

University of Central Lancashire uses Tableau to bring fresh insight to new and existing data

With over 400 undergraduate courses and over 200 postgraduate courses, The University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) is at the forefront of delivering leading degrees in disciplines such as Forensic Science, Dentistry and Medicine. Helping over 1,000 students in the last five years start a business or become self-employed, UCLan ranks second in the UK for the number of graduate start-ups still active and third for estimated turnover of those active firms. With expansion abroad and new portfolio programmes planned, the University wanted to improve how they produce and share data. After an EU tendering process, UCLan selected Tableau to look at new and existing data and create new opportunities. The introduction of Tableau has seen:

- Output everyone can understand
- Greater accessibility to all
- Improved availability of data
- Encouraging people to do more

"With Tableau it's more than just numbers on a page, it brings data to life."

Sally Turnbull,
Corporate Strategy Manager
University of Central Lancashire



355 Tableau report views on one day.

Over 100 regular Tableau users

Workbooks covering 9 key topic areas

A university dedicated to excellence

Founded in 1828 and home to over 37,000 students and staff, the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) is one of the largest universities in the UK and recognised as a ‘world-class institution’. In 2010, UCLan became the first modern university in the UK to be included in the prestigious QS World Rankings – which evaluates institutions across the world for their excellence in research, teaching, employability, facilities, innovation and much more.



To help support the university’s continued growth both domestically and internationally, UCLan places significant value on understanding its available data. For Corporate Strategy Manager Sally Turnbull, it’s important that data can be translated into a strategy that different departments at the university can grasp and put into action, “our strategic targets stretch out as far as 2020. We have a core set of KPIs, which we call the UCLan Measures, and each is cascaded to College level, which means an awful lot of data is shared and scrutinised”.

A lack of unity

With a number of different databases being used, making information widely available was proving difficult; “the finance department would use one source, the student support team would use another and staff records would be elsewhere. It was becoming difficult to align the data we had and bring the various parts together”.

For Sally and her team, understanding performance within league tables, reporting on student retention and the university’s recruitment activity are a few of the key objectives. Sharing information around these areas was becoming a challenge. “The information was available, but people didn’t know where to look due to the number of systems being used. It was obvious lots of people would benefit from seeing student profiles; why has someone left early, for example, and what extra support could we have offered them? But it wasn’t always possible – we were only able to share with a small proportion of people”.

An added challenge was consistency. Sally explains, “understanding league tables is extremely important for us. However, they all use different definitions. So when we looked at our reports on student retention; specifically, at the number of students that stayed the full duration and left with the degree they started with, we would have about three different figures due to the various systems and definitions we used internally and externally”.

A new data warehouse

With plans for a new data warehouse, the need to align their data more efficiently and find a tool that would integrate with the data warehouse was key. Sally explains: “...we worked with software called Mood, which focused more on information processes and structures rather than BI itself. While it was useful, we felt that we had taken it as far as we could. The process was very manual and labour intensive.”

It was decided that a change needed to be made. Looking for something more flexible that allowed more people access, the university started their open

tendering process. “Following the full EU tendering process, we invited six different companies in to present to us and demo their software”. There were a few key requirements, “it had to be easy to understand, intuitive for all users, present data visually and have the potential to do complex tasks”.

After narrowing down the list to just a few, it was Tableau that held the biggest impact. “Tableau was the one tender that really delivered what the ‘paper bid’ said it would. When we asked to see behind the scenes of the demo and mockup work, unlike others who presented to us, the explanations were very quick and straightforward – that was key”.



There was one other draw for the panel members, Sally recalls: “it looked great, the output was very modern and fresh, you see the data and want to actually explore it further. Every member of the panel got genuinely excited”.

Looking at data in a new light

The university chose Tableau and implemented a Tableau Server license and five Tableau desktop licenses, shared across the IT and Strategy departments. Getting

to work immediately, the Strategic Development team began looking at the static data sets they had. “We began by looking at data sets which are key for us, such as the three UK league tables and national student survey results. Being familiar with this data already, it allowed the team to play with Tableau and see what could be achieved”.

Since UCLan selected Tableau, Sally has seen a number of benefits.

Data available to all

With data previously restricted and only available and accessible within certain departments, information wasn’t easily reaching those other stakeholders who held an interest. With Tableau, that’s now changed. “Much more of our data is now readily available to people across the whole university. Those who want access can view data without having to be an expert or have any kind of training” Sally explains.

Output everyone can understand

Tableau’s powerful data visualisation capabilities have also made a difference. “While some people enjoy looking at spreadsheets, the majority of us find it quite time consuming and uninspiring. However, now the data is far more appealing to those who don’t necessarily feel an affinity towards numbers. It’s not difficult to understand what’s in front of you. Treemaps, for example, are a great feature that we’ve used a lot. With Tableau it’s more than just numbers on page, it brings data to life”.

Encouraging people to do more

With the increase in availability, accessibility and improved format, users of Tableau are going out of their way to explore more, “it’s certainly raised a lot of questions and an appetite to learn more, which has been really encouraging to see. Previously it was only really people who liked numbers and knew the intelligent questions to ask. We now have more people interested and wanting to explore reports and results further”.