

NorthTec, aPlus+ and the Head Count Audit

Getting the ducks in a row

One of the challenges of tracking student progress is making sure your class lists correctly reflect your actual student body to begin with.

This case study describes a solution that was created through collaboration between Cobek Software and NorthTec. The Head Count solution has become a real game changer in regards to NorthTec's process for ensuring the correctness of class lists.

At NorthTec, Academic Registrar Joan Taylor and aPlus+ administrator Colin Dyer have worked with the Cobek team, developers of the aPlus+ Student Results Management System, to implement a technology-based approach to the problem.

"The two most common problems we have at the start of a teaching period are students who are attending, but are not showing on the lists, (we call these "tourists") and students who are on the lists, but are not attending – (we call these the "no-shows)", explains Joan.

Traditionally, management have relied on tutors to audit their class lists early in the teaching period and to advise Registry if there are any discrepancies. The problem with this approach was that, in the absence of any formal process of reporting, the completion rates were haphazard at best. A key driver in the development of Head Count Auditing for NorthTec was to improve what they were doing.

Staff at NorthTec evaluated a number of possible approaches they could take to address the problem, but concluded that their best line of attack would be to work with Cobek to develop a solution as part of aPlus+.

NorthTec had already been using aPlus+ for assessment and result management since 2008, so were keen to adopt a 'one-stop-shop' approach - tutors would be using a package that they were already familiar with and there would be no need for them to learn something completely new.

Previously in 2010, NorthTec implemented a formal process of effective class list auditing that involved setting up a dummy assessment against every course in the aPlus+ system. This was used to mark whether students had attended class within the first three weeks or whether they were a no-show. The 'assessment' contributed zero to the final grade for the course.

Whilst it performed its function in terms of making head count reporting easier, this prototype interfered with the management of actual assessment results and it was a bit cumbersome to administer. Tutors needed to email management that they had completed the process, instead of the system sending off an automated response, and this was a source of contention for many of them.

In the wake of a chance comment to the Cobek team regarding what they were doing, Cobek offered to work with NorthTec to develop and refine specifications for a targeted solution to the problem. The comment took place at an ideal time as the aPlus+ Plug-in Framework had been recently implemented by Cobek in 2012 and allowed a solution to be developed using aPlus+ software.

“*Regarding Hcount, I've done all of mine. I think that was the easiest thing I have ever done on a computer.*”

*Tutor and self confessed technophobe
NorthTec Polytechnic*

The aPlus+ Plug-in Framework was initiated by Cobek in consistence with their philosophy to help customers to do more. It allows for the development of software 'plug-ins' to extend the functionality of aPlus+ in ways that are unique to a customer, and without making changes to the core aPlus+ product. Plug-ins are integrated at a fundamental level in aPlus+ so that they become an integral part of the solution from a user's perspective, although on a development level are entirely separate. They are particularly useful for implementing customer specific features.

The key benefits of deploying a plug-in are:

- Flexibility - there are few limits to what you can do with plug-ins;
- Speed - there can be no delay with development;
- Cost - there is less work required to add functionality than there would be if specific changes were to be made to the actual aPlus+ solution in itself.

By using the Plug-in framework Cobek was able to develop a solution to NorthTec's Head Count Auditing issue by adding functionality to the aPlus+ software exactly as needed, quickly and at a low cost.

NorthTec was very happy to take up this offer, having been involved with other aPlus+ enhancement developments in previous years, and were confident that they would end up with a solution that would simplify the process and improve the monitoring and completion rates of the audits.

What they ended up with is the aPlus+ Head Count plugin. There are two key elements to the new Head Count process:

- It is quick and easy for tutors to report each audit - less than a minute for a typical course;
- A simplified reporting routine makes it very easy for programme leaders or programme administrators to monitor whether the audits have been completed, and to track where missing students or no-shows need action.

The implications of getting the student commencement recorded and confirmed early in the courses relate to assurance that:

- Enrolments are complete for students applying for Studylink assistance;
- NorthTec can, within the first three weeks of a programme or course start date, ensure they have as accurate as possible figures for EFT reporting;
- Teaching staff can re-engage with students early in the teaching period, which research suggests assists in student retention;
- The Student Management System will be correctly set up for recording and releasing academic records at the end of the teaching period.

The biggest challenge to implementing the Hcount process is encouraging full tutor participation. The process can be successful only with willing and accurate data input from the tutors themselves, coupled with a supportive environment from their managers, forming a full team approach.

So far, however, the process is evolving nicely and NorthTec staff anticipate increasing levels of student list accuracy in the future.

About Cobek Software

Incorporated in 2004, Cobek is an independent software vendor specialising in student achievement management software for higher education institutes. Cobek's aPlus+ platform integrates with and extends existing student information management systems to provide comprehensive achievement management capabilities.

About NorthTec

NorthTec is a polytechnic institute located in the Northland region New Zealand that services a population of 160,000, with a diverse range of programmes including health, science, business, technology, tourism, Maori studies and the arts.



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