



Vaal University of Technology takes its first steps into the cloud with Google Apps



At a glance

What they wanted to do:

- Cut IT maintenance burden by moving to a cloud-based email service
- Prepare students for careers with a best-in-class communications system

What they did

- Implemented Google Apps for Education for its value, increased email storage, ease of use and low maintenance

What they accomplished

- Successfully moved email services to the cloud, significantly reducing internal system maintenance and licensing fees
- Laid the groundwork for a wider range of collaboration tools to improve the student experience

Organization

Vaal University of Technology (VUT), based in Vanderbijlpark, South Africa, has approximately 21,000 students from 26 countries reading a wide variety of subjects, including technology, engineering, arts, hospitality, management and marketing. Its mission is to produce highly employable and entrepreneurial graduates who can impact society for the better.

Challenge

Vaal University is committed to offering its students an exceptional learning environment that prepares them for their future careers. Technological skills are critical to their success, as are effective communications, teamwork and independent learning.

Unfortunately, the University's email system was insufficient for student needs. "Our old email system was hosted on-site. It had a 50 megabyte storage limit, which meant student mailboxes filled up quickly, and emails with large attachments could be prevented from reaching the recipients once storage capacity was reached," explains David Ramasodi, Executive Director of IT Services at VUT. "In addition, students were only able to access their university email accounts on campus. This lack of off-site access meant staff/student communication was not as effective as it could be."

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—David Ramasodi, Executive Director, IT Services, VUT

Operational challenges were even more deeply rooted. "We are a small institution with limited resources, and the maintenance of the old system was a big job," comments Attie Naude, IT Services Manager of Operations, noting that VUT couldn't afford to upgrade the old, internally hosted email system. In addition, Naude says, "we were inundated with spam, which we couldn't block effectively. Email is only one of a number of high-priority projects that we oversee, but relatively speaking, it was taking up far too much of our time."

Solution

To reduce internal maintenance burdens, the University sought to outsource its email service. "Using services hosted online offers a great way for resource-strapped organisations like ours to take advantage of best-in-class technology without having to make large capital investments. We were therefore very keen to adopt a cloud-based email service for our students," Ramasodi explains.

VUT chose to follow the lead of other universities reporting positive experiences with Google Apps for Education. The Google Apps suite includes Gmail, with 25 gigabytes of email storage—a vast improvement over the 50-megabyte capacity of the previous system.

About Google Apps for Education

Google Apps for Education 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, please visit:

www.google.co.uk/a/edu

For more information on Google Africa University Programs, please visit:

www.google.com/africa/universityprograms/index.html

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—Attie Naude, Manager of Operations, IT Services, VUT

The transition to Google Apps for Education was smooth, taking less than a month. "The system is very intuitive and while we received helpful guidance from Google engineers at the beginning of the process, we needed very little help to get the system up and running for our 21,000 students," notes Ramasodi.

Benefits

Since Vaal University began using Google Apps for Education, it has experienced many benefits. "The maintenance burden for email has fallen away," Naude says. "Spam was a massive problem with our old service, but now Google filters it all for us. It is reassuring to know that the system is being maintained 24/7 by Google, whose technology resources and expertise far outweigh our own."

Students have fully embraced the Gmail service, in part because they can access their accounts away from campus and via smartphones. They can now review project suggestions from classmates, notes from lecturers, and reading lists for courses no matter where they are. The increased email storage also means they can receive and store more information in their accounts.

Increased student email usage has improved everything from project collaboration to examination scheduling; even pastoral care and social activities can be organised by email, helping VUT to run more smoothly.

Students are also impressed that the University is working with Google. "We have received a lot of positive feedback from students for moving to Google Apps, particularly from those in the Computer Science department, who are pleased their university is taking advantage of the latest developments in web communications," says Ramasodi.

Currently students only have access to Gmail, but the University will train selected students in other Google Apps tools, including Docs, Calendar, Sites and Talk, to serve as "Google Ambassadors" during a designated "Google Apps Awareness Week."

"We are keen to take full advantage of Google Apps, as we believe it could have significant benefits for the student experience and help with their studies. Collaboration will help staff and students share lecture notes and documents easily in the cloud; group work and arranging social outings will be easier with Google Talk and Calendar, and students will be able to work on their coursework wherever they are, on whatever device, as everything is hosted online," explains Naude.

Google Apps for Education has also helped VUT save money, both by reducing the burden on the internal IT team (freeing them up for other projects) and by cutting the cost of licensing fees by approximately 15%. "Google Apps was our first step into cloud computing and it has been a great success. Our long term strategy is to move all our applications to the cloud," says Ramasodi.

"We would definitely recommend Google Apps for Education to other universities," Ramasodi concludes. "It fosters a fantastic collaborative learning environment, helping to prepare [students] well for the world of work in the age of cloud computing."

