



Facility's flexibility to deal with unusual demands

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Director of ICT
Southbank International School

When Southbank International School decided to update its management information system it knew it needed flexible and robust software to handle the huge variety of data involved. International schools have many more variables than state schools because of the nature of their staff, students and curriculum.

There are pupils from more than 50 different countries and teachers of more than 25 nationalities at the London school, many of whom are in the UK on different kinds of passport and visa, all of which need to be recorded and monitored. Class sizes and teaching groups are small so the timetable can be very complex because of the potential number of variations. Even the terms are arranged differently from state schools.

The school decided to overhaul its information management system two years ago and invited 15 top companies from the UK and the USA to demonstrate software packages. The process took around a year because staff wanted to be sure they had made the right decision. They visited other schools to see the various programs in action and found that only Serco's Facility suite provided what the school required.

Southbank's Director of ICT explained: "We had a number of criteria that we wanted covered but we did not share the details prior to seeing the products demonstrated. We wanted something that we could develop ourselves and Facility had that flexibility. There was a sense with the other systems that we would have to shape the school around them, rather than them adapting to our needs."

There were huge potential financial savings for the school with the introduction of Facility. The school previously had an in-house management system that had been developed over a period of 12 years. "It was haemorrhaging money. We were paying double our present costs just to change the system or to fix problems. It would have been OK if people were satisfied with it, but they weren't," the Director of ICT said.

The change has brought about an openness and transparency in the school's business that was not available previously and a whole series of management tasks has been simplified and improved. "The average teacher puts data into a system but has no sense of the thousands of pounds in admin costs that might be involved. Things like electronic attendance have been a huge culture change for some but everyone benefits when they see the statistics that can be generated," the Director of ICT said.

Central management

Southbank International School caters for approximately 700 pupils aged 3 to 18 and has three sites across London - Westminster, Hampstead and Kensington – so Facility's centralised database and the ability to reach information through ePortal has been a huge advantage. "We wanted to provide access to everyone over the web. Wherever possible the Internet is our common denominator for sharing information so ePortal fitted perfectly," the Director of ICT said. Access to data at home has also been popular with staff, especially when writing student reports. "It was one of the most requested functions. It is much more civilised to be doing them sat at home than stuck at school," he added.

Maintaining school standards

With the introduction of Facility many of the school's management processes have been simplified and expedited. As an independent school Southbank is not subject to PLASC surveys but still has to meet DfES standards and make regular returns to the department. "It is carried out at a school level, rather than a pupil level, and historically we would have thrown people at it to work out all the statistics - and we have had to do two returns this year. Serco have been able to provide report generators to complete the returns and it is literally done at the push of a button now," the Director of ICT said.

Although the school is not subject to Ofsted inspections it is still checked regularly by the Independent Schools Inspectorate to ensure it meets national standards. Its next inspection at the Westminster campus is a year away but it is planning a complete overhaul of student assessment before that takes place. In the past, subject assessment consisted of a simple grade for attainment and effort with a prose comment added. Now the school is introducing many new criteria with variable weightings, which will make assessments more comprehensive but much more complicated. "We would not have even contemplated this with our old system because the development costs to make it work would have been astronomical. With Facility we can set this up in a few weeks."

Keeping track of staff and students

The complex circumstances of the school create a unique challenge in people management. With teachers from more than 25 countries and students from 50 countries the school needs to handle extra details such as work permits, visa expiry dates and passport numbers. The school's curriculum also involves a great number of overseas visits, so staff and pupils are frequently away. Even international events can affect the school as political and business changes abroad sometimes force students to relocate to London. The school encourages all staff to undertake regular professional development and the system helps keep track of the number of hours and the variety of work involved in that, ensuring an even distribution of opportunities.

The combination of different variants creates an intricate situation that is difficult to keep track of without an effective database, but Facility has been adaptable enough to cope. Management is simplified because the school has created its own range of codes that can show the different reasons for staff absences, from a long school trip abroad to a half-hour dental appointment.

Student attendance is currently recorded twice a day electronically, using Facility, but there are plans to move up to class by class registration from next year. Unlike many schools the change is not just to confirm that everyone's whereabouts are known. The school operates the International Baccalaureate system and students need minimum attendance in each subject in order to obtain their grades. With Facility, attendance numbers will be easily obtainable and managing examination results will be much easier.

A student's grades are recorded throughout their time at the school on a single report known as the 'transcript'. This document is important in applying to American and Japanese universities. The ability to be able to customise such a report was a deciding factor in the school's choice of MIS.