University Connects Campuses with Latest Communication and Collaboration Solution

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Ziad Eid, Chief Information Officer, USEK

Founded in 1961, the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik (USEK) has always been a pioneer in adapting the latest Microsoft technologies. When it needed to improve communication and collaboration between its five campuses, USEK became the first university in the Middle East to implement Microsoft SharePoint Server 2010 Enterprise. The resulting system improved the flow of information, while cutting administrative tasks and increasing productivity.

Business Needs

As a national institution, USEK Lebanon plays a major role in training the country’s researchers and highly qualified professionals. Its curriculum combines tradition with modern knowledge to provide an education that prepares its students to meet the needs of the labour market. Today, USEK has more than 7,000 students divided into 10 faculties and four institutes. These 14 academic units offer diverse high-quality education.

Technology plays a key role in this strategy. USEK offers state-of-the-art learning facilities, including virtual and IT-equipped classrooms, videoconferencing, and a wireless network that is accessible at all locations on campus. Most students have their own portable computers, and plans are currently under way to subsidise the purchase of computers, making them available to all students.

Before May 2010, each campus ran its own IT infrastructure. Most administrative systems relied on Oracle databases that required staff to manage their everyday
tasks manually. Ziad Eid, Chief Information Officer at USEK, says: “A simple task such as requesting a holiday took many unnecessary steps. First, staff had to print a vacation request form, fill it out, and bring it to the office. Then, if the line manager wasn’t around, it could take several trips to get the form signed. The whole process was a waste of time, paper, and productivity.”

The university lacked a central system connecting the portals together, so the campuses had difficulty communicating with each other. Students often move between departments and locations, but couldn’t access the information they needed from campuses where they didn’t attend classes. Staff also had trouble accessing material they needed.

Solution
USEK has always been an early adopter of Microsoft technologies. Staff use communication application Microsoft Exchange Server 2010 Enterprise, while Microsoft Live@edu provides students with email and document storage. Each campus hosted a communication and collaboration portal based on Microsoft Office SharePoint Portal Server 2003. So, when Microsoft Gold Certified Partner Mindset advised Eid that SharePoint Server 2010 would be available, he saw the opportunity to connect the university’s technology together into one interface.

“We upgraded to SharePoint Server 2010 because it had the improved business intelligence reporting interface that we needed and it integrated easily with our existing Oracle Banner system,” says Eid. “By upgrading to SharePoint Server 2010 across all campuses, we digitised our information, so it’s now easily shared among staff and students. We’ve kept much of the same infrastructure while improving communication.” Students and staff can now log on to the university’s portal and access all the information they need in one place.

Most of the state-of-the-art technology used at USEK relies heavily on information stored in a variety of databases. Eid says: “Business intelligence reporting is a core element of SharePoint Server 2010. With it, we can import data from Microsoft SQL Server 2008 for accurate, up-to-date information about students, staff, and learning resources.” For example, student ID cards allow access to libraries, classrooms, and dormitories, and can also be used in the dining halls and bookshops to make purchases, and as library cards to check out books. To provide these services, they are linked to multiple databases. Students can now log on to their private spaces on the university portal to monitor activity on their ID cards.

Communication among faculty, staff, students, and administration is also streamlined. “Students can easily access information about other campuses, while faculty members have the information they need to communicate and collaborate with their students and peers more effectively,” says Eid.

Benefits
By connecting five campuses with the latest communication and collaboration solution, USEK provides students and staff with the modern learning environment they expect from a leading educational institution. Joe Tatarain, General Manager of Mindset, says: “As a leader in the innovative use of Microsoft technology in education, USEK saw how SharePoint Server 2010 could help staff and students make even better use of the technology they currently use.”

• **Improved business intelligence.** The business intelligence interface of SharePoint Server 2010 gives staff immediate access to aggregated information. Eid says: “Now, when officials from the university meet with the president to discuss important issues about faculties, they can immediately access the figures they need to answer any questions.”

• **Simplified event management.** USEK frequently holds large events, which involve many different agencies and departments, such as catering companies, the marketing office, and various groups inside and outside the university. SharePoint Server 2010 streamlines the workflows needed to run events. “With one click, an organiser can see if people are doing their jobs properly. For example, what the catering companies are producing and what media representatives the marketing department is inviting,” says Eid.

• **Increased security.** “Data security is important to academic institutions,” says Tatarain. SharePoint Server 2010 provides the tight security universities need. IT administrators can see exactly who is using and editing files, and what they’re doing to the files. “We can track changes on every document,” says Eid.

• **Easy archiving.** With one click, files are saved in a way that makes them accessible. “We no longer have to waste time searching for documents to mine the data we need. Data is accessible because documents are easy to find,” says Eid.

• **Improved learning experiences.** “USEK has a reputation for offering students a greater variety of Microsoft technologies than any other university in Lebanon,” says Eid. “Now, these technologies work together to create a better learning environment.”