A unified back office for higher education excellence

Kingston University

'Unified' is the name for Kingston University's Unit4 enterprise resource planning (ERP) strategy. And with good reason. A single, complete view of core back office processes spanning finance, procurement, HR, payroll, and research planning is helping this higher education provider to drive efficiency, agility, and shared insights.

Unit4 frees Kingston University's administrative staff and faculty to achieve the best in education and research.

- Reduced month-end finance close from two weeks to a few days
- Cut data latency from up to one month to near real time
- Allows the university to understand people's skills and manage the allocation of courses
- Underpins an optimized resource allocation model for maximizing curriculum success

Data silos plague a top-40 UK university

Until recently, data silos were a common challenge for Kingston University. The higher education provider — ranked in the top 40 by the 2021 *Guardian UK University Guide* — was relying on multiple disparate systems for vital processes across finance, HR, payroll, and research funding.

Separate, disconnected data made it difficult for the university to see the overall picture, manage change, and maximize efficiency. Andrea Whiting, Systems Manager, says, "We used outdated accounting and HR software and a research system that relied on spreadsheets. Too much time and resources were wasted on manual tasks, connecting data and paper-based processes. It was difficult to make sense of the data. Our month-end, for example, took 10 days to close."

Industry
Higher education

Location
Kingston, UK

Size
Approx. 16,700 students and 1,900 staff

Product
Unit4 Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP)

Challenges

Replace legacy systems of siloed HR, finance, payroll, and other back office data. Disconnected, fragmented data demanded manual report generation and made it harder for the university to make decisions based on complete information.

Key metrics

SPEED

Cut month-end close from 10 days to 2 days

VISIBILITY

Unlocks complete financial insights, connected to the rest of the institution

"Unit4 represents a great step forward for the university. It liberates our people by automating manual tasks. Decision making is faster, easier, and more accurate. And our processes are far more efficient now, too."

Andrea Whiting
Systems Manager, Kingston University

Freeing resources for strategic tasks

'Unified' is the umbrella name for this ERP transformation strategy. Three years ago, the university went live on a single, connected, on-premise Unit4 platform comprising Financial Management, HR, Payroll, and Research, Costing & Pricing (RCP). "Unit4 represents a great step forward for the university. It liberates our people by automating manual tasks. Decision-making is faster, easier, and more accurate. And our processes are far more efficient now, too," says Andrea.

Their month-end close used to take 10 days, with another two weeks added for payslip integration. This meant that decisions made by the faculties could be based on month-old data. Now, the faculties use complete, real-time data with no delay. And they do it themselves without waiting for finance to submit the report.

The HR functionality is particularly impressive, according to Andrea, blending core HR with payroll, talent management, and finance integration, to create a 360-degree view of people. "From one system, we have central control over the recruitment to retirement spectrum – including profiles, payslips, time management, and training courses people have attended or are due to attend. That joined-up view enables us to support staff more closely and deliver a more engaging people experience."

Rapid resource allocation insight

This connected view has also enabled the creation of a resource allocation model (RAM), a methodology for determining the distribution of income and funding common for services. "Integration between Unit4 and our student information system allows us to identify how successful courses are – how many students are registered, the cost of delivering that course, attendance rates, etc. Armed with this insight, we can examine which courses to focus on in the future, versus courses we may retire."

Likewise, the Unit4 People Planner module is an efficient way to understand people's skills and manage the allocation of courses. Says Andrea, "Several faculties use People Planner through self-service. They can see the cost of hourly paid lecturers against the cost of full-time lecturers, which allows them to balance lectures with the appropriate teaching resources."

The self-service feature is equally valuable for procurement. Gone are the days when a departmental head filled out a paper form to order stationery. Now, in a few clicks, the order can be made against approved suppliers, with faculty heads and other budget stakeholders maintaining visibility and control over spending patterns and authorizations.

This automated, straight-forward processing also leads into another Unit4 benefit: the paperless work environment. The university is conscious of its environmental responsibilities, and the vast majority of payslips, reports, authorizations, and requests for leave are now electronic, accessible, and smart. "This paperless way of working was brought home to us the other day by an office move," says Andrea. "We discussed physical filing needs and questioned whether we actually needed any filing at all."

The user community is satisfied with the fast, granular insights, too. "In the past, when a budget holder had a finance query, they had to wade through lines of meaningless spreadsheet data in search of the answer. Now they can instantly drill down into the individual transaction, even seeing an image of the original invoice. They say to me, 'I don't remember approving that spend!' However, Unit4 always tells the truth."

UNIT4
In business for people