



Leading London university moves to the cloud with Google Apps, saving £1million and aligning technology to staff and student needs

UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER



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Institution

For 170 years the University of Westminster has been a place where dedicated and creative students have enjoyed a vibrant learning environment, graduating with the skills they need to succeed in their chosen career. More than 20,000 students from over 150 nations are taught at the University's prime locations across three large sites in London's West End, and a fourth location at Harrow.

The University has a long history of innovation and leading the way in developing new technologies, including opening the first ever photographic studio in Europe and showing the first moving pictures to a paying British public.

Challenge

The University of Westminster faces similar challenges to many Higher Educational institutions in the UK and worldwide: catering to the IT needs of a very large number of people with finite resources.

"Our IT budget is always stretched, but at the same time we have to deliver a first class service for our staff and students," explains Professor Roger James, Director of Information Systems at The University of Westminster. "Today, universities have to compete for students on a global level. Building a reputation for delivering an outstanding student experience plays a crucial role in attracting prospective students. So does making the most out of leading technologies to provide an innovative environment for learning and teaching and the wider elements of student life."

An additional factor is students that have grown up with the latest technology and collaboration tools will have strong opinions about what services they want to use. "We have historically found student uptake of some institutional systems requires extensive support and training. Students want to use systems that are powerful, contemporary, flexible, and familiar which don't appear alien to their experience."

Solution

In April 2008, The University of Westminster started to look into systems that would offer staff and students a "Web 2.0" experience.

After careful evaluation and consultation with the student body, the university decided to roll-out the free service from Google - Google Apps Education Edition. This gives staff and students across the organisation, access to free communications tools including email, shared calendars, instant messaging and collaborative word processing all delivered and managed under the institution's identity and management.

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The university rolled-out Google Apps in phases. During Freshers' Week in October 2008, Google Apps was offered to all new students. Google Apps was then made available as an optional service to second and third year students; by December 2008 over 15,000 students had elected to move with the remainder moving for the new academic year.

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At a Glance

What they wanted to do:

- Provide students and staff with an IT system that promoted collaboration and creativity
- Deliver immediate savings and return on investment
- Increase email storage

What they did:

- Implemented Google Apps across the whole organisation and collaborated with student union to provide educational campaign to accelerate uptake
- Made available a rich environment of tools and institutional data for student led contributions and development

What they accomplished:

- Saved an estimated £1 million to date on IT costs
- Now offer students and staff a virtual platform for learning, working and managing their social lives
- Dramatically improved email storage capabilities

About Google Apps Education Edition

Google Apps Education Edition is a free suite of hosted communication and collaboration applications designed for schools and universities. Google Apps includes Google Mail (webmail services), Google Calendar (shared calendaring), Google Docs (online document, spreadsheet, presentation, and form creation and sharing) Google Video (secure and private video sharing – 10GB free) and Google Sites (team website creation with videos, images, gadgets and documents integration), as well as administrative tools, customer support, and access to APIs to integrate Google Apps with existing IT systems.

For more information, visit
www.google.co.uk/a/edu

Results

The University of Westminster estimates it has avoided a spend of £1million in moving to the cloud, cutting expenditure on new hardware and software upgrades. An additional benefit has been the reduced time spent in systems and user support with a minimal number of calls for support for such a significant system. In addition, pioneering staff and students at the university have already exploited the potential of Google Apps and are enjoying the benefits of the 7.3GB storage quota liberated from the smaller storage limits of the previous in-house solution.

User familiarity with Google was the driving factor in ensuring take-up across the university. "Our student union was an early adopter and a big fan of Google Apps and it did a fantastic job in promoting the service when it was first launched," adds Roger. "We started with monthly competitions and exercises to get students involved. Each of these highlighted a different element of Google Apps, with a "fun and funky" approach to student involvement with the applications."

Google Apps is also inspiring students to start new initiatives. For example, students are using Google Sites to support traditional student groups and societies. It offers a coding-free web page creation and publishing tool to share media and information online. "A first year student has created a Google Site collating information for those wanting to do a postgraduate course in medicine without having studied it as an undergraduate degree. Information such as this is invaluable and has traditionally been very hard to compile," adds Roger.

"Google Calendar and Sites has also been very popular with our clubs and societies. Initiatives like this can make a big difference to a lot of students and having this easy to use collaborative Google platform in place is great for encouraging student creativity," continues Roger.

To foster more student innovation through the use of social media tools, The University of Westminster is working on a project funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) Institutional Innovation Programme called TWOLER [Web 2.0 with lightweight enterprise RSS]. Instead of a traditional top-down development approach the project is making many of the institutional data sources available through RSS and is encouraging students to mix and mash these to develop new content types and mixes in the form of an internal student Wikipedia. For TWOLER to work, information needs to be easily accessible and presented in a familiar, simple to use environment rich in possibilities for manipulation and discovery. Google Apps fits this bill exactly and is a key component of this architecture of participation. Google Spreadsheets is emerging as the 'killer application' for delivering user-generated shared data sources to be mashed with institutional data.

But it is not only students that have used Google Apps to find new ways of working. Forward-thinking staff are also seeing the benefits collaborative cloud technology can bring to the university environment: "Our lecturers are also personal tutors to a number of students and are required to gather feedback on each student's performance from other lecturers," says Roger. "Feedback has been difficult to collate and is not always available in one place meaning we can fail to spot common trends, identified by many different course leaders. Personal tutors want the full 360 feedback to help guide and support the individual student with their studies and across all elements of their student life".

In another JISC funded project MAC [Making Assessment Count] a pioneering team is using facilities which automate the data integration with RSS and deliver it through a Google Spreadsheet that brings together all the information on each student. This delivers instant access to a student's overall performance without creating an additional administrative burden.

"As important as the estimated £1 million saving by moving into the cloud with Google is, the new system also promotes creativity and collaboration among students. It brings an added dimension for students and underlines our commitment at the University of Westminster to deliver the best possible student experience," explains Roger.

