

University of Exeter

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BACKGROUND

In 1999 one of the UK’s leading Universities, the University of Exeter, embarked on a major project to change many of its core administrative systems. Over the next three years replacement applications were sourced including new student records, finance, personnel and payroll systems. One characteristic of all organizations that introduce new technologies is that access is still required to information that was previously held in older, “legacy” applications even though they have often been replaced by new technologies.

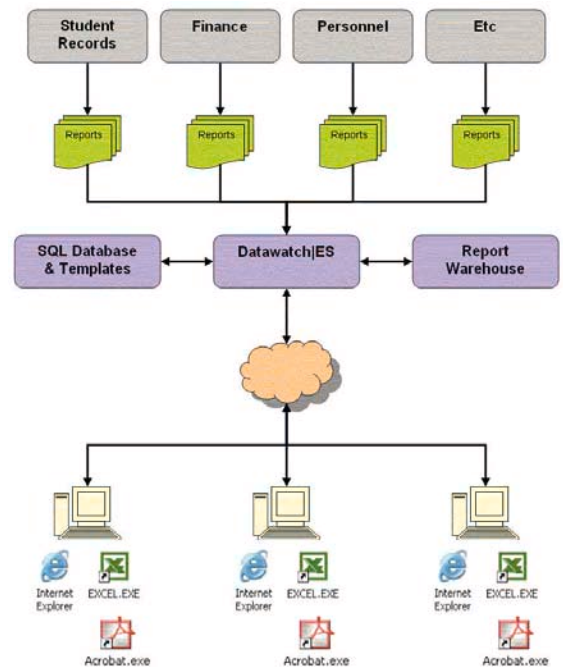
The alternatives facing the University were varied and included solutions such as creating a data-warehouse, a data-mart or developing the old systems to produce HTML reports. Typically both cost and resource allocation were key driving forces and were fundamental to the success of the project. The University had only limited time and budget to apply to this project as their core focus was on implementing their new systems.

THE CHALLENGE

The University therefore required a solution that could leverage the investment that had already been made in producing key system reports. The new solution needed to use proven technology capable of taking data from a wide variety of University systems from different software vendors including student records, finance, personnel, payroll, etc. These core requirements were imperative; as was a speedy implementation and using a minimum amount of University resources.

THE SOLUTION

The University of Exeter chose Datawatch|ES from Datawatch International, the report storage and report mining experts. This solution enabled the University’s users to easily select and access the relevant data through a secure web browser with the ability to drill down to further levels of information, including individual detail lines in source reports (data mining). Users were also given the ability to see summary views and apply filters to the report data and view this output using the graphical analysis tools supplied or in a variety of applications, including Excel and Adobe PDF.



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Initially the decision was seen as being a tactical solution that would give short-term benefits in terms of access to data held in legacy systems that were regarded by many users as “unfriendly.” However, since implementation, significant strategic benefits are now being derived.

Paul Sandy, MIS Manager for the University of Exeter described the implementation as providing “new tricks for old dogs!” Paul explains, “The solution that we implemented from Datawatch has continued to provide user access to data from administrative systems that have, in fact, been replaced and are no longer in use.

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Datawatch|ES provides the University of Exeter with a report warehouse that stores the different reports that the University holds, in a compressed and logical structure. Templates are then created to “teach” the system where data fields are located in the ASCII files containing reports from standard applications such as student records, finance, personnel and payroll.

For each report, two templates are used; one defines the data and the other defines the index. This enables users to find and access the data in the report(s). This also provides security, based on a username and password. (e.g. access to only reports pertaining to certain finance cost centres or giving details of students enrolled on courses in only a particular school or department).

Once the initial set-up for a new report layout is complete, reports are typically run overnight and transferred automatically to the report warehouse. They are automatically processed and made available immediately for access by users subject to appropriate security controls.

Paul goes on to add that, “Many of our users were comfortable accessing information and viewing their reports in the same way as they had viewed their reports in the past, so this solution enabled us to provide these users with this capability. As well as this, we have other users, sometimes at the request of auditors, who need to access reports from various systems and pull the data from these reports for important historical analysis.”

THE FUTURE

Datawatch|ES was originally implemented as a “point” solution, but future development will start to include routine reports from new incoming applications and this will make Datawatch|ES a real strategic success. Another future possibility is to use the solution to compare data in different formats from periods spanning the implementation of new systems. “With the new functionality that Datawatch can provide with regards to applying XML Style sheets to reports and presenting the reports in any manner of ways, Datawatch|ES can now be considered for all manner of areas that we never thought of when we first selected Datawatch|ES,” Paul concluded.



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