

CUSTOMER SPOTLIGHT

Queen's University Belfast



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Jonathan Doonan is the Development Services Manager at Queens University Belfast.

Queen’s University Belfast (QUB) is one of the leading universities in the UK and Ireland. Founded in 1845 as Queen’s College Belfast, it became an independent university in 1908. Today, QUB is ranked 43 in the world in the Times Higher Education Impact Ranking 2021 and is a member of the Russell Group of UK research intensive universities, combining excellence in research and education with a student-centred ethos.

A Blackbaud customer since 2001, the university recently migrated to Blackbaud Raiser’s Edge NXT to take their fundraising and relationship management system to the cloud, enabling them access from anywhere with a secure internet connection. We learned more about the reasons behind the change and the impact from QUB Development Services Manager Jonathan Doonan.

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Q. Why did you make the decision to move to the cloud?

In early 2020, we had started to discuss our plans to move to the cloud with the team at Blackbaud. At the time we were using Raiser's Edge 7, and we had three servers running 24/7 which were hosted in-house. It was a very good system and had been reliable, but it was an ageing hardware, and we knew that the clock was ticking. We would either have to spend the money to upgrade the hardware or explore moving to Raiser's Edge NXT, hosted in the cloud.

However, there were other contributing factors that made us realise that moving to the cloud would be the best solution—for example, our database team was a team of only two, and the sheer amount of server maintenance was getting more onerous. There was also the issue of cyber security and making certain we were up to date—it was giving us a lot of pain points and extra work.

Our Information Services Directorate were having to complete nightly back-ups, and should the system have gone down, new hardware would have been required, which would have taken a couple of weeks to get back up and running. In short, we were very ready to migrate to Raiser's Edge NXT.

However, what we didn't expect is that we would be undertaking this huge digital transformation project during a global pandemic brought on by COVID-19. When the lockdown began, staff had to start working from home—and the need for the project became even more apparent.

Q. Why did you choose Blackbaud Raiser's Edge NXT?

We initially considered a range of options. First, we thought about adapting a custom in-house CRM—this option was dismissed due to the lack of in-house computer programming and testing resource required. We also thought about purchasing an out of the box CRM, however, although there are many products on the market, they are not tailored to higher education philanthropy. Plus, we knew that migrating existing reporting to a different platform would require a huge amount of re-engineering.

Our preferred option, was to upgrade to Raiser's Edge NXT. It's built with the needs of a higher education organisation in mind, with out of the box functionality, and as we were already Raiser's Edge users, we had the capability in place with our previous system.

Something that stood out for us was that there are a high percentage of our peer institutions already using Raiser's Edge NXT, and we liked the fact there is a forward-looking roadmap for the product.

Q. How did you find the migration process?

We were very involved with the planning and working with the Blackbaud team to agree how and when we would move to Raiser's Edge NXT. The great thing about the system is that the Blackbaud team is able to do numerous test runs where you actually set up a test environment, known as a "sand pit," prior to going live. This gave us a lot of confidence and reassurance, and we had been through the entire process twice before going live with Raiser's Edge NXT in January 2021.

For the actual implementation, we had everyone choreographed down to the last minute, so we knew exactly where they should be and what they should be doing. This was a huge migration, and it wasn't to be taken lightly. With this amount of data, you can never predict how long it will take. But because we were so prepared and had liaised so closely with Blackbaud, going live was a great success.

Everything went so smoothly, and it was all due to the careful planning and the team at Blackbaud who had been through this many times before with other similar organisations.

Q. How has Blackbaud Raiser's Edge NXT helped to shape your future plans?

Up until now, the only areas of the university that had access to the CRM were Finance and Development and Alumni Relations, but since we implemented Raiser's Edge NXT, we have also rolled it out to the Vice Chancellor's Office. This is a big and positive change for us, and we have more plans to carry out an institutional rollout.

The way Raiser's Edge NXT is set up means we are able to configure specific views, so we can provide the access each department needs, and that gives us more control over its use.

We are now working on our five-year plan and looking at what we need in terms of technology. Having Raiser's Edge NXT opens up a lot of options for us, as Blackbaud has a fantastic partner marketplace and there are lots of tools available that can easily be integrated to give us more functionality. To have a company come in and say, 'We're fully integrated with your product', we know that means no messing about and no data loss, and that's priceless for us.

Q. Do you have any advice for other organisations thinking of moving to the cloud?

I would say don't underestimate how dramatic the change will be. It will provide you with lots of opportunities, but there is a lot of work to do. With good planning and the team at Blackbaud, who know what they're doing, it can easily be done.

Blackbaud Raiser's Edge NXT® helps you overcome fundraising obstacles and lets your mission grow.

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