

NATIONAL COLLEGE OF IRELAND



Solution Overview

Solution
Citrix

Client
National College of Ireland

Industry
Education

Key Benefits:

- Exam timetable shortened by two thirds
- Improved IT performance for students

Citrix Products:

- Citrix VDI-in-a-Box™
- Citrix NetScaler®
- Citrix Receiver™

National College of Ireland forecasts a future of BYOD students

National College of Ireland (NCI) is a leading tertiary education college located in Dublin's International Financial Services Centre. The college specialises in computing, business and psychology courses from certificate to post-graduate level. NCI has 3,500 full-time and part-time students taught by 120 permanent and 100 associate faculty members. Over recent years, the college has become increasingly popular, seeing a sharp increase in student numbers and in courses being offered. The diversity of software applications being used has also increased; some of these, especially multimedia applications, are particularly resource-intensive.

The challenge: meeting demand and protecting the future

The increasing range of applications used to deliver teaching programmes was placing a strain on NCI's ageing PCs and on the college's network. This was particularly obvious with some multimedia applications where poor system performance was impacting students. IT Manager Geraldine Minogue was also conscious of changes in the general IT landscape. The way that students interact with technology is evolving. As Geraldine puts it, "Their life is an online life." There was increasing demand from students to use their own devices – laptops, tablets or smart-phones – for college. "They expect to rock up with whatever device they have under their arm and get access to their services," explains Geraldine. This trend is set to continue and the team have watched as demand for BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) has spread from students of computing courses right across the curriculum.

At the same time, many of NCI's 480 PCs were reaching the end of their life. Geraldine and her team faced the decision of whether to renew the PCs or to try and look further ahead. Geraldine explains, "Five years down the line, there may be no need for the college to have PCs; we believe that by then student computing labs will be totally different from what we see today. BYOD is very much a part of our strategy." Geraldine and her team needed to plan how best to meet evolving demands on the college's IT resources.

The solution: tailoring task-specific mobile workspaces

The team began to evaluate possible solutions that would meet the performance needs of resource-heavy applications and the access demands of students. NCI has been a Citrix customer for many years and, as the manager of NCI's Citrix Lab Frank Flynn explains, "We were trying to predict the future and for us, desktop virtualisation was the way to go." The team worked with their long-term partner Zinopy, a Citrix Platinum Solution Advisor, to develop a proof of concept using Citrix VDI-in-a-Box™ and Citrix NetScaler®, with client devices (whether PCs, tablets or smartphones) using Citrix Receiver™ to access their virtual desktop. "Zinopy was very helpful and supportive," explains Geraldine. "They understood what we needed and recommended VDI-in-a-Box as the best solution. They

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Frank Flynn
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helped us scope the solution and used their experience to help us configure NetScaler to our requirements. Their Sales Director, Aidan McEvoy, helped us to optimise our existing licences to make the pilot affordable.”

NCI had a particular challenge in coordinating their end-of-year practical exams for computing. Because of the resource constraints of their old system, and the time taken to get each sitting of students logged into the system to access exam materials, the entire sitting took three days to complete. In turn, this meant that the faculty had to prepare three separate and comparable exam papers, block out computing labs for three days and incur the cost of invigilators for the period. Frank worked with Frances Sheridan from NCI’s School of Computing and together they took the brave step of using the exam period as their proof of concept.

Key benefit: shortening the exam timetable

The trial worked well. Frank created a dedicated virtual desktop for the exam with access to designated applications, file shares etc., as specified by the computing faculty. VDI-in-a-Box enabled Frank to specify and allocate computing resources specifically to the desktop. As a result, students could login and have immediate access to the required resources, saving time and ensuring that all students have the same exam conditions. Practical exams can now all be completed in a single day with the result that only one exam paper is required. The integrity of the exam is preserved and the college saves time, money and organisational overhead.

Key benefit: improved system performance for students on legacy and BYO devices

Following their successful pilot, NCI is deploying VDI-in-a-Box across their estate. Some desktop profiles require 100 separate applications and as Frank explains, “The ability to allocate computing resources per desktop is key. VDI-in-a-Box has exceeded our expectations. We were taken aback at how good it is.” The response from students has also been positive. NCI’s library contains 40 legacy PCs which log around 350 individual student connections each day. Previously, these machines could take ten minutes to boot up to a desktop session; now the same hardware boots up in just 30 seconds. Student complaints have disappeared.

The ability to configure resources for specific desktops means that resource-hungry multimedia applications are easily accommodated and NCI is now considering a specific desktop for Data Analytics.

“Remote performance has also improved dramatically since we moved to VDI-in-a-Box,” says Frank. “It’s faster and cleaner. Students are happier too; they can login with whatever device they choose, whenever they want. We even saw 382 student logins on Christmas Day.”

Looking ahead

The college is continuing to roll the system out across the college and Geraldine believes that they have future-proofed NCI’s systems for the next few years, “We are one of very few educational establishments in Ireland using this type of solution and Citrix has turned out to be much more powerful than we expected. We have to keep one step ahead and that’s hugely challenging but we now have a scalable, resilient environment where we can easily increase back-end resources without negatively impacting users.”

