At a glance

Organisation
Catholic Education Commission NSW
(CEC NSW)

Industry
Education

Location
Sydney, NSW

Challenges:
- Existing IT architecture and software had grown organically and lacked cohesiveness
- Data rekeying, workarounds and manual processes slowed down staff and made errors more likely
- Current systems lacked flexibility to accommodate regulatory changes and visibility for schools

Solution
XMPro iBOS, Intelligent Business Operations System

XMPro orchestrates grant management at Catholic Education Commission NSW

There are 583 Catholic schools in New South Wales enrolling over 251,000 students. Catholic schools educate roughly one-fifth of all school students in the state. Most Catholic schools are run by their local diocese, others by a religious institute or their agents.

Australian Government and State Government Grants are administered through the Catholic Education Commission NSW (CECNSW). School Operating and targeted educational grants are distributed to the eleven NSW Diocesan Catholic Schools Authorities and targeted program grants are also distributed directly to some 44 individual Congregational Schools.

"We needed more flexibility and one source of truth"

Strategic objective

One of CECNSW's strategic objectives is to improve knowledge management, communication, information sharing and networking through greater utilisation of digital technologies. CECNSW is striving for common standards; to simplify its application and systems architecture; eliminate non-value adding work practices, and to improve or replace software applications that cannot make the journey of improvement.

Drivers for change

A major pain point was the burden of administering and managing its targeted grant programs. Conventional applications and development had failed to deliver benefits. CECNSW needed new thinking and technology to deliver its objective of streamlining processes and integrating existing systems to meet diverse stakeholder needs, both internal and external (including Governments, auditors, dioceses and schools).

Accounting for grants

CECNSW manages approximately $2 billion each year in funds, largely made up of government grants to schools. Acting as a central resource, CECNSW's secretariat is responsible for paying grant funds to the eleven Diocesan Catholic Schools Authorities and 44 Congregational schools as well as centrally maintaining all associated records including receipting, invoicing and financial accountability reports as required by governments.

It's a complex task as Director – Corporate Services, John Kitney, explains: "Because we sign the contracts for schools grants with governments, we are responsible for compliance and each grant must be acquitted based upon specific terms and conditions. There will be a need for audits and financial reports, plus a range of other things. Requirements vary according to each program."

From 2008 to 2012, CECNSW used a bespoke web-based software application supplemented by many spreadsheets to help manage, track and report on grants. Systems were difficult to manage and were not integrated with CECNSW's Infor SunSystems financial management system. This inevitably led to unnecessary duplication of data across systems. The bespoke software was also inflexible, making it difficult to adapt quickly to changing reporting requirements.

There was also a critical risk, that the bespoke solution relied on a single technical resource and the spreadsheets depended on a few key people. Staff expertise in the system was in short supply. What's more, while there were two separate systems and numerous spreadsheets all dealing with grant-related information, there was always potential for variations that had to be managed and mitigated.

"We needed more flexibility and one source of truth, we wanted to eliminate reconciliations or minimise them, and we wanted a good portal providing transparency for CECNSW and our clients," Kitney points out.

Situation prompts action

CECNSW decided it was time to find a better way of managing grants.

"Across CECNSW, we were also looking at creating a fully integrated IT architecture," Kitney notes.

"We've been in existence since 1974 and like a lot of small organisations; our systems just 'grew up'. We'd reached a stage where we knew it was time to reform and integrate our architecture".

Indeed CECNSW required a seamless experience with bi-directional master data and transactions threading into its finance system, integration into its own developed LDAP authentication application and Microsoft SharePoint as the content management repository for all associated and generated documentation.

"For the grants programs, we realised we needed a platform that could fully integrate to our underlying systems and which could track grants for all eleven NSW Diocesan Catholic Schools Authorities and 44 Congregational schools. We also wanted a portal so that dioceses, schools and their auditors could see the full status of grant programs displaying what payments had been made and what payments were planned for the rest of the year and the progress of grant expenditure."

The solution

With such a focus on integration, Kitney says, "It was logical for us to turn to Professional Advantage rather than to any other third party. Professional Advantage already had experience managing our finance system deployment and they knew precisely how we use it. It was better to have one group totally responsible for making sure all systems, whether old or new, were properly integrated."

CECNSW engaged Professional Advantage to review the issues and requirements and recommend and implement an appropriate solution. That solution was XMPro iBOS, an Intelligent Business Operations Systems. XMPro would be configured to deliver what CECNSW refers to as its Program Grant Management (PGM) solution. XMPro was recommended as it would comprehensively address CECNSW's immediate change objectives and also provide a robust, flexible platform for the future. Indeed CECNSW plans for XMPro to address other improvements.

XMPro would control the grant processes through rule based workflows surfaced in a portal to share information and reports with dioceses and schools and other stakeholders. XMPro seamlessly updates and validates underlying applications such as Infor SunSystems, which is the sole authoritative source of financial data for CECNSW. XMPro controls the process, provides governance and maintains security across the multi-stakeholder landscape.

It has also made life easier for CECNSW and its users. Combined with CECNSW enterprise security framework, XMPro would ensure there was only one login and password for each user.

The XMPro-based PGM would also manage all processes relating to receipts and payments, and enabling full reporting and acquittals. Duplication of data between multiple systems and duplication of document management would no longer be an issue. Reconciliations would be eliminated or reduced.

"Transactions have become easier because we are using a single system for all grants, right from the beginning all the way through to appearing in the finance ledger."

An agile start

Kitney says he was happy to take Professional Advantage's advice and work soon began on the project. "Our technical people agreed with the recommended approach and I wasn't going to second guess professional people about which applications they planned to use. I took the view that if I had specified what I required along with the workflows and output, a professional person ought to be able to know what tools are available and give proper advice about what to use. I trusted Professional Advantage to provide me with quality advice and a solution, and that proved to be the case."

The project team adopted a semi-agile approach, iteratively working towards milestones, incorporating feedback along the way. The project successfully met a critical January 2013 deadline when CECNSW required PGM to be ready to start distributing schools grants in time for the new school year.

Today, PGM is fully operational and is used to set up grant budgets, make payments and perform receipting, invoicing, and acquittals. The portal has achieved the goal of bringing visibility to all parties involved in the grants process and is helping to keep dioceses, schools and auditors informed of funding details.

Kitney says he's happy with PGM and the XMPro platform. "Transactions have become easier because we are using a single system for all grants, right from the beginning all the way through to appearing in the finance ledger. And we're not relying on spreadsheets any more so it's faster. It's almost impossible to measure the benefit of all of this as it's allowing us to do more than was previously possible."

"I'm confident that the integration of XMPro and Infor SunSystems means the integrity of our transactions is much higher than in the past. When you have systems that don't work together, there is always the possibility of error.

"PGM is an important part of improving service and visibility to our clients - the dioceses and schools. It certainly makes me feel better that the transactions are going through in a systematic way rather than being treated as a part system, part manual process," Kitney concludes.

Business benefits

Improved operational efficiency

- Delivered a significant productivity saving and completely eliminated non-value adding manual activities.
- A web portal providing direct process visibility to all stakeholders including remote users across NSW schools and communities.
- Reduced process durations for key activities across budgets, receipting, invoicing, interest derivation and acquittals, from hours and days to minutes.
- Automated critical linkages in processes from contract to master plan, budget to payment plan, and then from payment receipt, budget check, forecast, revised master plan, back to contract - eliminating manual handling and system gaps.
- Eliminated double and triple data handling by providing a systemic approach to master plan set-up and management.
- An intuitive user experience delivering a rapid staff uptake with minimal training and orientation.

Increased visibility and accountability

- Real time dashboard visibility over program management and performance.
- Audit and tracking, providing transparency over the process.
- Health check processes that identify gaps and omissions.
- Transparency over all outstanding tasks for CECNSW and clients. Time saved is substantial at critical times of the year.
- Task management dashboard, portal and notifications.
- Clear responsibility and ownership of tasks.
- Increased structure and clarity of communication.
- Electronic record of decision- making.
- Executive reporting on program management and information.

Consistency with CECNSW's IT strategy

- As an enterprise platform, XMPro iBOS provides the adaptive capability to make integration to other systems and business processes that arise as simple and streamlined as possible.
- Digitisation of key peripheral spreadsheet-based systems.
- Platform for halting the proliferation of applications. Indeed XMPro iBOS is being considered to address other future CECNSW requirements.
- XMPro Connectors ensure a certified and seamless interface to:
  - underlying billing, interest and finance systems
  - authenticate and interface to CECNSW's enterprise application security framework
  - interface to CECNSW's electronic document management (Microsoft SharePoint) which holds all related content and documentation.

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About Professional Advantage

Professional Advantage is one of Australia's most awarded solutions providers, with over 20 years experience in helping organisations improve their business systems through industry leading software solutions. Our 250-strong team in 6 offices across Australia and internationally has successfully worked with over 1000 organisations.

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