Business challenge

University funding fluctuates with student enrolment and many other factors. How could LSBU gain the insight it needs to optimise resource planning and make prudent long-term investments?

Transformation

Working with IBM Business Partner Budgeting Solutions, LSBU enhanced its planning capabilities with IBM® Planning Analytics — empowering the finance team with more efficient forecasting processes.

Keith Would
Head of Financial
Planning and Reporting
London South Bank
University

Business benefits:

85%
faster monthly payroll planning processes

93%
faster to load annual budget into accounting systems

Boosts
flexibility, enabling anytime, anywhere access to planning data

London South Bank University

Drives educational excellence with smart financial planning

Established in 1892, London South Bank University is a cosmopolitan university with over 18,000 students drawn from more than 130 countries. In recent years, the University has been awarded Silver for teaching excellence under the Government's Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and recognised as the Times Higher Education's Entrepreneurial (THES) University of the Year 2016.

"Equipped with the rich functionality of IBM Planning Analytics, we can help LSBU nurture academic achievement and invest in the future."

Keith Would
Head of Financial Planning and Reporting
London South Bank University

London South Bank University
EST 1892

Share this

Keeping track of student numbers

For many universities, a significant proportion of their budget is determined by the number of students enrolled on their courses during the academic year. Each year, the number of applicants for each course fluctuates, and student attrition rates can vary too, which poses a significant challenge for business planning. How can you ensure that you offer the right portfolio of courses to meet student demand? Are you employing the right number of academic staff to teach each course? What kind of facilities, equipment and other resources should you invest in? And how can you not only meet today's needs, but also secure a stable and successful future for the business?

The financial planning department at London South Bank University (LSBU) faced precisely this challenge: it wanted to find a smarter way to design and execute sustainable long-term financial strategies.

Keith Would, Head of Financial Planning and Reporting at LSBU, explains: "Efficient, effective financial reporting and forecasting is fundamental to LSBU's ability to make the best investments in its students, staff, and facilities. To help LSBU direct its resources, we use financial planning tools to track every aspect of university finance, including student numbers, staff payroll and CAPEX, as well as all of the University's additional costs."

Over time, LSBU found that the legacy forecasting systems it was using to track its key financial data no longer offered the flexibility, efficiency, capacity and functionality required.

Keith Would says: "When completing our budgeting cycle, we had to manually update around 20 different tools to ensure we produced student numbers and fee income information for different programs of study, including undergraduate or postgraduate courses and domestic and overseas students. This created a significant amount of time-consuming, manual effort for our team, and increased the scope for human error. As our needs grew, it was clear that the financial planning tool we were using didn't have the capacity to handle the amount of data we needed to build one consolidated budgeting model.

"While our legacy forecasting application allowed us to build individual tools for some systems such as the staff payroll, these tools were disparate and required us to extract and import information into different systems—a process which could sometimes take up to two days."

LSBU found that the labour-intensive, manual effort needed to support its financial planning systems took valuable time away from the finance team, affecting the team's ability to build more long term financial strategies.

Graduating to a new level of planning and forecasting

To transform its planning capabilities, LSBU worked with Budgeting Solutions to implement IBM Planning Analytics, running in the Cloud.

Keith Would adds: "We explored a number of solutions and consulted various business partners before we decided to work with Budgeting Solutions to deploy IBM Planning Analytics. We found that most companies seemed to be more interested in winning deals than helping us develop the functionality we needed. Budgeting Solutions stood out because they let the IBM solution speak for itself and helped us to kick-start our work developing customised tools with the solution straight away.

"LSBU's financial planning and reporting team believes that systems skills and knowledge should be built into the business, to ensure flexibility. We need to be able to make changes to our forecasting tools as required. And we need to know that the business is not tied into relying on consultants to update our systems, with all the costs that would entail.

"The beauty of IBM Planning Analytics is that it is relatively easy to learn and you don't need to be an IT expert to build tools with it.

"Budgeting Solutions understood the mindset of our financial planning and reporting team, and quickly realised which members of the team would be involved. They selected a consultant who they knew would be a good fit for what LSBU wanted rather than attempting to provide their own solution. LSBU were delighted with this approach and it enabled the financial planning and reporting team to learn how to use IBM Planning Analytics with just a handful of days of training."

"The ability to access IBM Planning Analytics from any device enables us to work on the move, spend more time with business users out in the field and work much more flexibly and productively."

Keith Would, Head of Financial Planning and Reporting, London South Bank University

Keith Would continues: "Budgeting Solutions not only helped us learn how to make the most out of the IBM solution, but also suggested different ways to structure our payroll planning systems much more efficiently and effectively. We only needed to spend a fraction of the usual budget on consultancy, and now we're fully self-sufficient with IBM Planning Analytics. The combination of the user-friendly software and great mentoring from Budgeting Solutions has added up to excellent value for money.

"Within just six months of implementing IBM Planning Analytics, we had built a comprehensive planning tool to help us forecast student numbers, staffing costs, and CAPEX. The solution also gives us an easy way to import and export data easily between IBM Planning Analytics and our Agresso accounting system, which saves significant amounts of time."

By choosing the cloud deployment option for IBM Planning Analytics, LSBU doesn't have to worry about installing, maintaining or upgrading the software. This helps to reduce total cost of ownership and increase flexibility.

"Our IT department recommended that we adopt the IBM solution as a cloud service," explains Keith Would. "It means that our team can work with IBM directly, and it reduces maintenance workload for our internal IT team. Throughout the implementation process and beyond, support from IBM has been good and they always quickly address our queries."

To help the financial planning team transfer data between different systems more easily, LSBU also utilises the IBM Planning Analytics for Microsoft Excel extension—enabling it to load budgets and forecasts from the IBM platform into its accounting solution seamlessly.

Investing in the future

With IBM Planning Analytics supporting its budgeting and planning process, LSBU has eliminated time-intensive manual tasks from its planning processes, empowered staff to work more flexibly, and gained new insights that will help it drive educational excellence in the future.

Keith Would explains: "Since we enhanced our planning and budgeting capabilities with IBM Planning Analytics, we have seen dramatic improvements in performance that help to make us more productive.

"With our legacy planning solution, it used to take at least a day to complete our payroll planning and to update our budget with monthly actuals. During this process, users would be locked out from accessing data, causing inconvenience and delays across the planning department. Now, IBM Planning Analytics completes the same workload in just under 60 minutes, cutting loading times by 85 percent.

"What's more, extracting data from our legacy system to import into our accounting system used to take two days; with IBM Planning Analytics we can do it in an hour. That's more than a 93 percent improvement, and it frees up a lot of time to work on more interesting and valuable aspects of the job.

"With these time savings, not to mention the fact that we no longer have to spend large amounts of time managing multiple spreadsheets, the financial planning and reporting team are able to be much more productive. The ability to access IBM Planning Analytics from any device enables us to work on the move, spend more time with users out in the business, and work much more flexibly and add more value."

IBM Planning Analytics is also helping LSBU to develop its approach to budgeting and planning, as in-memory analytics and flexible capacity enables the university to process larger volumes of data.

Keith Would adds: "Because IBM Planning Analytics can handle large data sets, we have been able to extend the period of our forecasting across a three- to five-year horizon. We can provide decision-makers with more insight into the impact of key investments further down the line—helping the university direct its resources to areas that will produce the most positive outcome.

"The versatility of the IBM solution has enabled us to apply planning and forecasting tools to different areas of the university, such as tracking staff-student contact hours, which helps each faculty to manage the workload of teaching staff across different course modules. We have also built a tool that helps researchers to accurately log the time they spend on their research projects—reducing the risk of issues during audit."

Keith Would concludes: "Each department in the university is becoming aware of just how powerful IBM Planning Analytics is, and we are receiving more requests to build tools that will help them to optimise efficiency. Equipped with the rich functionality of IBM Planning Analytics, we can help LSBU nurture academic achievement and invest in the future."

Take the next step

IBM Analytics offers one of the world's deepest and broadest analytics platform, domain and industry solutions that deliver new value to businesses, governments, and individuals. For more information about how IBM Analytics helps to transform industries and professions with data, visit ibm.com/analytics. Follow us on Twitter at @IBMAnalytics, on our blog at ibmbigdatahub.com and join the conversation #IBMAnalytics.

Budgeting Solutions is a recognised IBM Business Partner specialising in planning, budgeting, forecasting, consolidation, reporting, and analysis. It delivers a full range of services supported by strong financial acumen. To find out more, visit budgetingsolutions.co.uk

Connect with us