

Applications portal makes it easier to keep on learning

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Jaanus Cristoffel – Head of IT Division, Estonian Ministry of Education and Research



SUMMARY OF KEY FACTS

Organisation

Ministry of Education and Research, Estonia

Services delivered

Development and implementation of SAIS, a Common Admissions Information Portal that enables school leavers to submit electronic applications to universities and colleges

Key metrics

- 16 higher education establishments
- 40,000 users

Benefits

- **Reduced operational costs** – the cost of managing student applications has decreased significantly
- **Increased productivity** – has accelerated administrative tasks, saving time and human resources
- **Improved customer experience** – students no longer need to submit individual applications or travel to each university and they receive much faster decisions
- **Optimised placements** – if offers are rejected they can be automatically offered to the next best candidate
- **Maximised flexibility** – provides a secure and scalable platform to support future educational needs

Challenge

Located in the heart of the Baltic Sea region, Estonia is one of the Baltic States that regained its independence in August 1991. Since then Estonia has witnessed rapid economic growth and in 2004 the country became a member of NATO and the European Union (EU).

Estonia is famous for its innovative and highly developed use of IT, having one of the highest Internet connectivity rates in the world. The Government is firmly committed to developing a knowledge-based economy and is in the vanguard of e-government. Outlining its aims Andrus Ansip, Prime Minister, Estonia, said, *“Although investing in innovation requires great efforts and hard work, and it takes time until the investments will pay off, it is worth the effort. There is no alternative to this path. I am convinced that when acting purposefully, we can turn Estonia into a country that is internationally known for its innovative solutions, top-level research and technology.”*

As part of the Government’s strategy, Estonia’s Ministry of Education and Research is constantly creating new ways to provide easier access to life-long learning for all of 1.3 million citizens of Estonia, in order to help them achieve an even higher standard of living.

Jaanus Cristoffel, Head of IT Division, Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, says, *“Some years ago we started to look at developing a new information system that would enable school graduates to apply to universities without going there in person and without the need to submit multiple documents. By 2004 the idea was starting to take shape and, in cooperation with the Estonian Information Technology Foundation, we began to plan the SAIS (SisseAstumise InfoSüsteem) application. The main aim of SAIS was to offer a secure and convenient way for the graduates of secondary schools to apply for admissions and also provide universities with an efficient and cost-effective way to evaluate and accept new students.”*

Solution

In 2004, following an extensive public procurement, the contract to develop and implement SAIS was won by Fujitsu (previously known as AS Mandator Estonia).

SAIS provides a Common Admissions Information Portal that enables Estonian school leavers to submit electronic applications to participating universities and colleges securely over the Internet. They can log-on to the system through the country’s Citizen’s portal using their Estonian national ID-card or through one of the Estonian internet banks, so the identity of everyone who uses SAIS is fully verified. However, students also have the opportunity to submit admission applications on paper if they want to.

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In addition, SAIS is connected to educational databases in other countries, so it is not necessary to provide evidence of previous educational achievements, examination grades, or higher education qualifications if that data is already recorded elsewhere. However, even if such data does not yet exist electronically, SAIS can issue a request to the relevant school to corroborate any missing or unverified information, and once this data is confirmed and entered in SAIS it can then be used to support any additional student applications.

After logging in, the entire information exchange between the students and the universities is managed through a secure encrypted SSL data channel and cannot be viewed by unauthorised users or other universities, even when multiple applications have been made.

Once applications are submitted, SAIS enables universities to consolidate the capture of all enrolment information, and the associated processes and decision-making, within one environment. As a result, the admissions process can be simplified and accelerated, with offers and refusals being issued and either accepted or rejected electronically. If a student rejects the offer of a place it can then be offered to the next candidate on the list almost immediately.

Jaanus Cristoffel comments, *“SAIS was first used in 2005, and we did have a few issues with the submission of applications, because the system had been put in place very quickly, so the implementation and first electronic admission process took place simultaneously. However, while only one college used the system in the first year, by the summer of 2006 the number of users had increased significantly and even the biggest universities were using SAIS.”*

SAIS is now widely used throughout Estonia and most of its higher education schools have joined the system, and it has some 40,000 users. It is also the first system of its kind to be ready for the introduction of the EU central enrolment system in 2009, when Estonia will be integrated with a European and the global education system.

“SAIS is now a vital part of our educational system,” says Jaanus Cristoffel, *“and is supporting our aims of creating a knowledge-based economy and providing the best possible educational opportunities for our citizens. People have got so used to the system that there have been some stories about people being upset if a university is not part of SAIS, because they have to go to the university to submit their application!”*

Benefits

The SAIS application developed by Fujitsu is enabling Estonia's Ministry of Education and Research to:

- **Reduce operational costs** – the cost of managing student applications has decreased significantly through the simplification of processes and electronic sharing of data with students and other educational organisations
- **Increase productivity** – has accelerated administrative tasks, saving time and human resources and freeing up university workers for other activities
- **Improve customer experience** – student candidates no longer need to submit individual applications or travel to each university and they receive much faster decisions.

- **Optimise placements** – if offers are rejected they can be automatically offered to the next best candidate
- **Maximise flexibility** – provides a secure and scalable platform to support future educational needs.

“The most important thing about SAIS is the communication with other country's educational registers. The infrastructure of state registers in Estonia is very highly developed, so the users of SAIS can obtain information about themselves from different databases. This data is then automatically presented on the electronic application forms, so the submission process only takes a few minutes,” explains Jaanus Cristoffel. *“However, SAIS not only simplifies the process for students, but also for universities. Thanks to this well-planned solution the number of workers dealing with admissions has decreased noticeably. Of course, the new system is also environmentally friendly as there's no need to print tons of application forms anymore, because everything is done through the Internet.”*

Approach

During the development process for SAIS the need for such an application was carefully evaluated, taking into account the potential risks and the impact on colleges and universities of changing their existing admission processes and systems.

The biggest obstacle to the introduction of SAIS was the inherent differences between universities in how they organised their studies, their admission processes and systems as well as their rules and regulations. So, rather than impose a solution that standardised all processes, it was decided to analyse each university's needs in order to identify similarities and disparities. This information was then used to develop a common platform that could also accommodate individual requirements wherever possible in order to create a user-friendly solution.

Jaanus Cristoffel adds, *“Each university is like a little state, with its own ways of doing things, so we needed to recognise that fact and make the system as flexible and easy to use as possible. However, it was also essential that we didn't lose sight of the main purpose of SAIS, which is to streamline and simplify the admissions processes for universities.”*

Since 2006 SAIS has also been progressively enhanced and improved each year in order to make it even more flexible and convenient for the users and universities.

Expertise

With over 40 years experience of supporting the needs of customers, Fujitsu has a proven track record in providing complex systems integration and application development and management services that reduce costs, improve productivity and customer services and deliver a compelling return on investment.

“The fact that SAIS now has such widespread use proves that Fujitsu is a trustworthy and capable developer of applications for higher education. With the invaluable experience that it now has I'm sure that Fujitsu will be able to help us address many similar challenges in the future,” comments Jaanus Cristoffel.

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