

CASE STUDY

University of Liverpool gets boost from automation in admissions

The University of Liverpool's use of Robotic Process Automation (RPA) to manage new applications has seen it make eligibility assessments up to 55% faster than when simply relying on a manual process undertaken by an admissions officer.

RPA was initially used on assessing applications for five postgraduate programmes from China and as its initial success has seen its use expanded to include other programmes, during the peak of an application cycle. The admissions team are now able to make at least 400 more decisions each week.

With student applications for postgraduate programmes following a defined assessment process, the admissions department was identified as the perfect department to trial automation to assess where the university could benefit from digitalisation to increase efficiency.

The university had previously looked at automation with a number of in-house projects as part of a business process improvement which was conducted by the in-house IT Services team.

Jude King, the University's Associate Director, Admissions, Enquiries and Fulfilment, said:

As a centralised admissions team we are responsible for assessing applications following set criteria. This includes the review of documentation such as academic achievements; certificates; references; personal statements; and when dealing with international students the confirmation of English language ability. Having made the assessment we are able to make decisions on the suitability of the applicant based on academic criteria. "By its nature time-consuming and resource challenging at peak periods, but rules-based which made the process an ideal RPA pilot."

The university decided on support from RPA specialists for the project and began working with EAS to create a bot which could help make the admissions process more streamlined.

The EAS-designed and built bot had to be able to integrate with Ellucian systems, the recognised higher education student system, used by the university to track a student from the admission application, registration through to course completion and beyond. The integration was important as it also meant no new systems would be necessary to allow the bot to work with the Ellucian system.

Initially, it was decided to apply the bot to student applications for its Management School programmes from applicants who have studied in the China Education system. This was because they generate a significant number of applications and allow assessment of whether the technology could add value to the process and department.

Jude continued: "EAS's project manager discussed needs with our five strong team to design the bot. We provided detailed process maps, suggestions on potential areas for automation and we even produced a short video to show how we work. A close working relationship with the team was quickly built. EAS understood that we were non-technical and supported us in learning about automation and how it could work for us. This meant we were also able to include some future proofing by thinking about potential future enhancements."

Jude was clear with her team at early stage that the project was not about replacing roles as the main reason for its introduction was to help manage the 23% increase in applications since 2018.

"The bot would ease the workload pressures which were affecting the team's motivation and morale. With less pressures to meet deadlines, there would be an opportunity to reduce administrative workload and give staff more time to focus on 'added value' work, enable more involvement in projects and chance for professional development."

Process automation would also help to improve efficiency, enhance consistency while ensuring the team keeps to the agreed service levels agreements with the academic departments.



Team's enthusiasm drives success

During the automation project's development two team members emerged as champions for the initiative. Working closely with EAS's project team, they would volunteer to carry out trials as the bot developed by testing functions and highlighting issues which arose to prevent problems at a later stage.

This enthusiasm for the project led them to write a user guide for the other team members and the time they invested has proved beneficial as the understanding developed meant they were on hand when the bots were introduced to offer immediate advice or liaise with EAS.

Prior to the bot's full deployment, Jude and her team communicated with academic colleagues about its introduction, impact in terms of their service and give assurances that the process of assessing applications and the service provided to applicants would not be impacted.

They also created a demonstration to show the new process and reinforce the fact that all relevant checks would continue to be made and that it would even provide a fairer and consistent admissions process as it reduces chance for human error.

One challenge for EAS was to ensure that updates to the Ellucian system did not impact on the bot's effectiveness.

Jude added: "We identified during the development of the bot that Ellucian updates had the potential to have an impact on how the bot interacts with the platform. By working with our IT Services team, EAS was able to adapt the way the bot shares data so that when the platform is updated the bot requires minimal changes with minimal disruption to workflow.

"Having a dedicated EAS project manager has been a major benefit for the project. By working closely with us have come to understand our needs and the result is a bot which has made a significant impact to the admissions department."



The bot's introduction has led to immediate results for the admissions team.

At peak periods the team has been able to process over 400 extra decisions every week. They can also deal applications from China 55% faster, and 35% faster from India. Seeing this increase in decisions it has now introduced bots for applications from Pakistan, Ghana an<u>d Nigeria.</u>

There are now also plans for bots to be used on other administrative functions which are largely process driven and Jude can see a role for RPA in helping to enhance communications with students and applicants.

Jude concludes: "Our automation journey has been one which has shown a strong return on investment for the university. Over the last 18 months EAS has been highly supportive in the helping us transform our approach to application processing which has also the team save time and resources while significantly increasing productivity and helping us provide a first class student experience."





55% faster to process applications x 400 more decisions each week 3% increase in conversation rate



Better student experience due to faster turnaround times and fewer complaints



Reduced workload for staff freeing them up to focus on added-value activity



Improved morale and job quality for staff resulting from reduced applications per FTE and more involvement in project work



Integrates with existing systems and no expensive upgrades are required

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