University of Suffolk transforms e-resource access and student satisfaction

Time and cost constraints prevented the University of Suffolk from giving its stand-alone EZproxy solution the attention it deserved. As the problems of aging infrastructure mounted, the university made the switch to EZproxy hosted.
Encountering e-resource access problems

The University of Suffolk had been running the stand-alone version of EZproxy for several years. Although it originally worked smoothly, e-resource access problems increased over time.

When publishers started to secure their websites with HTTPS, the university found itself unable to upgrade to the EZproxy version that handled the change. This caused frequent certificate errors when off-campus students tried to access e-resources—the warning messages gave the impression that the university was directing them to unsafe websites.

Counting the cost of negative feedback and staff time

“Academics started to give us negative feedback about remote e-resource access at the course committee meetings we all attend,” said Aaron Burrell, Digital Learning Systems Manager. “We have an e-first policy, due to restricted library space. And we’re aware that students value the ability to access resources from any location. So these access problems had a huge impact, with a couple of the schools being particularly vocal.”

“I’m not sure it could have run any more smoothly. If you’re looking for the right authentication solution for all your publishers, then I haven’t seen one better. As an institution, we’ve used others, but EZproxy hosted is seamless. It’s a huge improvement for us.”

Aaron Burrell
Digital Learning Systems Manager,
University of Suffolk,
Ipswich, Suffolk, United Kingdom

KEY OUTCOMES

• Students and staff get problem-free e-resource access from any location.
• Library staff make proactive use of the time savings that a hosted solution delivers.
• Usage data opens up exciting opportunities with learning analytics.
Library and digital learning staff returning from these committee meetings then had to investigate the problems and report back. “And at the same time, our library helpdesk was inundated with visits, calls, and emails from users struggling to access the resources they needed,” Aaron said. “So it generated a lot of additional work. We created support pages, but people don’t always see that as the first port of call—many prefer to speak with a real person. So managing those problems tied up a lot of resourcing.”

**Choosing EZproxy hosted**

Despite these problems, Learning Services staff valued many aspects of EZproxy. “We were able to customise the pages that students accessed as they authenticated through EZproxy,” Aaron explained. “We applied the look and feel of our own environment, and we could add our Twitter feed and display messages.”

The staff member who had originally set up the EZproxy system had since left, and as the access problems continued, the Learning Services department formed a “task and finish” group to focus on solving the problem. “And what came out of it was a decision to move to EZproxy hosted,” said Aaron. “It would mean that OCLC would manage the hardware and the system on our behalf, giving us all the benefits of EZproxy with none of the internal overheads.”

**Implementing quickly and easily**

The migration to EZproxy hosted was straightforward for the University of Suffolk, with a short and smooth implementation project. “We went through all the details on an online call with the OCLC team,” Aaron said. “And we then sent them our configuration file—detailling all the e-resources we held—and OCLC set it up in our EZproxy hosted instance. This was a very quick process, even allowing for the fact that we had the deployed version in place and were familiar with the solution.”

EZproxy hosted was live at the University of Suffolk within two weeks. Aaron and his colleagues communicated the changes and improvements through the intranet as well as through student engagement sessions in the library.
LEARNING POINTS

• The problems of ageing infrastructure can be debilitating, affecting not only IT staff but also resource access and frontline services.
• EZproxy hosted gives users problem-free access to e-resources from any location.
• A growing number of academic libraries are retaining the benefits of EZproxy that they value while freeing themselves from the infrastructure overheads.

“Working with OCLC to implement EZproxy hosted has been a real pleasure.”

Aaron Burrell
Digital Learning Systems Manager,
University of Suffolk,
Ipswich, Suffolk, United Kingdom

Enjoying seamless access from any location

E-resource access is truly seamless with EZproxy hosted. Students and staff in remote locations simply access the resource as they would on campus, and they only have to authenticate once for each browser session.

“The biggest change is that there are no complaints from students,” Aaron said, “whereas we were previously receiving them on a daily basis. We’ve left the certificate errors behind now, and the only occasional problem is where an academic has put an old link into the VLE [virtual learning environment], which we can easily sort out.”

Making better use of staff time

Library staff can be certain that EZproxy hosted is always up to date through automatic updates. Freed from time-consuming student and faculty complaints, and with the lighter IT workload that comes with a hosted solution, library and digital learning staff were able to shift their focus elsewhere. “We’re able to be much more proactive,” Aaron said. “We can provide support for tools and access to other resources that students will find useful, for example. We’re doing so much more than problem solving now.”

Opening exciting opportunities with learning analytics

For Aaron and his team, a significant benefit of EZproxy hosted is the usage data it provides. “We are now able to see who is accessing which resource, which wasn’t possible before. And for us, e-resource usage is only the start. We are leading an institution-wide project that will look at learning analytics and how students are progressing. We see e-resource usage as an important part of that.”

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