

Dudley College delivers higher quality education with *net-runna*



Dudley College is one of the largest colleges in the UK boasting some 26,000 students – the college houses its huge student intake via three main academic sites located in and around Dudley.

Dudley College is committed to providing its students with the best possible learning experience and relies upon IT to support the successful delivery of its courses. IT support plays an important part of providing high quality training and education where the availability of fully-functional IT hardware with the appropriate software installed and working is critical.

IT failures can be caused by students attempting to alter settings on classroom machines – these ‘alterations’ are not always the result of malicious intent, they can often occur by accident. Regardless of the reasons for the ‘alterations’ the ramifications for the College can be quite serious. Not only does it affect the service delivery of the course for students but it may also alter their impression of the organisation as a whole and require a significant investment in manpower to rectify.

Any such problems need to be rectified quickly; however returning damaged computers to a working state before the next class with only conventional support is virtually impossible. Dudley wanted an alternative solution that would be able to roll-back machines automatically or at the press of a button.

The College IT department manages all procurement, deployment and maintenance directly. With over 50 servers and 1600 desktops maintained by up to 12 IT staff the department has its work cut out. In an effort to work smarter not harder the department researches possible tools that will help improve their management methods and make the IT staff more productive. The college needs to use IT resources proactively if it is to minimise the risk of negative perception through the failure of customer-facing equipment. The college's IT problems range from functional – e.g. a path to software not found or missing desktop icons, to service failure – e.g. computers failing to boot and requiring rebuild.

One response to such errors and problems has been to 'lock-down' the computer i.e. restricting access to computer files and limiting permission rights to certain areas in order to avoid user corruption. This method fails to help with such problems as viruses, spyware or other non user-related causes of file corruption and is increasingly hard to maintain in relation to complex software images. Lock-down can limit quality regarding the delivery of certain curriculum content – as the level of lock-down increases the computers no longer resemble the average home/office PC at all which can prove very confusing for students if they are trying to replicate aspects of their learning at home.

The college began looking for an alternative way of managing their systems. As part of the colleges thorough evaluation process many software variants from various market suppliers were tested but fell by the wayside – few met with the research teams expectations and many failed to deliver what their marketing messages promised. Although some worked satisfactorily in the lab – most failed quite spectacularly in the field.

De-motivated by the lack of adequate industry tools available, Dudley College suspended their hunt – that is until we contacted them to inform them about *net-runna*. Although convinced that *net-runna* would be unlikely to deliver the specifications and features as promised; they still agreed to a meeting; however the team at Dudley held low expectations.

After providing a sales presentation we then performed an evaluation of the product on their machines. The evaluation went well and after using *net-runna* on their own hardware they were pleasantly surprised to see it 'walking the walk' not just 'talking the talk'.

“We are used to software failing to meet our expectations – *net-runna* is one of the few products that has actually delivered and met our expectations” Neil Marsh IT Manager Dudley College

net-runna is being deployed throughout the College helping to manage the delivery of IT courses via hundreds of machines. The self repair environment has dramatically changed the way the support department operates, enabling them to provide a further enhanced quality of service exceeding past expectations and with self repair, downtime is significantly decreased, which in turn dramatically reduces the ‘fire fighting’ time.

net-runna’s improved imaging efficiency and ease of use have made it possible to take and deploy images during term time – with alternative systems this would have to wait until term finished. The College support team was extremely enthusiastic about the *net-runna Management Console* with its logical structure and centralised management and were excited at the prospect of abolishing the hassle historically associated with imaging and deployment.

net-runna has integrated perfectly with the best practice techniques employed by the IT support teams - the computers now run for an entire term with minimum intervention. Their self repair set-up is set to exclude the anti-virus update folder in order that new updates can be added and their anti-virus software can continue to protect their IT environment. At the end of term the college employs best practice maintenance whereby one of the computers is updated to meet the amended audit criteria – any new software and patches are installed and tested. In the instance where a patch might cause a problem the computer can be rolled back in just a few minutes to the previous working state. After successful installation of new software then a new image is taken and deployed utilising *net-runna*’s fast multicast deployment technique across all the other machines in the room – the computers then automatically repair to their updated state throughout the following term.

The perfect tool for IT management within the Education sector - many academic institutions are reaping the rewards that *net-runna* provides; these benefits are also being enjoyed in the commercial environment. Dudley College is just one of many organisations that have been able to fundamentally improve service quality thanks to *net-runna*.

Summary: how has *net-runna* improved the IT management at Dudley College?

How does a college with 26,000 students ensure quality course delivery?

The IT reality in the Education sector inevitably means when students and computers work together problems occur. Such problems may not always be the result of malicious intent, they can range from settings changes to inappropriate downloads, or chewing gum wedged in the floppy disk drive - these variations can result in non-bootable machines often leading to loss of service. When class size equals the number of machines, even one computer down can cause considerable disruption.

IT management at Dudley College *before net-runna*:

- Visiting each classroom on foot to make manual repairs
- Computers potentially down for hours, possibly days
- Operating systems 'locked down' until they no longer resembled students' home PC's causing confusion
- A significant investment in man hours spent reacting to failures
- Lack of control and difficulty in identifying problem causes – be it a hardware or a software problem
- Waiting until term time has finished to deploy new system images

IT management at Dudley College *after net-runna*:

- Fast deployment of an image taken from one perfectly set-up machine to all the other machines in the room
- A simple reboot at the end of each session automatically repairs each machine to its predetermined settings ensuring near 100% availability for the term
- Reduced lockdown leads to much more effective course delivery through machines that look and work in the same way as a students home PC
- Less frequent visits to each classroom on foot
- Maintenance is less reactive
- Increased productivity of IT staff
- Centralised management across the network
- Far easier to identify the route of problems i.e. hardware or software
- Imaging can take place during term time

Neil Marsh, IT manager at Dudley College comments:

"Our aim is 100% guaranteed availability – *net-runna* is moving us towards that"

Would Neil Marsh recommend *net-runna*? "Absolutely"

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