

Why universities need to prioritise availability

By  Claude Schuck

14 Feb 2018

The cost and importance of higher education mean this sector is always open to scrutiny. Whether that is from politicians, journalists or even their own staff and students.



© georgejmclittle – [123RF.com](https://www.123RF.com)

At times it feels like the list of demands placed on universities is so long that fulfilling it is impossible. And that nothing the sector does will satisfy its numerous stakeholders.

The unfortunate upshot of this is that technology and availability failures, which compromise the student experience and the ability of staff to work effectively, are judged more harshly than they were in the pre-digital era of higher education. Especially now that universities are constantly watched over by government departments and regulatory bodies that manage everything from fees to the student experience.

It has led to a situation in which application and data availability are crucial to both the smooth running of a university, as well as to ensuring that it only makes the headlines for the right reasons.

Availability stakeholders

To understand the availability challenges faced by universities, it is necessary to look at the various user groups they must cater for with their services, as well as their unique needs.

Obviously, there are the students. Today, they expect easy access to resources, learning portals and information from the universities they are told are becoming increasingly connected. And they want seamless experiences, characterised by consistent availability wherever they are, and at whatever time of the day they are working - whether that is at the crack of dawn in a library, rushing to complete a paper, or at midday on campus, looking to access important information, such as timetables and classroom materials.

Significantly, while these demands may feel standard, giving students constant access is very important for universities – for both reputation and finance.

South African students have become increasingly reliant on smart devices to access information, both on university systems as well as external research sites. And while universities certainly cannot provide smartphones and tablets to students, those that do have them expect a continuous availability of information that includes access to key university resources.

The experience of current students determines where prospective ones choose to apply. In an age of endless peer review, 'I can't ever access services and resources' can be a pretty damaging write up for even the most respected institution.

Moving beyond students, universities must also have an eye on faculty and administrative staff.

The former are often tasked with creating interactive and data-informed classroom experiences that match the needs of students, as well as digitally distributing learning materials and resources that cater for self and remote learners.

The latter (admin staff) are reliant on applications to communicate with students and colleagues. And on data to boost university revenue through alternative streams like virtual, online campuses that can appeal to a wider mix of students.

These numerous high demands on universities mean that availability and business continuity are vital elements of a modern institution's technology portfolio. Of course, a lack of tools or resources could mean a missed deadline for a student. But, perhaps more serious is the higher education institution's duty to data management and protection.

Continuity over availability

Universities house huge amounts of highly sensitive, valuable data (everything from personal information to bank details). And there are several access points to that data – some of which can be easily exploited if the correct recovery, backup, and data loss avoidance measures are not in place.

This makes universities a huge target for cyber-attacks.

Interestingly enough, some of these attacks revolve around getting potential students enrolled into universities. With limited spaces available for first year students, some are turning to more dubious methods to get access to higher education. A well-known South African [blog](#) was contacted earlier this year to try and hack into the University of Cape Town and get the person enrolled.

And while there will always be those trying to access systems to improve grades, the onus rests on universities to protect data availability gaps and improve their technology environments. How these improvements manifest will depend on the nature of the university in question. Factors like student body size, whether it is a campus or college university, and region all influence the eventual solution.

However, data and applications in general must be supported with backup plans that can be put in place within minutes,

rather than hours. In turn, this should be supported with testing, visibility, monitoring, and reporting. So, IT leaders can understand their environments and potential issues within them sooner rather than later.

Meeting expectations

The higher education sector is changing. People are constantly trying to manage universities with greater efficiency and profitability. And, with expectations going up, it is only likely that there will be more scrutiny placed on the sector in the future.

It is hugely positive that technology is becoming such a key enabler for education, be it delivering materials, enabling new types of study, or assisting with research and other creative projects. However, IT leaders must remember that data and availability issues will have an unfortunately long lifeline in the minds of administrators and government officials.

Improving availability is not just a chance to improve access to critical facilities or aid the reliability of resources. It is a chance to make everyday life on campus that little bit easier and more efficient.

ABOUT CLAUDE SCHUCK

Claude Schuck is the regional manager for Africa at Veeam
■ Why universities need to prioritise availability - 14 Feb 2018

[View my profile and articles...](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>