's Marketing & Recruitment solution, with the aim of moving key student services to the cloud and standardising processes, starting with recruitment. The university's 'cloud-first' strategy recommends SaaS solutions wherever possible and implementing this CRM platform in the cloud would ensure that the latest functionality is always available to the university's Information Services, administration and teaching teams.

John Hemingway, appointed as CIO in 2019, has dual responsibility for the university's strategic direction and oversight of digital Information Services (IS), as well as directing the university's core IS provider and co-ordinating the others. He explains the decision to implement Tribal' solution:

“Ultimately Durham University was looking to meet ambitious recruitment targets that were only achievable if we had a platform that enabled growth plans through efficiency gains. The university is now positioned to achieve those growth targets in international markets, but of course, the world has since changed and this market is under unprecedented stress due to a global pandemic... Thankfully, with the move to the cloud comes resilience and availability.”

Proving crucial to operations and business continuity during the outbreak of Covid-19, the university's HR, payroll and recruitment, pre-enrolment, student management, administration and the entire Microsoft Office 365 suite including Teams are already in the cloud. John and his team are also now working to move the university's website to a cloud-based web CMS, with its Ellucian Student Information System (SIS) and finance system scheduled for migration to the cloud in 2020.

Accelerating CRM implementation to improve time to value

Prior to implementing Tribal's Marketing & Recruitment solution, Durham University had not deployed a CRM and instead managed its finely honed marketing, enquiries, application and enrolment processes with a combination of spreadsheets and point solutions.

Indeed, CRMs are a relatively new addition to the technology ecosystem for most universities. Whilst Dynamics 365 is widely considered a market-leading platform for nurturing leads and growing relationships, its generic 'out of the box' functionality does not lend itself to delivering immediate value in education settings – so partnering with Tribal was key to the success of the implementation.

“We've been working closely with Tribal to utilise their product knowledge of Dynamics – particularly around recruitment and pre-application support, implementing an agent portal, and integrating a third party product to facilitate event management... Now we can also manage our supply chain in the CRM, enabling us to recruit through agents. Our post-enrolment management piece and case management is next on our agenda, and apportioning support services will be key to its success.”

John Hemingway, CIO

Through the CRM, Durham has been able to implement a new agent portal, which has significantly improved the experience for agents who are supporting international recruitment programmes in increasingly competitive markets. Meanwhile, backwards integration into schools and schools liaisons is supporting its UK pipeline. Tribal's solution also gives the university campaign functionality to promote their open days, helping marketing teams to organise open day and recruitment events.

This step-change in functionality is proving critical to recruiting the next generation of students, where league tables, reputation, and student experience are all contributing factors to students' decisions about where they study. The capability to respond quickly with targeted and highly-personalised communications has transformed the way in which the university recruits, engages and retains students – but comes with a word of warning from John and his team:

“There is a lot of useful functionality in Dynamics 365, but if you surface the functionality too quickly - it will overwhelm people. Don't deploy it all at once with a 'big bang'. Gradually open up the potential of this platform in a safe way.”

John Hemingway, CIO

Results and learnings for other universities

Durham University moved into a live operation of Tribal's Marketing & recruitment solution in December 2019, and so it is still early in the journey to assess the extent of efficiencies and savings gained. However, feedback and early indications from stakeholders have been positive, with Registrar Michael Gilmore describing the deployment of Tribal's solution as 'transformational' to the way in which the university recruits.

Whilst Dynamics 365 technology has clearly been instrumental to the transformation, adapting business processes and preparing the business for change has been equally important in readying Durham University for new ways of working. John's recommendation for anyone considering embarking on deploying a CRM in the cloud is to prepare for the long journey ahead.

“At the beginning of your journey, accept it will be a long one, and allow time to understand and adapt to business change. For example, student recruitment targets change annually. How the IT function handles the change is really critical.”

John Hemingway, CIO

Unlike IT projects of the past, deploying a CRM in the cloud is not a 'one time job'.

“Just remember that when you go live, the job isn't done. It's simply the first phase milestone. For example, soon after go-live we had a mandatory Microsoft upgrade project to manage, plus the changes and ideas that have happened since go-live to implement, to improve applicant experience. The improvement cycle shouldn't stop.”

John Hemingway, CIO

Freeing the IT team from 'maintaining' the product is key, and shifts the function, enabling it to take a more strategic approach that considers and carefully controls the solutions' ability to flex capacity up and down.

“Cloud solutions aren't homogenous, so this can also prove unnecessarily expensive if your Central IT function isn't carefully managing what and how services are being ramped up and stood down.

John Hemingway, CIO

John's final piece of advice for other universities looking to transform Information Services by moving to the cloud is to ensure the digital strategy puts people – teaching and administration teams, and the students themselves – at the very heart of the process.

“You can't compel people to use a service. You have to make it good – so they don't want to look anywhere else. And I'm happy that Information Services at Durham has achieved that.”

John Hemingway, CIO

