

The University of Leeds needed a unified approach to IT project management in order to support its growing project portfolio. Project Online with PS+ delivered the fast, easy solution they needed.

Founded in 1904, The University of Leeds is one of the UK's leading academic institutions and a member of the prestigious Russell Group. It is home to over 31,000 students from 146 countries, including 28,752 full-time students, and is one of only 19 UK universities to appear in the top 100 of the QS world rankings in 2014. With 7,517 staff, it's also the third-largest employer in Leeds.

Ultimately, it's a big organization comprising many different functions, from academic faculties to corporate services with their own complex IT needs, all supported by IT teams coordinated by the IT Program Management Office (PMO). The PMO looks across all projects that use IT resources, and can be involved in over 30 in-flight projects and up to 100 event activities using the project management approach at any one time. Maintaining an overview of projects and resources is a major undertaking.

The Issue

Three years ago, IT spearheaded a wide-scale program of change, bringing the different IT teams from each faculty together, with a view to standardizing IT services and project management approach. Previously, different faculties and departments had managed projects independently with their own tools and processes, but this caused problems in terms of transparency, visibility and project members' ability to move from project to project.

“The experience of working on a project could be very different” says Alex Rist, IT Program Manager. “The governance would be different, the documentation would be different and the whole approach would be different, depending on where you were working and what you were used to. What’s more, because different teams were working independently and receiving funding from different sources, there was little to no centralized reporting. It was difficult to get a whole picture and see what IT teams were working on across the university.”

Lack of visibility and centralization meant that some projects and the IT resources they used were not visible to the University, leading to reduced confidence in overall project success rate.

The IT teams and the IT PMO decided to work together on a new stage-gate project management framework, which could pull everything together, tracking project progress from one key stage to the next, with an automated system of checks that were mandatory before the project could move on. However, the new framework needed a new project management solution. A solution that would enable consistency of approach across all teams, allowing for increased visibility into individual projects and the portfolio. Most of all, the implementation needed to be quick and the adoption painless, so that teams could move smoothly from their localized practices to the new streamlined process – a challenge across so many different areas.

The Solution

Alex and the PMO team spoke to Microsoft, who suggested PS+. The PS+ team set up exploratory workshops, demonstrating what Project Online could do and how its features aligned with the University's requirements.

With ease-of-adoption being a core requirement, the PS+ team focused on delivering a solution that covered all the University's basic IT project management needs, whilst leaving scope for future enhancements. The advanced customization features of PS+ enabled the team to develop reports, logs and project sites to fit the University's exact requirements. Alex was impressed by the customized changes stating that,

"The risk logs, for example, match the risk logs used by the University. They adapted the highlight report for us so that it matches how our highlight report looked beforehand, and there were lots of views, fields and custom fields put in place to make it all work."

These adjustments extended to customized navigation, making it easier for busy Project Managers to shift attention rapidly from one project to another.

The Benefits

Ultimately, while these dashboards give an instant overview of the whole portfolio, reports are much easier to produce now as a result. A management report that might have taken days to prepare and nearly half a day to run, now happens at a press of a button. "It's the same for portfolio risks and portfolio issues" says Alex, "I press a button and it just pops out." What's more, the PMO can be confident that he's working with the latest, most up-to-date data.

"It's the visibility and transparency that's the best thing. We now have a screen up in the Program Management Office where anyone can walk in and see the dashboards updating and the information changing in real-time."

PS+, there's no need to trawl through individual SharePoint sites or ask for access to ad-hoc shared folders; the information is all in Project Online right where they need it.

Other key PS+ strengths include long-term support and updates and an ongoing deployment stream of additional apps and templates, all providing even more functionality. Alex singles out

the Dependency app, which tracks and updates dependencies that affect more than one project. Furthermore, the Risk Log app that escalates a risk to an issue at the touch of a button, with all the relevant information transferred.

User-response has been extremely positive, with some users now researching additional Project Online features and asking when they can be added. Best of all, PS+ isn't imposing a way of working but supports the process that works for the University. In Alex's words, *"The system is supporting the process we wanted to apply."*