University of Southampton
enables rapid and agile changes to solve COVID-19 challenges

COVID-19 has represented a significant challenge for institutions worldwide—and this was no different for the University of Southampton. Faced with an environment where staff were working from home, and government guidance was rapidly changing, the university recognised it needed to act decisively to maintain essential processes while keeping students safe.

Working with Ellucian, its established student software provider, the University of Southampton harnessed the power of Ellucian's Banner platform to move key processes online, and thereby significantly reduce the need for face-to-face contact. This meant large on-campus events—identity checks, right to study checks, and graduate celebrations—could be hosted virtually.

The same technology also enabled secure and widespread take-up amongst students of a COVID-19 testing programme, run by the University of Southampton in partnership with Southampton City Council and the NHS.

A history of partnership

The University of Southampton has worked with Ellucian since 2001, using Banner technology across a range of student information systems. When COVID-19 hit, the University team was already working with Ellucian consultants on enhancing the existing modules of Banner.

These initiatives used Action Item Processing (AIP) and PageBuilder pages—key tools that ensured the university's response to COVID-19 was fast, agile, and effective.

AIP is an Ellucian Banner self-service application that helps institutions get the information they need from students. The application works in conjunction with Banner Communication Management and PageBuilder,

UNIVERSITY OF Southampton

CASE STUDY

Enrolment: 22,000

Objective: To move key processes online and reduce the need for face-to-face contact during the pandemic

Solutions
- Ellucian Banner
- Action Item Processing (AIP)
- Banner Communication Management
- PageBuilder

Business benefits
- Increased efficiencies
- Cost savings
- Positive student experience

IT benefits
- Increased agility
- Simplified delivery

which enables easy customisation of page templates designed to deliver an appropriate interface tailored to each task.

Critically, using AIP and PageBuilder keeps all the data in a single system, minimising the development time. The University of Southampton could deliver these developments within a very tight timescale.

"We had a good idea of how Ellucian could help, and quickly redirected our efforts to designing the proposed developments, obtaining quotes, organising budgets, and ensuring that Ellucian had the resources lined up to undertake the developments in the timescales required," explained Liv Stobseth-Brown, Student Records Manager at the University of Southampton.

"For us, the real innovation was the speed at which we were able to move these developments from concept to delivery, including identifying ways to repurpose existing budgets to focus on technology rather than staff time.

"By using Ellucian services to undertake the development, we have delivered new systems quickly, and also identified and resolved issues with Banner. We have learned much more about AIP, PageBuilder, and Banner Communication Manager than we would have done in a normal project lifecycle."

Meeting the challenge

The University of Southampton had four key goals:

1. **Move Identity checks for students online**

2. **Move a significant part of the right-to-study checks for international students online**

3. **Create a new graduation application for online celebrations**

4. **Create a new opt-in page to the Southampton COVID-19 testing programme**

Taking registration online

Common to other institutions, the University of Southampton knew that longstanding events for welcoming new students to the university would not be safe to run during 2020. This presented a particular challenge for the Welcome Weekend, where students move into their residences. Historically, they would come to campus to prove their identity and collect their ID cards—a process that had to change completely.

Similar challenges applied to the university's International Registration events, where staff complete right-to-study checks for international students.

"Using Action Item Processing combined with Banner Document Manager seemed like the obvious solution. This meant that students could upload their identity and right-to-study documents at a time that suited them, with no need to travel to campus. For new students, a virtual ID card provided immediate

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proof, while ID cards were posted to students' term time addresses," confirmed Liv Stobseth-Brown.

The University of Southampton has identified other improvements from this process beyond the immediate safety benefits. Completing right-to-study checks online has significantly streamlined International Registration, with face-to-face interaction reduced to ten minutes per student. This reduced staff time from 171 to 100 days, saving around £7,500 on temporary staff.

For the Welcome Weekend, identity checking could now be spread across a large group of people over a longer period, freeing up staff time for other activities and saving £8,340 on overtime payments for weekend working. Over 4,000 new entrants uploaded their ID and right-to-study documents.

Worthy of celebration

While the university's graduation celebrations were already part of the ongoing Banner 9 programme, it was quickly apparent that the response would need to be reshaped. An in-person graduation was impossible, yet a survey of students indicated they would welcome an online celebration to note their achievements.

Again, Action Item Processing played a vital role in building an interim graduation solution by providing an easy way for students to sign up for online celebrations. In addition to ensuring efficient processing, resulting in significant time saving for the graduation team, the use of AIP kept student data in-house, thereby removing any need to share personal data with an external supplier. As such, various consents to share data were held in the same system as personal data and contact details for easy reporting.

"Our previous graduation application system made use of an online store provided by an external software supplier. The move to AIP has given us much more control over upgrades and associated testing, as well as removing an interface that needed maintenance and testing. The graduation team has really embraced this change and welcomed the opportunity to streamline their processes and reduce the number of systems they are using," explained Liv Stobseth-Brown.

The most complex of the developments in response to COVID-19, the University of Southampton saw impressive results, with 2,000 students signing up for the autumn Online Celebrations and a further 500 for the winter celebrations. The new application method saved 40 days of staff time in 2020 and the university anticipates that savings will increase once it returns to in-person graduation ceremonies. Next stage functionality will include support for students and guests with additional requirements such as special seating and visa support.

Passing the test

The University of Southampton's COVID-19 testing programme, in partnership with Southampton City Council and the NHS, uses a convenient, non-invasive saliva test to check for coronavirus, with results sent by text message within 48 hours.

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"We wanted to create a simple way for students to sign up to the programme, ensure that they updated their UK address and mobile phone numbers, and that we recorded the student consent to engage with the testing programme," explained Liv Stobseth-Brown.

A new PageBuilder form was created for student consent, with instructions on how to update their contact details in Banner Self Service. Students were not permitted to sign up until they had clicked on a link to the privacy notice, confirming consent.

As such, the use of Banner delivered a quick and easy way for students to sign up to the testing programme and test as soon as they returned for the new academic year. By retaining consent to engage in the same system alongside personal data and contact details, the university was able to streamline reporting on student consents.

Over 14,000 students have signed up to the COVID-19 testing scheme. During the autumn term, the number of people testing positive across the city of Southampton, and in almost all other UK universities, increased exponentially, but no such rise was seen in the University of Southampton population, despite the university continuing some face-to-face teaching.

The regular testing programme, combined with many of the measures that the university put in place to ensure student and staff safety, was likely to have contributed to keeping levels low in our community by identifying asymptomatic positive cases and breaking chains of transmission.

Student focus groups reported that they found most of the programme requirements easy and the logistics convenient including simple registration, and that they were impressed with the overall organisation of the programme. Participants reported feeling reassured to carry on with "normal" daily activities and students felt lucky to be able to take part in the programme.

Conclusion

"We are extremely pleased with the progress we have made using Ellucian technologies in new and exciting ways for us over the last year. All of the developments and associated process changes have brought a range of benefits to students and staff, and we will continue to look for ways to build on what we have learned through these innovations," concluded Liv Stobseth-Brown.

"Looking to gain positives from a global pandemic, we have learned that we can be much more agile than we have in the past. We now know what we can achieve and we're already applying what we have learned to other developments."

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