Case Study | Google Apps for Education

University of Pretoria expects to save R590,000 ($57,260) through using Google Apps for Education

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The University of Pretoria (UP) is a leading research university in South Africa and one of the largest in the country. The University has seven campuses as well as a number of other sites, including the Pretoria Academic Hospital. It offers more than 1,800 academic programmes in Afrikaans and English reaching 62,000+ students. UP is at the forefront of tertiary education in the region and collaborates with world-class partners to ensure continued excellence in learning and teaching.

At a Glance

What they wanted to do

- Provide superior email to students, including mailbox size at a low cost
- Create a consistent and reliable communications channel for official announcements

What they did

- Moved to Gmail to offer a more flexible, mobile email solution
- Provided students with mailboxes over 1000 times more spacious than the previous system

What they accomplished

- Expected savings of R590,000 ($57,260) through reduced IT maintenance and elimination of infrastructure costs
- Significantly boosted use of official email account amongst student body
- Created a foundation for further collaborative engagement amongst students and lecturers through use of other features in Google Apps

Challenge

With 140 departments and 85 centres, institutes and bureaus, effective electronic communication is essential to manage such a large student body. It also offers a real opportunity to establish a scalable communication platform to support future growth.

Having used Cyrus Mail Store component as its legacy system for all previous student email, with 40,000 accounts, the University found it costly to manage at R120,000 ($11646) to R150,000 ($14,557) per annum on running costs, and in the region of a further R250,000 ($24,263) every three years on Capital Expenditure. The service also had limited functionality. Students were restricted by 25MB mailboxes and often relied on independent email addresses instead, meaning bulk email from the University would not reach them.

Increasing mailbox size would have been expensive and technically laborious on this in-house platform, costing approximately R380,000-R500,000 ($36,879 - $48,526) and disrupting the users' experience. With a student body increasingly relying on email to share multimedia resources, such as videos and images for their studies, something had to be done.

Students were also dissatisfied with the arbitrary aliases for their address and so created a variety of personal email accounts with unprofessional nicknames and forwarded their messages onto these unofficial accounts. However, in time, many lapsed into inactivity, creating numerous bouncebacks and increasing the risk of the University ending up on spam lists.

"In the age of mobile devices, students expect constant access to information from any location. Our existing email simply wasn't up to the job so we decided to explore online communication and information sharing services from third parties," explains Dr Wimpie Beeken, ITS Capability Development Management, University of Pretoria.

Solution

The South African Government implemented the South African Research Network (SANReN) connecting learning institutions with fibre broadband, drastically increasing the bandwidth available for online education and information access. As a result, the prospect of UP increasing its use of online communication became not just a more viable option but a dramatically more attractive one.

UP began a short pilot of Gmail and Microsoft Live, distributing accounts to a cross section of the student community and gathering feedback about usage. The results quickly demonstrated the clear benefits of Gmail, which offered more flexible, accessible email accounts with 30GB of storage per user, all entirely free as part of the Google Apps for Education online collaboration suite. UP now has 47,150 active student accounts and 137,075 alumni accounts. 45% of these accounts are active, which means that most of the current student body are now using their official Gmail, while alumini accounts are less active. This compares to 39% of active use on the University legacy email accounts.

"We saw an immediate opportunity to embrace cloud email in the short term and have made some substantial cost savings of over R150,000 already. But it is Gmail's future potential via the Google Apps suite that sealed the deal. In contrast to other services considered, our email project wasn't just a free and effective solution to the challenges we'd been facing but a gateway to all kinds of virtual collaboration and information sharing in future." Dr Beeken suggests.

Benefits

UP can now send messages to students in confidence that they will reach their intended recipient. Meanwhile, students can access inboxes with more features and over 1000 times more space than the previous system. It has also provided a way for them to access their email and projects on any internet-connected device, with potential for further integration with other tools from the Google suite.

Although the project scope currently concentrates on adopting Gmail, students are able to access other elements of the Google Apps suite, including Google Drive for online document collaboration and presentations. UP very quickly saw students adopting these tools and taking advantage of their close integration to the core Gmail experience.

The integration of licenced Google applications for Education into the University's Blackboard Learning Management system is planned for 2014. This will enable lecturers and students to access content item links to Google calendars, sites, and documents. The integration will provide users access through a single sign-on request to course related items in the Google Apps system.

The potential for integration with UP's main virtual learning environment and intranet, Blackboard, is also being explored. This provides students with everything from tutorials to exam results and more.

"From simple improvements like an unread Gmail counter integrated with the student portal to lecturer-developed Google Sites for bigger projects, the ability to create a more consistent and joined up experience simplifies communication for everyone involved."

UP is also taking advantage of the Google's Student Ambassador (GSA) Programme, which empowers a selected group of students to take responsibility in helping the University embrace the potential of Google Apps and online communication. To ensure the project worked smoothly, the University put a management framework in place for the ambassadors. This framework ensured their ideas and suggestions would match the University's technical capabilities.

"Thanks to Google Gmail, we finally have in place a reliable and effective institutional communications channel. It is exciting to think that this is only the start of our journey into online collaboration for our student body and staff, and we already see a very positive experience of such with associated Google Apps."
- Dr Wimpie Beeken, ITS Capability Development Management, University of Pretoria

As a result of the combined efforts of UP's Information Technology Services team, its GSAs, Google and the infrastructure support provided by the Government, the University now spends less time grappling with potential frustration like email bouncebacks and server maintenance. Instead, it focuses on equipping students with the best tools to prepare them for life in the real world.

"Thanks to Google Apps, we finally have in place a reliable and effective official communications channel. It is exciting to think that this is only the start of our journey into online collaboration for our student body and staff," concludes Dr Beeken.

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