New student information system supports compliance with increased regulation

Christie's Education improves staff and student experience while gaining control of its data reporting

The higher education market has changed considerably over the last decade with the rapid growth of new types of providers entering the market, including independent providers—also known as alternative providers—who are regarded as specialists in their subject areas. This has widened the choices available to students and also resulted in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

Added to these changes in the market, students' expectations have also changed dramatically over the years. Students want more services online, great value for money, good employability links and a personalised experience where they feel supported. As independent providers are smaller-sized institutions, they tend to be more engaged with their students and are able to deliver a more personalised experience, and as they are more specialised, independent providers tend to have close links with industry.

Having offered courses since 1978, Christie's Education—a specialist provider of postgraduate higher education and continuing education courses in the fields of art history and art business—has seen first-hand the growth of the market for independent providers. However, alongside that growth has come increased regulation aimed at bringing these niche institutions in line with the industry and their larger peers.

CHRISTIE'S
EDUCATION

Christie's Education
Christie's Education is a graduate and continuing art-world education provider owned by Christie's Auction House

Challenge
To implement a new student information system to support the provider's reporting for compliance with increased regulation

Solution
Ellucian Quercus

Result
Autonomy and automation to improve the student experience while managing the regulatory burden

Meeting compliance and beyond

The changes began in 2015, when the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)—the independent body responsible for monitoring and advising on standards and quality—started to review independent providers to ensure they were meeting the required standards. With the rapid growth of new types of providers, regulation became fragmented, and a regulatory body—the Office for Student (OfS)—was set up by the Department for Education to create a more simplified landscape.

Fiona Guernaoui, Christie's Education's director of registry and student services, explains: "With the formation of the Office for Students, I feel this has provided a level playing field for all higher education providers. Whether you were a government-funded provider or an independent provider, if you met the criteria you would have rights equal to a university—and this has provided an equal opportunity to any higher education provider who is able to meet the criteria."

For independent providers, achieving compliance resides in the ability to demonstrate that they have the required student data readily available and can provide it to regulators. While the regulations help to ensure high levels of standards for all higher education providers, they also increase the regulatory and administrative burden—particularly for independent providers, with their smaller teams and resources compared to larger universities.

In the midst of increasing regulatory pressures, Christie's Education took the opportunity to invest in their infrastructure to continue meeting standards—and, just as importantly, to enable the institution to grow by strengthening their offerings to provide greater value and a better experience for their students.

Built for smaller providers

To continue meeting statutory regulations and while seeking accreditation from their awarding body, the Open University, Christie's Education recognised the need to move away from spreadsheets and complex internal processes to more streamlined and automated business processes with the support of a new student information system (SIS).

Christie's Education created a clear set of requirements for their new student information system, which needed to achieve five key objectives:

- Meet statutory requirements by demonstrating data efficiencies, security and accessibility
- Improve the student experience by providing an easier way for students to enquire, apply for courses and self-serve
- Improve efficiencies through automation
- Increase revenue through increased enrolment
- Provide business intelligence through improved analytics and reporting

The size of their institution was a key consideration during the selection process, as Christie's Education did not want a system that was built for larger universities. Ultimately, they wanted a system that was well supported, well recognised

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FIONA GUERNAOUI, Director of Registry and Student Services, Christie's Education, London

and built for their size. After reviewing several systems in the market, Ellucian's cloud-based student information system, Ellucian Quercus, was chosen.

"We talked to other independent providers who provided positive feedback about Ellucian, and that's how Ellucian Quercus first came to our attention. Having a system that is well supported and built for smaller institutions was crucial for us, and Ellucian Quercus was the system that met all of our requirements," explains Chris Colnaghi, an independent consultant who led the new student information system project at Christie's Education.

Institutional compliance with regulators is a critical issue and considered a high risk, especially for smaller institutions. Guernaoui adds: "It was essential that our new partner was committed to staying abreast of the regulatory changes. Ellucian demonstrated a clear commitment to higher education. With Ellucian Quercus being a SaaS product, it is rolled into a new release automatically so it actually removes the worry of keeping up with the regulatory changes for us."

Relationships matter

Christie's Education credits its relationship with Ellucian as a crucial factor in their timely completion of their first milestone in the first five months of the project. Christie's Education also cited the expert knowledge and experience among Ellucian's team, which works closely with similar smaller institutions across Ellucian's rapidly growing independent provider community.

Guernaoui notes: "We felt Ellucian understood Christie's Education. They didn't just understand our environment and our priorities—we also felt the team at Ellucian really understands the independent provider community. I think their knowledge and experience of working with smaller institutions like ours played a big part in helping us achieve our go-live date for online applications for our Master's programme in the first five months of the project."

Colnaghi adds: "We really appreciated and respected Ellucian's expertise in this process—and as well as Ellucian, there's also the Quercus community, which is a really important aspect. All software vendors will have similar user communities, but I think the Quercus community works really well. People really want to help each other, and it feels very much like a community, and this has obviously been fostered by Ellucian."

A better experience for all

"Our student experience has improved hugely since the implementation of Quercus," Guernaoui confirms. With a more transparent approach, students can now clearly see what stage they are at in the Master's programme application cycle. Other changes are having a positive impact on the student experience, too. Key documents are now available on the student portal, and students now have the ability to upload application documents, eliminating the need to print and scan.

Furthermore, automated processes reduce the likelihood of error, deliver more efficient working practices and provide more control—ensuring that students receive the right information at the right time and that everyone receives the same consistent communication.

With 50 per cent of the student body based overseas, and the remainder split between UK and the EU, Christie's Education is able to be more responsive, regardless of which time zone a student lives in. The autonomy and automation the Quercus system brings means that students get a much faster response—especially important in the early stages, when prospects are shopping around for a course provider.

"When I see an application come in at midnight on a Saturday, I know that applicant is getting an automated message to thank them for their application," says Colnaghi. "Previously, that would have been sent manually on a Monday morning—and in some cases, it might not even be the first thing on the administrator's list, so it may even be Tuesday or even Wednesday, therefore resulting in a two- to three-day wait for the applicant. Although it's an automated response, I think the perception we are giving to our students is that we are on it and we care about their application."

From a student-relationship point of view, Ellucian Quercus frees up time so staff can spend more time fostering personal interactions with existing and prospective.

Lessons learned

When talking about their key takeaways from the project, the team at Christie's Education had three top tips for other independent providers looking to implement a new student information system.

"Be open to the possibility of changing your internal business processes to suit best practice, rather than trying to transfer your own working practices into the software," says Guernaoui, who also notes that this is where institutions have come unstuck in the past. "We have always done some things in a certain way, and because Ellucian Quercus is built around best practice, we were able to tweak the processes."

Equally important, Christie's Education encourages institutions looking for a "quick" implementation to ensure they have processes mapped out by doing the work upfront. As Colnaghi said: "At Christie's Education, we spent a lot of time—even before Ellucian came onboard—to map out our current processes, think about our end goals, what we wanted to achieve [with our new student information system] and more importantly where we wanted to get to. What you put into this process is what you get out of it."

Finally, when it comes to signing off on a new student information system, Guernaoui suggests having a decision maker in the room. "It is a big investment—time, resource and financial—so make sure you have key sponsors from your business with authority that understands and can agree to those commitments up front."

The implementation of Quercus has created many efficiencies. Above all, by alleviating the regulatory and administrative burdens, Christie's Education can prioritise being an engaged, specialist course provider that today's students have come to expect.

By partnering with Ellucian and investing in Quercus, Christie's educators are not only able to keep up with the rapid growth and changes the sector has experienced over the last decade, but are also now in pole position for the decade ahead.

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