

Sheffield Hallam University & CoreAzure: Azure Virtual Desktop & Azure Lab Services

Background

Sheffield Hallam University needed to quickly pivot when COVID-19 shuttered its campuses in the middle of an ongoing datacenter migration. Adopting Microsoft Azure Virtual Desktop and Azure Lab Services, the university was able to guarantee access to resource-intensive programs that students had only been able to use through on-campus computer labs. As a result, Sheffield Hallam now provides better access to these critical programs than ever before, increasing agility and improving student outcomes.



The Challenge

Located in South Yorkshire, Sheffield Hallam University is dedicated to both the education and employability of its 30,000 students. With the goal of becoming a world-leading modern university, Sheffield Hallam recently began work on an ambitious 20-year campus redesign. The university's city-center campus is being expanded and modernized. As part of this major project, the building that housed its primary datacenter was earmarked for demolition.

Sheffield Hallam had a decision to make. Its datacenter was by no means at end of life but was beginning to show signs of age. Was it better to relocate the existing hardware to a new building or to take the opportunity to move its functionality to the cloud? By far the most dramatic shift from its existing infrastructure, the move to the cloud would allow for the university's finite IT staff to focus their talents on broadening the services they offered students and staff, rather than datacenter maintenance.

Like many other universities that teach engineering, architecture, and game design, Sheffield Hallam has multiple computer labs on campus. Populated with powerful machines capable of running the resource-hungry programs that fuel each of these industries, the labs are made available to students when not in use as classrooms. The sudden loss of these rooms as a student resource was a chief concern for the university, as many students lacked the funds to purchase their own high-end computers.

Why CoreAzure ?

Turning to CoreAzure for help was the logical choice. CoreAzure was able to demonstrate a successful track record of AVD projects for UK universities and strength in depth to provide the required support and delivery skills in a number of key areas, for example, CoreAzure are a Microsoft Advanced specialisms and AMMP partner which made us eligible to apply for funding to support the programme.

CoreAzure's agile delivery model had already proven its adaptability to respond to customers changing priorities and reinforced the reasons why Sheffield Hallam selected CoreAzure as its partner of choice.

CoreAzure was selected for this assignment for the following reasons:

- We are an accredited Microsoft AMMP partner and were eligible for financial support to be made available by Microsoft
- With a successful track record in data centre modernisation programmes we were able to demonstrate an expert level of relevant experience
- We came highly recommended by Microsoft
- Working in Higher Education has been our primary focus over the past 6 years – we understand the technology landscape and the workloads used to support teaching and learning activities

Abertay University & CoreAzure: AVD & Azure Lab Services

The Solution

The university selected Microsoft Azure from among its cloud options and began working with the cloud migration experts at CoreAzure, a member of the Microsoft Partner Network, to make its new infrastructure a reality. It was with this work already underway that a new and substantial challenge presented itself. COVID-19 was sweeping the globe, and the university would have to shutter its campuses. As the scale of the pandemic became clear, Sheffield Hallam and CoreAzure now had to quickly develop a remote learning platform as well as manage a sizeable datacenter migration, all of which would need to be completed by the start of the new academic year.

For students without any access to IT, Sheffield Hallam made funds available to buy a basic laptop, which meant that they needed to assure they could run programs like AutoCAD on their hardware. With CoreAzure, Sheffield Hallam decided to adopt Azure Virtual Desktop to allow remote work from any connected device, no matter its location. Entire courses, including their associated resource-heavy software would be moved to Azure, where students could access them through their own devices via Azure Virtual Desktop. This was swiftly followed by the rollout of Azure Lab Services to the research community.

After conferring with Microsoft and CoreAzure about the situation, Microsoft funded a proof of concept., CoreAzure visited the university, demonstrated how the solution worked, and showed how it could quickly be scaled to meet student needs. "We loved that the Azure Virtual Desktop backend wasn't something we'd need to maintain ourselves," says Dave Thornley, Head of Digital Architecture. "Managing that sort of service can be incredibly complicated, and we had our hands full."

Results

The new hybrid learning options that Sheffield Hallam has created are far from the only benefits of the move to Azure. The university has also begun to realise its goal of lowered costs of ownership and maintenance compared to its old on-premises architecture and its also more reliable and easier to use.

In just 12 weeks, Sheffield Hallam University rolled out the largest Azure Lab Services client in the United Kingdom. In the same timeframe, it also established a brand-new remote learning model with Azure Virtual Desktop. All this was done with the majority of its IT resources still managing outdated on-premises infrastructure. Now, having broken the shackles of ongoing maintenance and updates, Sheffield Hallam is poised to create a truly formidable educational space in the cloud.

Having seen the beginnings of what the university can do in the cloud, academics all across Sheffield Hallam are looking for ways to augment their own classes through the cloud.

"We've certainly got full use out of the scalability Azure offers. In the past few months, we've gone from hundreds to thousands of students using and relying on Azure Virtual Desktop for their classwork."

Simon Briggs - Director of Digital Technology

"Azure Lab Services functions a lot like Azure Virtual Desktop. It works so well for us that we went from deployment to being the largest consumers of the service in just 12 weeks."

Dave Thornley- Head of Digital Architecture



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