

Building a connected data foundation to support student success at the University of Northampton

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The University of Northampton is one of the UK's youngest universities and positions social impact at the heart of its mission.

From its Waterside Campus, it is focused on supporting aspiration, creating opportunities and delivering impact through teaching, research and engagement with the wider community. Alongside that wider institutional

ambition, the University has set a clear direction for how digital, data and technology should improve the way it works, strengthen decision-making and enhance the experience of staff and students.

Key Facts

1 UK university with a mission centred on supporting aspiration, creating opportunities and delivering impact

2 Waterside Campus opened in 2018 as part of a modern approach to learning and student experience

3 Digital and data strategy places strong emphasis on better decision-making, improved student and staff experience, governance and capability building

The Challenge

Like many large institutions, the University of Northampton was working with a broad and evolving applications estate. Over time, important data had become distributed across multiple systems, teams and processes. That created a familiar challenge for organisations looking to become more insight-led: there was valuable information available, but it was difficult to bring together in a way that supported timely, confident decision-making.

For the University, this mattered at both an operational and strategic level. Reporting on issues such as student attendance, engagement and progression was possible, but it was not straightforward to connect information from different systems and create a consistent, trusted picture. As Navinder Kaur, Head of Application Services, explained, "People export their data, work their magic on it, and then take it to a meeting and say, this is what my figures show; but because everyone interprets and presents data in a different way, we needed to move to a single source of truth."

That challenge was particularly important in a university environment, where the quality and timeliness of information can directly influence the support available to students. The University wanted to move towards a more connected model in which data could be used to help colleagues act sooner, and more effectively. As Navinder

put it, "It's about making sure that the students' welfare is the priority and empowering us with the ability to act quickly, increasing the likelihood of positive outcomes."

There was also a broader institutional ambition behind the programme. The University's digital and data strategy set out a vision for more joined-up systems, stronger governance, better use of authoritative data and a more seamless experience for staff and students. In practice, that meant creating a stronger foundation for evidence-based decisions, operational planning and service improvement. Navinder described that ambition clearly: "We decided to apply our digital and data strategy, and try to speed up the journey to our end goal with this project. That being a situation where we have access to unified data, so we can make informed decisions."

At the same time, the University wanted to make progress in a way that was realistic and sustainable. This project would initially address fragmented data, reduce reliance on manual workarounds, improve oversight of the student journey and build a platform that could support future use cases over time. The primary focus on student-related scenarios, including attendance, engagement, retention and a more complete view of the student lifecycle, reflected the importance of realising value early, in areas that matter deeply to the institution.

Critical Success Factors

Create a trusted, central data foundation that can bring together information from multiple systems

Improve the University's ability to support timely, evidence-based decisions around student engagement, retention and welfare

Deliver the programme in a way that builds internal capability, governance and long-term sustainability

The Solution

Softcat and Oakland worked with the University of Northampton alongside Microsoft and Boomi to support a connected approach to the programme.

Rather than treating the requirement as a standalone technology implementation, the engagement focused on helping the University move from strategic intent to an actionable delivery plan, with the right partners, technologies and methods of working all aligned around the same objective.

Good discovery at the start of the project was crucial to ensure the near and long term success of the project. Softcat and Oakland worked closely with stakeholders across the University to identify and prioritise the use cases that would shape the first phase of delivery. This meant getting a clear understanding of where improved data visibility would have the biggest impact, where systems needed to connect, what "good" looked like from a reporting perspective, and how everything aligned with wider operational priorities. What emerged from this process was something broader than expected, with additional opportunities identified beyond the initial scope, helping to create a more holistic roadmap for future development.

From there, the programme focused on creating a consolidated data platform using Microsoft Fabric, alongside integration capabilities designed to connect source systems more effectively. The aim was to create a more complete and authoritative view of data, especially around the student lifecycle, while also laying the groundwork for improved governance, reporting and self-service over time. This aligned strongly with the University's own strategy, which calls for a data platform, master data discipline, stronger reporting capability and improved access to trustworthy information.

For Navinder, the value of the solution was in the creation of a central foundation that could support better data quality, clearer ownership and more meaningful decision-making across the University. She explained, "we're really wanting to move integrations to the next level, and have a single master data source for everything. When we have a central reporting repository with accurate data, we can work on data analysis to really start making some innovative, data driven decisions, and crucially: start using reports generated from the data to inform strategy." The work also recognised that platform success depends on more than architecture alone. Governance, ownership

and practical adoption were central themes. The University did not want to create a new repository without improving the processes and accountability that sit around it. As Navinder noted, "Any organisation can put a lot of data into Fabric and say, yeah, we've got a data platform, but it absolutely has to be data of extremely high quality and integrity. We want to ensure we work in this way because as we all know good inputs equal good outputs". This emphasis on governance helped ensure the programme was as much about improving operating discipline as it was about implementing technical capability.

Partnership across all key stakeholders drove the project towards the end goal. Multiple organisations were involved, each contributing different capabilities, but the experience from the University's perspective was one where this worked seamlessly. Navinder described that collaborative dynamic in simple terms: "We've got five component partners from different organisation which could be really complex." She added, "but the thing that makes me happy is that it feels like we're one team, all working together to towards this common goal."

Softcat's role within that model included: helping the University navigate options, simplifying access to the right expertise, and coordination of the commercial and partner ecosystem around the programme. That meant supporting procurement conversations, bringing in the right specialists and helping the University move more efficiently than it might have done if each workstream had been sourced and managed separately. As Navinder Kaur reflected, "Having that kind of central point we could go to for the whole project was really useful. Softcat have the experience, and understand the market, its key players, and how they apply to our situation. This means when we do progress to engaging the wider market, we're a lot more prepared and it's much easier for us."

Ultimately, the programme was designed to leave the University in a stronger position over time. Internal capability building, skills transfer and a more self-sufficient operating model were treated as core requirements, right from day one. That was particularly important as the team looked beyond the first phase towards future use cases and wider adoption of the platform.

Solution Highlights

Discovery-led approach to identify priority use cases and align delivery with the University's digital and data strategy

Microsoft Fabric-based data platform combined with integration capabilities to connect key systems and improve reporting foundations

Collaborative multi-partner delivery model focused on governance, internal capability and long-term sustainability

The Benefits

Although the programme is part of a broader transformation journey, the benefits already being targeted are significant. At the highest level, the University is creating the conditions for more consistent, joined-up and evidence-based decisions. Instead of relying on fragmented extracts and individually interpreted spreadsheets, teams are moving towards a model where authoritative data can be brought together, understood more clearly and used with greater confidence.

That has particularly strong implications for the student experience. A more connected view of attendance, engagement and progression can help the University identify issues earlier and respond more effectively. Rather than waiting for problems to show themselves after the fact, colleagues at the university can work with better visibility and be more proactive in the support they provide. Navinder highlighted that principle when discussing student-related use cases, explaining that, with welfare front of mind, the University wants to identify when a student is no longer engaging so that the appropriate support can be offered sooner.

This greater visibility also supports planning and performance. Better integrated data can help the University understand patterns across recruitment, course demand, retention and engagement, enabling more informed operational and strategic decisions. Navinder Kaur summed up that aspiration by saying "the University wants to quickly quantify and forecast for the future, and make evidence-based decisions around the education landscape and course offering more effective".

There are benefits for colleagues too. A centralised and better governed approach reduces duplication, creates

clearer accountability and lowers the friction that comes from disconnected systems and manual processes. It also provides a foundation for more self-service reporting and more scalable improvement in the future. Rather than building one-off fixes, the University is investing in a platform and operating model that can grow over time as new use cases are prioritised.

From the University's perspective, responsiveness, open communication and partnership have also been central strengths throughout the engagement. Navinder described the experience this way: "It's been an open and honest working relationship across the board, so it's been a really positive experience." She also noted the practical value of knowing that concerns would be picked up quickly and that expectations would be managed transparently when circumstances changed. That sense of trust is helping the programme move at pace without losing alignment. Even with multiple strands in flight, the University has felt supported by a team that is engaged, accessible and focused on delivery.

Perhaps most importantly, the work is setting the University up for the longer term. This is not a short-lived intervention. It is the beginning of a broader capability that can support future reporting, additional integrations, stronger governance and more mature use of data across the institution. By investing in a reusable foundation and internal capability at the same time, the University is creating a path towards sustained value rather than a single isolated outcome.

Benefits at a Glance

Better foundations for proactive, evidence-based decisions around student engagement, retention and welfare

Reduced fragmentation through a more central, governed and connected data environment

Stronger internal capability and a scalable platform to support future use cases across the University

Why Softcat

For the University of Northampton, Softcat stood out not just because of technology access, but because of the way it helped bring together the right people, partners and options around a shared objective.

The University valued the trust already established in the relationship, the responsiveness of the team and the ability to simplify what could otherwise have been a more fragmented process. As Navinder Kaur said, "We've had a great working relationship with Softcat for many years here at Northampton. Softcat are a trusted partner of ours and we know we can go to them with the confidence that what we've asked for, we're going to get." That confidence, combined with a collaborative delivery model and access to the right expertise, helped create a partnership built for progress.