ellucian
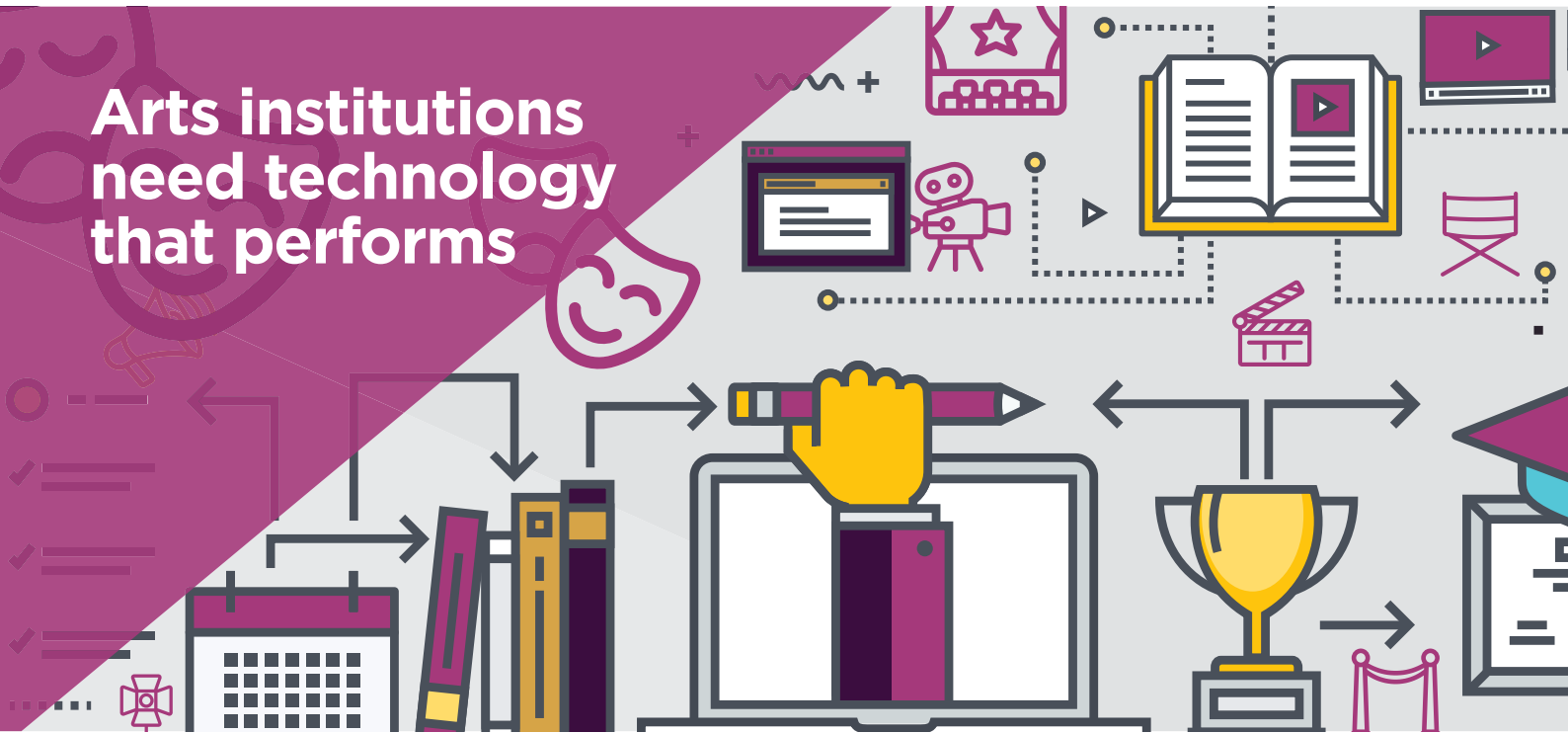
Arts institutions need technology that performs

How LAMDA found the right student information system

The London Academy of Music & Dramatic Art (LAMDA) is currently undergoing an exciting transformation.

As the oldest drama school in the UK, LAMDA has always had a worldwide reputation for the excellence of its conservatoire training and education. Now we are nearing completion of a £28.2m project to transform our London home, providing modern training spaces to match the quality of our teaching. We are doubling the size of our campus by creating two new theatres with full technical and wardrobe facilities, a new library, ten new teaching and rehearsal studios and a state-of-the-art screen and audio suite.

To support this transformation, we are also modernising some of our internal systems.

While the mission at the heart of LAMDA hasn't changed since our institution was founded in 1861, the way we need to communicate and manage information certainly has, so finding the right student information system was a top priority during this period of rapid development.

There were several challenges any new system had to address

» **LIMITED RESOURCES**
We have a small core team (95% of teaching staff are part-time), with modest IT infrastructure and little time for training

» **INEFFICIENCY**
We spend a lot of time looking for, or reconfiguring, information. We need to work smarter, with much less manual labour and much more access to reliable, up-to-date data

» **SPECIALISED NEEDS**
We need a comprehensive but agile cloud-based student information system that handles full-time degree courses and two-week short courses equally well

» **MAINTAINING QUALITY SERVICE**
We are very proud of our reputation for excellence and we are not prepared to jeopardise it with an impersonal user experience or a lack of insight into the needs and expectations of our applicants and students

» **WIDENING PARTICIPATION**
This is a key strategic goal—one we cannot accomplish without better understanding our applicants and implementing a system to identify and reach out to/cultivate the best and most diverse students.

Why we chose Quercus by Ellucian

We ended up going with the Quercus by Ellucian student information system for a number of reasons.

As an institution, we were really clear about the resources we had available, and that was a major factor for our choice. We selected Quercus because it does everything we need it to without requiring excessive training, customisation or cost. What's more, it can be implemented very quickly. It's a cloud solution, hosted and managed by Ellucian, which saved us from a heavy investment in hosting or IT. It will link in simply to other core systems (like finance and the Academy library), while the regular cycle of updates to the system will also make it easy to keep on top of the frequent changes to the external reporting environment for higher education here in the UK.

I would advise other arts institutions looking for an SIS to assess their resources carefully and choose a system that fits both what they want out of it and what they can put into it.

I also recommend choosing a flexible system. Like other small, specialist institutions, LAMDA has some unique requirements, and Quercus is easy to configure. For example, our actors may not decide on a stage name until close to graduation, but when they do, their record is easily updated without losing any associated data, by adding an alias. Quercus also supports management of our Easter and summer short courses, not just the traditional academic calendar model. These things may seem small to a more traditional institution, but they're actually big wins for us and for our students.

Another thing we greatly appreciate is single sign-on. Navigating information is easy and communications are more integrated.

Ultimately, better information management equals better service for all of our constituents—whether that's staff providing richer, more timely feedback to students; leaders getting more regular updates enabling them to make better decisions; or current and potential students having more satisfying interactions with LAMDA, whether in-person or online.

Widening participation

At LAMDA we believe that the arts, and the best quality training, should be accessible to everyone, and we are highly committed to widening participation in our courses. The ability to enhance our application process and learn more about potential students is a key benefit with Quercus.

Our BA (Hons) Professional Acting takes in 30 students a year from an audition pool of 4,000 applicants. In order to ensure these 30 students represent the most talented candidates from the widest range of backgrounds, we need to widen the pipeline; reach out to new applicants; understand our potential students; store data in a single, reliable source; and filter down the pool in the fairest and most effective way possible.

We have a bespoke online application system that we did not want to reinvent. Ellucian was willing to help us integrate the existing processes into Quercus, so that we could achieve all of these goals without losing the reporting and filtering capabilities we already rely on.

A bonus is that the system is user-friendly and intuitive for all our applicants.

The future

Implementation of Quercus is underway at the moment. Some of the administrative benefits we expected from the system are already apparent, but we're also finding unexpected ways in which Quercus will help us improve the experience of students at LAMDA and achieve wider institutional goals.

Ellucian only focuses on higher education, and we've been impressed not only by the knowledge and expertise of the staff we're working with, but also by the speed with which they've adapted to the specialist requirements of our conservatoire setting. More widely, the global customer base will be invaluable for peer-to-peer networking.