Using Academic Analytics:  
The experiences of UniSA’s Student Learning Service

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Introduction

In 2004, the University of South Australia (UniSA) focused on creating a coordinated and consolidated web-based management-reporting environment known as UniSAinfo Reporting. This new environment was deployed to the entire institution and enabled users to generate simple or complex information, with data from various source systems, tailored to their local area and functional responsibilities.

They may seem like strange bedfellows, like ‘The Odd Couple’, but Learning Connection, UniSA’s student learning service, and the Business Intelligence (BI) team in Planning and Assurance Services (PAS) have forged a strong working partnership through embracing the value of data and its application in planning and decision-making utilising UniSA’s BI environment.

The partnership began as a pilot project with the development of an original data cube from Learning Connection’s student data but has since evolved into a mature application of this BI technology. This paper, through a case study analysis, discusses:

- The early experiences of Learning Connection and PAS in developing the data cubes and how the value was demonstrated to non-traditional users of this technology.
- The support infrastructure that the business needed to develop, including demonstrable leadership from the user area, to educate and train Learning Connection staff in the use of UniSAinfo Reporting.
- The experiences of the users of the cubes and how their expertise has evolved (and consequently, their requirements and expectations about what the data can deliver).
- How, through UniSAinfo Reporting, the unevenness and the questionable quality of the data became highly visible leading to both a cultural and technological solution to improving it.
- Finally, the importance of managing this relationship within the formal boundaries of a service level agreement to maximise value for both parties involved.

The use of the environment varies within the institution with user acceptance steady and continuing to grow. However, the unlikely business areas of the university that have embraced the technology provide us with great insight into this new way of working.

Context

What is business intelligence?

Business intelligence (BI) is a concept coined by Gartner as a user-centred process that includes accessing, exploring and analysing data, and developing insights and understanding which leads to improved and informed decision making (Tiedrich, 2003). Put simply, BI converts data into useful information and, through human analysis, into knowledge. Some examples of the application of BI are:
Creating forecasts based on historical data, past and current performance, and estimates of the direction in which the future will go.

‘What if’ analysis of the impacts of changes and alternative scenarios.

Ad hoc access to the data to answer specific, non-routine questions.

Strategic insight.

BI enables managers to make strategic decisions, as well as establish or re-engineer business strategies and processes to gain competitive advantage, improve business operations and profitability, and achieve the strategic directions determined by senior management.

**Business Intelligence System at UniSA**

Negash and Gray (2003) state that BI systems combine data gathering, data storage, and knowledge management with analytical tools to present complex and competitive information to planners and decision-makers. Implicit in this definition is the view that BI systems provide actionable information delivered at the right time, right place and in the right form to assist decision-makers. The objective is to improve the timeliness and quality of the input to the decision process, hence facilitating the work of knowledge workers and managers alike (Dresner et al, 2002).

An important building block of the BI system at UniSA was the creation of a coordinated and consolidated business intelligence environment – both from an organisational and functional perspective. Importantly, this environment needed to encourage users to meet their BI needs (data access, analysis and reporting) through self-service.

Consequently, in 2004, a number of Cognos products were implemented across the University (accessible to all 2000+ UniSA staff) to create what is now known as *UniSAinfo Reporting*, a web based management reporting environment. The environment enables users to generate simple or complex information queries tailored to their local area, using data from the human resources, finance, research, student (domestic and international), marketing, project quality and evaluation corporate systems. The data is available as multi-dimensional cubes, which the user can ‘slice and dice’ and ‘canned’ reports.

To complement *UniSAinfo Reporting*, a user support framework for both users and developers was established. This framework is structured around educating users through targeted training (generic/contextual/one-on-one) and development activities (usually focusing on key university business processes) as well as user driven support services (for example, Newsgroups such as the Research Reporting User Group).

**Planning and Assurance Services**

The custodian of this organisation-wide BI system is the Business Intelligence (BI) team within Planning and Assurance Services (PAS). PAS is a unit, which has two distinct functions at UniSA, audit and corporate performance. The latter function encompasses BI, analysis and strategy, and quality and evaluation. The BI team in PAS, working closely with the Analysis and Strategy team and Information Strategy and Technology Services, has oversight for UniSA’s BI system.

The functional responsibilities of the BI team are to:

- Ensure everyone, from senior management through to the knowledge worker at the local level, shares the same level of BI activism (that is, recognise that BI will deliver more insight and perspective to the University).

- Understand clearly the needs of different users and their role in the organisation.
Manages the tools and methodologies to help deliver the BI system, including guiding users in self-service to meet their BI needs.

Identify and share best practice in the delivery and application of BI.

Anticipate organisational problems and turn them into opportunities for growth and development.

This team’s skill profile encompasses both technical and business expertise, and has responsibility for fostering a University-wide culture of collaboration in the implementation of UniSA’s BI system. Participation of the business, through units like PAS, provides valuable knowledge and guidance from the perspective of the end users and business units.

**BI User Profile: Matching User Type to Function**

Academic institutions vary in how they have deployed their management reporting environments with many favouring the deep use of analytics and reporting within narrow functions (Goldstein, 2005). The experience at UniSA has been somewhat different, opting for an approach that is both pervasive and organisation-wide, with the strategic vision that UniSAinfo Reporting, for many staff, will become an everyday tool they utilise to do their job.

User acceptance at UniSA has been steady and continues to grow. Tiedrich (2003, p.9) claims that ‘the majority of BI users need only basic information, and their jobs have a relatively small BI component (perhaps 10%) … while knowledge workers have a much higher BI content in their jobs, perhaps 30%, and business analysts (high-level knowledge workers) are more of the order of 80%’. The literature clearly states that it is important to match user types to the BI solution to meet the diverse needs of an organisation, this is nicely summarised for UniSA in Table 1 (Hostmann and Buytendijk, 2004).

**Table 1. Match User Types and Functionality to Maximise Value**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of users</th>
<th>Super users</th>
<th>Senior management</th>
<th>Functional Managers</th>
<th>Occasional information users</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of users</td>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>10-12</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>100-2000+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BI tools and functions</td>
<td>Ad hoc query</td>
<td>Dashboard#</td>
<td>Reports</td>
<td>Reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Online analytical processing (OLAP)</td>
<td>Reports</td>
<td>Spreadsheets</td>
<td>Spreadsheets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reports</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>OLAP view</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Data mining</td>
<td>performance</td>
<td>Corporate performance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Advanced analysis</td>
<td>management</td>
<td>management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic value</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Low to medium</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# - still to be developed at UniSA

UniSA has focused on broadening the user profile in all classes of users by ensuring that the BI system is integrated with flexible business processes, aligned more closely with institutional objectives and the skills and needs of users. In addition, we have deployed a range of tools that meet the needs of our varied user profile as Table 1 illustrates, with an increasing shift away from using spreadsheets. This case study looks at the experiences of a cohort of staff who sit firmly in User Type 4 – occasional information consumers.

**Learning Connection**

This paper focuses on UniSA’s student services area known as Learning Connection. Learning Connection provides a range of services and resources to help students succeed in their studies and manage their life-cycle as a student. Services include:

- learning development,
- language development,
- personal issues,
- disability services,
research degree student services; and
international student services.

Learning Connection student services are provided through:

- online resources,
- workshops and information,
- on-campus workshops,
- individual contacts through ‘drop-in’ sessions (a short 10 – 15 minute session with no prior booking required); and
- 30 minute appointments.

Learning Connection also plays a major part in assisting commencing students to make transition to university through the provision of resources, workshops and other activities.

For academic staff, Learning Connection provides information and resources to:

- develop an understanding of the University of South Australia Teaching and Learning framework;
- develop teaching and supervision practice; and a
- advance the scholarship of teaching and research supervision.

Assistance is available through the Academic Development team for curriculum development, assessment, Internationalisation, research education, online teaching and learning, embedding the Graduate Qualities and more. However, this case study focuses on the student services that Learning Connection offer.

**Have Data But What To Do With It?**

Importantly, Learning Connection already had a culture of recording activity undertaken by its staff in their delivery of its services. Capturing this data enabled managers to:

- Demonstrate what services were being provided to students.
- Critique the portfolio of services offered and make decisions about the viability of services and recommendations about other options, where appropriate.
- Explore trends over time of utilisation of services.
- Ensure that Learning Connection has the available resources distributed appropriately across campus teams especially during periods of high demand.
- Provide regular reports to the University’s Senior Management Group, relevant Pro Vice Chancellors and key stakeholders on the use and effectiveness of services offered.

In particular, staff recorded their contact with individual students around the following dimensions:

- Reason for contact
- Type of contact
- Outcome of contact
- Location
- Comments
- Date

Whilst they captured a diverse range of data on their own, Learning Connection’s reporting capabilities were limited, rudimentary and relied on a small number of staff producing ‘once off’ reports. Typically, accessing reliable data was time consuming and difficult. Furthermore, manipulating data to observe trends or run comparisons across different parameters was virtually impossible.

It was early 2005, when the managers of Learning Connection became aware of the functionality of *UniSAinfo Reporting*. They saw it as a potential solution to their reporting woes and as a means to realise the ‘real value’ of their captured data.
Designing and Developing the Reasons Cube

When developing new cubes and reports for clients the BI team undertake the following methodology:

1. Business requirements - scope with the users the type of information they use and why.

2. Functional specification - develop a functional requirement which informs the design of the reporting product.

3. Analyse the data source – be aware of best practices for sourcing data to a BI application (i.e. summarise data, clean data).

4. Acceptance Testing - undertake user acceptance testing to ensure that the end product meets the needs and expectations of the user.

5. Training - provide training to users upon publication of the new reporting products to the production environment of UniSAinfo Reporting.

Steps 1 to 2 were relatively simple to undertake with Learning Connection as they knew what data they captured and for what purpose, and it was this that informed the design and development of the Reasons Cube.

The Reasons cube design saw the integration of the Learning Connection dimensions with student demographic data drawn from UniSA’s student source system (Medici). The original cube enabled staff to customise it in various ways to explore:

- specific measures of activity (Total Appointments/Reasons for Contact/No. of Students);
- by various dimensions, for example All Session Dates, All Visit Types, All Divisions, All Professional Groups and a number of student demographic characteristics.

The benefits gained by Learning Connection in the adoption of this technology were immediate, they included:

- Direct access to the data in a meaningful format at the click of a mouse.
- Provision of access to reports to all relevant Learning Connection staff at their desktops.
- The capability to change the report parameters dynamically (the data is refreshed the first and third Tuesday of each month).
- The capability to explore and discover patterns, meaningful relationships, anomalies and trends.
- The functionality to compare data across campuses and professional areas.
- The integration of student demographic data from Medici enabled the reporting of contacts with students against nominated programs, equity groups and other key student dimensions.

In terms of the application of this data, it is used at two levels within Learning Connection, they are:

- Functional Managers - who were previously User Type 4 but now have shifted to User Type 3 (refer to Table 1).
- Professional Staff - who are User Type 4 but who now engage with the data on a regular basis.

Prior to the development of the cube, the professional staff collected the data but saw it disappear into a ‘management blackhole’ where the data was perceived to be only used by managers. However, this behaviour has now changed with these staff empowered by the easy accessibility of the data, as well as understanding of it and they now use it regularly to plan their workload as both, an individual and professional group. Managers too have increased their contact with the data, scrutinising it at their regular management meetings as well as using it for planning, service reporting and strategic decision-making.
It can be said that since the development of the original *Reasons* cube, Learning Connection’s management reporting requirements have evolved considerably and become more mature. They have now integrated student outcome data into the *Reasons* cube. [Attachment 1] shows in detail the 2006 version of the *Reasons and Outcome* cube. It is important that the BI team work with Learning Connection to ensure that emerging and evolving requirements are continually integrated and supported as needed. The section on Relationship Service Agreement: Committing to Continuous Improvement addresses how this is managed at UniSA.

**BI Activism: The Importance of Leadership**

One of the most important attributes to assure the success of BI initiatives and their take-up is leadership from the top. The Learning Connection managers, aware of the functionality of *UniSAinfo Reporting*, understood the need for and potential value of BI in their workplace – this is called ‘BI activism’. To guarantee a successful implementation of BI, the managers needed to undertake an honest evaluation of the available skills and the culture of the workplace. They needed also to be aware of the challenges that lay ahead in moving Learning Connection from being occasional information users to regular information consumers.

Importantly, the existing workloads of all student services staff was acknowledged as ‘full’, that is, that they all had little time to plan their week let alone look at data on a regular basis. However, a ‘softly, softly’ approach to training was undertaken and the value of having the data one mouse click away was demonstrated explicitly to them. Consequently, the deployment was both fluid and relevant to learning Connection. Good leadership coupled with the right training are significant drivers of BI usage, the next section discusses in greater detail the importance of the right type of training.

**The Right Training: A Critical Success Factor**

Research has shown that the effectiveness of training has a significant impact on the take-up of BI tools (Goldstein, 2005). Typically, users of new technology are trained once and then left to apply the new technology to their context. The BI team has adopted a model where initial training is provided which exposes the users to the basics of the BI tool. However, it is the subsequent training where the user’s level of expertise jumps incrementally – after having had basic training and some well-supported hands-on experience – the user has a much better context within which to grasp the next level of understanding. The important factor is of course, context, where the user sees the real value in the application of the BI tool and the associated data products within their workplace experience.

The training partnership between Learning Connection and the BI team has resulted in many positive user experiences. This is attributed to the following:

- The BI trainers’ willingness to listen to Learning Connection’s requirements for training.
- Assisting the users to learn how to use the BI tools but also help them understand the underlying data and how it can be applied.
- Establish a clear avenue by which users can provide feedback to drive continuous improvement.
- A commitment to measuring the effectiveness of training based on ongoing use.

It cannot be underestimated how important it is to educate the users on how to interpret and apply the data. The training provided to the professional staff was not simply focused on the data within the Learning Connection cube but also on supplementary data available in *UniSAinfo Reporting*. Understanding this additional data provided further context to the Learning Connection data they were analysing. For example, the Career Advisers explored student enrolment and Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) data as well and the International Student Advisers investigated data on international student enrolments. The training requirements of the professional staff were very different to that of the Learning Connection managers and the structure of the training certainly acknowledged that.
Realising the Value of Data

Research has shown that ‘enterprises that have measured the impact have found they are losing multiple millions of dollars each year as a result of poor data quality’ (Friedman, 2003, p.1). Furthermore, evidence suggests organisations that raise the visibility of data quality issues will reap substantial benefits over time (Friedman, 2002). Building on awareness, organisations need to follow a structured approach to ensure that business and IT resources are focused on achieving and sustaining improvements in data quality.

For Learning Connection, the development of the original Reasons cube made the data highly visible and consequently, that there were obvious data quality issues. These issues were at two levels, they were:

- the intrinsic data dimensions that relate to data validity, reliability and accuracy; for example ensuring that ‘reason for contact’ is entered for all students who visit Learning Connection and that this information is correct and complete; and

- the extrinsic dimensions that relate to the business needs of data users, such as data accessibility, timeliness, relevance and conciseness; for example ensuring that the ‘reasons’ data is readily available on an ongoing basis in a summary form that meets the requirements of Learning Connection managers and professional staff.

In 2006, Learning Connection decided to address the data quality issues as well as the gaps in the data. It became evident that it was necessary to achieve functional and technical alignment around the data, technology, people and process to deliver better reporting to Learning Connection staff. This process included:

- A review and documentation of business processes within each team.
- A review of all fields of data recorded.
- The development of an interface, which made it easier to enter the data.
- A review of the list of “reasons for contact” available for use by staff to align them better with University priorities and to provide more meaningful reports to divisions/schools.
- A redesign of the back-end database.

Following the review of business practices, a phase 2 development of Learning Connection Reporting has commenced with a view to build in functionality to streamline practices and to minimise the need for staff to enter data in multiple places. An example is the inclusion of secure case notes fields for Counsellors.

The diagram below is an example of the new interface that professional staff uses to enter data from each student contact. It provides them with a clear structure within which to enter the necessary data. In addition to the new interface, Learning Connection has also recognised the need to develop some standards on data collection and educate staff on why this is so important. This has seen the development of the Guidelines for Entering Contacts (Attachment 2) which ensures that Learning Connection staff capture data better and understand the business rules associated with it.
**Relationship Service Agreement: Committing to Continuous Improvement**

The BI team in PAS and Learning Connection manage their ongoing working partnership through a Relationship Service Agreement (RSA). It is essential to define the parameters of the services to be provided, for the benefit of both the provider and the recipient. The intention of the agreement is to:

- Identify and define Learning Connection’s needs
- Provide a framework for understanding
- Simplify complex issues
- Reduce areas of conflict
- Encourage dialog in the event of disputes
- Eliminate unrealistic expectations

The benefits for the BI team and Learning Connection in establishing an agreement are:

1. As a communication tool which facilitates ongoing communication between the parties from the outset.

2. To help avoid or offset disputes by providing a shared understanding of needs and priorities, particularly those around roles and responsibilities (e.g. Learning Connection is responsible for assuring the quality of the data).

3. As a living document where parties can on a regular basis review, the agreement to assess service adequacy and negotiate changes (e.g. the incorporation of ‘outcomes’ data into the 2006 version of the *Reasons* cube).

4. To objectively assess the service effectiveness

For the BI team and Learning Connection, the greatest advantage of the RSA is as a structured framework to review regularly (point 3 above) whether the data cubes are meeting Learning Connection’s requirements. This aspect of the RSA cannot be underestimated. For example, Learning Connection can now see the ‘real value’ in having their data readily available to analyse and the RSA provides a mechanism by which to negotiate new work such as the proposed cube on their data collected for their campus workshop program.
Institutional Attributes for Successful BI Acceptance

Notably, this case study has demonstrated that successful BI implementation is characterised by a strong alignment between business and organisation goals, as well as those of IT and the end-user. At UniSA, this success is most evident at the local level when end-users are engaged with the BI system and continuing to extend the application of this new way of working to their daily experience. This case study has enabled us to isolate a number of key factors that contribute to successful BI acceptance, they are:

- Understand the organisational culture, business processes and requirements of the end-user that you are delivering outcomes to.
- The importance of business-side-led training cannot be overemphasised.
- Leadership within the functional area, coupled with an understanding of the cultural and practical challenges that face the BI implementation.
- Data quality, including acknowledgement that ‘garbage in’ means ‘garbage out’ and that any data cleansing initiative requires time and effort.
- Commitment to active two-way communication and periodic reviews, preferably formally through a service level agreement.

This case study demonstrates that whilst the BI team and Learning Connection seem to be unlikely collaborators, the partnership they have shared together has been a highly positive experience for both parties and no doubt continues to flourish today.

References


## Attachment 1. 2006 Reasons and Outcomes Cube

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<td>352</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Attachment 2. Guidelines for Entering Contacts

Learning Connection Reporting

Guidelines for entering contacts

The reason we record the activity in Learning Connection is to enable us to demonstrate what services are being provided to students, to critique what is offered and decide if other options exist or there are trends to be aware of, to ensure we have the resources distributed appropriately across campus teams especially at the busy periods and to be able to provide regular reports to the Senior Management Group, PVCs and the Director FLC on the effectiveness of the services offered.

What is less useful is the ‘number’ of contacts unless in the opinion of the staff member concerned a professional service has been provided. For example, when handing out health care cards, responding to emails which are already part of a recorded service contact, or answering a student enquiry on the location or time of a workshop there is no value in recording this as a stand alone. When you have an initial contact with a student and you provide a service then that is recorded. If subsequently you are asked to do something which relates to the initial service then you don’t record again unless it requires a new service on your part. A new and different matter is recorded more of the same is not.

The following table provides a guide to entering data in LC Reporting fields.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LC Reporting data entry field</th>
<th>Options (ie these will be the options available within the drop-down list for the given field)</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contact Type</td>
<td>Drop-in</td>
<td>In person at scheduled drop-in times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drop-in - telephone</td>
<td>A drop in conducted via telephone during a scheduled drop-in time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appointment short</td>
<td>Maximum half an hour in person at scheduled times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appointment short - telephone</td>
<td>A short appointment conducted via telephone at scheduled times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appointment long</td>
<td>Maximum one hour in person (prearranged).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appointment long - telephone</td>
<td>A long appointment conducted via telephone (prearranged).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unscheduled contact</td>
<td>In person contact not during a drop-in or appointment where a service is being provided.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unscheduled contact - telephone</td>
<td>Telephone contact not during a drop-in or appointment where a service is being provided.</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Email</td>
<td>Email contact with a student where a service is being provided.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email – drop box</td>
<td>Email contact with a student initiated from a generic email address (drop box) enquiry where a service is being provided. (eg <a href="mailto:disability@unisa.edu.au">disability@unisa.edu.au</a>)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td>Contact via synchronous or asynchronous discussion where a service is provided to an individual student who can be identified.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Administrative contact        | This can be used when a significant administrative service is provided to an individual student without an associated direct contact with the student. For example work rights applications or proof of student status letter. | This contact type should not
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>As per list The location entered should be where you are at the time of the contact.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason for contact (Primary)</td>
<td>As per list This should be the main reason why the student came to see you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reason for contact</td>
<td>As per list Additional reasons, if applicable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome (Primary)</td>
<td>As per list This should be the main outcome of the contact. This may not necessarily be the outcome of the student’s issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome</td>
<td>As per list Additional outcome of the contact, if applicable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments</td>
<td>Free text field Please note that information in this field can be viewed by all LC Reporting users.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Murray Barr, July 2006