Google Apps helps the University of Ibadan's Distance Learning Centre transform communication with students

At a Glance

What they wanted to do
- Implement a system that would improve the communication between the university and its distance learning students
- Offer email addresses to all students
- Reduce IT expenditure

What they did
- Implemented Google Apps for Education across the entire staff and student population
- Began working with Google to obtain infrastructure grant

What they accomplished
- Transformed the way the university communicates with its students and considerably enhanced the learning experience
- Reduced the spread of virus infections on university computers
- Made learning materials more accessible to students from any location

Customer

The University of Ibadan, Nigeria's premier university, was established as a college of the University of London in 1948. The idea of distance education was conceived by the Department of Adult Education of the University in 1972 as a self-financing programme. Designed primarily to suit students whose schedules, distance, financial condition and other situations may not permit them to undergo full-time studies, the Distance Learning Centre has now graduated over 7,000 students.

Challenge

While the University of Ibadan's Distance Learning Centre (DLC) is part of the overall University organisation, it maintains its own IT infrastructure and depends entirely on internally generated funds, which puts a lot of constraints on resources.

Providing technology services to staff and students has been challenging due to numerous factors, including the high cost and unreliable nature of electricity supply, the high cost and limited bandwidth of internet connections, as well as space limitations in the DLC's internal IT mail servers. Resource shortages meant that the DLC was only able to provide one single, official university email address to staff and not students.

"Our Distance Learning Centre allows students to study at their own pace without having to physically attend the university except during interactive sessions. This means that forms of communication other than face-to-face interactions are very important. Until recently, we depended on a number of different email systems, SMS and the post for our communication with students. This was inadequate and not sustainable, especially as our vision is to be recognised as a world-class education and learning institution," explains Professor Bayo Okunade, Director, Distance Learning Centre, University of Ibadan.

"Being able to stay in touch and be connected to the place of learning is so important for a distance learning student. With Google Apps, we are able to offer world-class technology to our staff and students while saving on administration and maintenance costs."
—Professor Bayo Okunade

Solution

In a bid to enhance the learning experience and improve communication and collaboration between staff and students, the Distance Learning Centre decided to implement Google Apps for Education across its entire staff and student population. Google Apps for Education is a free communication and collaboration suite hosted online by Google.

"Google Apps has had a dramatic impact on our course delivery platform and enhanced communication with all our stakeholders, especially our students."
—Dr. Oyesoji Aremu, Deputy Director Academics, Distance Learning Centre, University of Ibadan

Through Gmail (part of the suite), all emails are stored online and accessible from anywhere. Each Gmail account has 25GB of storage capacity, which means space is never an issue. Staff and students also have access to additional free Google applications, including Google Drive for storing files, Google Docs for creating documents, Google Calendar for organising schedules, as well as Google Talk and Google+ for easier communication and collaboration. This is not only transforming how staff and students communicate with each other, but it is also changing internal university processes and the learning experience as a whole.

Results

The DLC has started to integrate Google Apps into internal processes, from admissions procedures to student course registrations and the management of the student portal. Instead of the lengthy physical mail process, students can now submit assignments via Gmail and academic staff distribute additional course materials through Google Docs or a Google Site.

As the cost of internet in Nigeria is relatively high, many students cannot afford to go online frequently. Most students do not have their own computers and rely on visits to cyber cafés to access the internet. Now, with the Gmail SMS application, students can send and receive free email messages via SMS even on basic mobile phones. While many internet cafés do not offer certain applications, including word processing and presentation software, students can now access Google's equivalent of these essential applications, wherever they access the internet.

The DLC has started using Google+ Hangouts to deliver lectures, allowing students to replay them online at their own convenience. It is also looking into using Google+ Hangouts to stream key university events, such as the formal matriculation ceremony, for the benefit of students that are unable to attend. Some staff are also using Google+ to collaborate and share information with colleagues and students in their 'Circles'.

"Google Apps has had a dramatic impact on our course delivery platform and enhanced communication with all our stakeholders especially our students," explains Ogundele Olumuyiwa Caleb, Webmaster, Distance Learning Centre, University of Ibadan. "It has also cut our running costs, reducing the use of paper, as we can send course materials and assignments through Gmail," he adds.

From an IT perspective, the move to Google Apps has enhanced security and reduced the spread of viruses across the campus. "We previously had to rely on flash drives and other hardware to share information, which meant we had problems with virus-infected machines. Now we share communications on Gmail, which scans every document before it opens, meaning we have substantially cut down on infections and saved time and money dealing with these issues," adds Caleb.

"Google Apps has completely transformed the way we can communicate with our students. Within a short period of time, we moved from multiple email systems to an all-encompassing two-way communications infrastructure. Being able to stay in touch and be connected to the place of learning is so important for a distance learning student. With Google Apps, we are able to offer world-class technology to our staff and students while saving on administration and maintenance costs," believes Professor Bayo Okunade.

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