

Streamlining funding applications with the Blackbullion Funding Tool



OVERVIEW

Location	Suffolk, United Kingdom
Students	6,557 students (2018/19) spread across a number of campuses and partner colleges.
Background	Widening participation is at the core of the University of Suffolk's mission and in 2016/17 and 2017/18 the University was ranked third in the country by HESA for the proportion of students entering the University from low-participation neighbourhoods.
Funds	The Financial Support Fund (FSF) is a discretionary fund provided by the University of Suffolk to support students experiencing financial difficulty. The fund is administered according to guidance provided by the National Association of Student Money Advisers (NASMA).

Challenge

Making things straightforward for students, and staff.

While students are provided with guidance to apply to FSF, applications were previously often submitted without all the required evidence. We frequently received queries relating to the status of an application, how they were assessed and the type of evidence required. Incomplete applications led to delays for students and created high levels of email traffic between the students and the FSF Team.

Previously, the application form and guidance notes were published on the intranet.

The majority of students downloaded the form to submit a paper version of their application and their evidence. This meant additional costs for our students in printing, and postage for students at our Partner Colleges. Sometimes students submitted original documents, which the Team would then have to return by recorded delivery, and any missing evidence was usually sent by email. The variety of methods in which we received evidence made tracking progress with applications more difficult.

Objectives

Developing our own 'off the shelf' product would have taken considerable time, and in adopting the Blackbullion funding tool we hoped to:

- Improve the student experience by making it easier for students to apply to the Fund, particularly for students from our Partner Colleges;
- Bring transparency to the process and solve some of the tracking, correspondence and incomplete application challenges;
- Allow our Student Services Team to easily refer students to the Fund and access updates on applications;
- Increase the visibility of the Financial Support Fund and encourage greater use of the Blackbullion budgeting modules.

The software is intuitive, and has helped with organisation, prioritisation and workflow management.

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Solution

We decided to implement a 'big bang' switch to the new Blackbullion system to avoid any confusion from having two different approaches. In doing so, we:

- Updated the form and guidance documents to ensure they reflected the new application process;
- Communicated the changes to relevant departments within the rest of the institution. We placed particular focus on the Infozone staff who provide a frontline service to our students and would be assisting with any queries;
- Reviewed and updated our workflow and storage processes.



The funding tool has provided a secure central hub for application information. We can now, if needs be, look at applications off-site (allowing for greater flexible working)

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Results

The Blackbullion funding tool has brought clarity (for both us and for students) over the status of applications, which saves staff time that otherwise would have been spent chasing evidence and following up with students.

In our new workflow we can:

- Easily see applications that are ready to be assessed and when they were submitted, and students can see whether they need to do anything further to complete their application;
- View incomplete applications and have the ability to follow up with those individuals;
- Better track newly submitted documents (and whether they have been checked), ensuring these are all stored in one place. Spend more time on complex cases, since we have seen a decrease in email traffic;
- Encourage student ownership of their application by providing transparency and clearly showing any additional information required;
- Better share information with our Student Services Team, allowing them to quickly access evidence that may be required for any non-standard assessments.



Setting up and using the Blackbullion Tool within our existing framework was straightforward and quick.

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