



DATA INTEGRATION

## Oaklands College



## Oaklands College improves home working and distance learning with a Juniper Networks SSL VPN from Data Integration

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**Richard Everett, Head Of ICLT, Oaklands College**



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## Keeping pace

Oaklands College with campuses in St Albans, Welwyn Garden City and Borehamwood, is one of the largest providers of further education and training in the region. More than 25,000 full-time and part-time learners are taught by 800-plus staff.

Oaklands College has been quick to recognise the need to provide distance learning, and in the face of increasing demand for these courses and home working for staff the college decided it needed a better way to enable these new ways of working.

Oaklands College has a significant proportion of distance learning students and in today's highly competitive education market learning at a distance represents an increasingly important revenue stream for the college. The college's remote working and learning facility was limited to Outlook Web Access, and the Governing Board knew it had to improve the range and standard of services it offered in order to keep pace with other learning providers and sustain the college's plans for growth.

## Investigating the options

Adam Stephenson, Network Manager at Oaklands College was asked to investigate the options available to implement a cost-effective solution to provide remote access to the college intranet, Virtual Learning Environment, email and file shares from staff and students' home computers.

Adam's first step was to review whether the college's existing firewall could support VPN functionality: "In theory we could have utilised IPsec VPN clients on staff and students' machines, but in reality this would not have been cost-effective to roll-out and support. The huge range of hardware and software on our users' home PCs would have caused all sorts of compatibility issues and the 'transient' nature of our student population means that we'd have been perpetually installing and uninstalling clients as new students came in and others graduated! We needed a solution that our small IT team could support efficiently and that staff and students would find easy to use."

## SSL VPN meets requirements

Having ruled out the IPsec VPN, Adam considered SSL VPNs as an option. He had heard about some of the advantages that SSL VPNs offer and thought the technology might meet the college's requirements.

There is a wide choice of SSL VPN products on the market, which at first glance appear very similar, so Adam decided to conduct a thorough evaluation to determine which one would best suit the needs of the college.

Adam short-listed six of the best-known vendors' products and gave each a thorough road test. He found that the user interface on two of the products was not very easy to use, which could have presented a problem given varying levels of IT literacy across the college's staff and student population. Another criticism of some of the products tested was that they had bundled functionality, at extra cost, that was not relevant to the college and would not have been used. Another product performed quite well, but the management interface

was complex and time-consuming to use, which did not fit in with the college's need to have a solution that was simple to support.

## The right solution

Data Integration provided a Juniper NetScreen-SA 3000 SSL VPN for the college to evaluate and helped Adam to configure it for the pilot. "Data Integration was very knowledgeable and supportive throughout the trial, which we felt was important for developing a potential future relationship."

Following this comprehensive evaluation stage, which involved a pilot of ten students and staff including the college's Governing Board, Adam concluded that the Juniper solution stood out above the rest because:

- The pilot users found it very intuitive to work with. Richard Everett, Head of ICLT at Oaklands said, "The Juniper solution was very simple to use and navigate which is essential in an educational environment".
- The management interface was very clear and logical to use.
- Very granular access policies and can be set.
- A number of different user groups and services can be delivered on a single appliance.
- The appliance cost-effectively meets the needs of the college today but can also scale to support more users and functionality as the college develops its distance learning strategy.

## Intuitive to use and manage

"The Juniper product is one of the more mature products on the market, which means it has been thoroughly tested in live environments. It has been regularly updated and refined throughout its development which is reflected in the fact that it is so intuitive to use and manage. It was also clear that Data Integration knew the product very well and had plenty of hands-on experience," explains Adam.

Having selected the Juniper solution from Data Integration, it did not take long to get the system up and running. Much of the configuration had been set up during the evaluation stage and Data Integration pre-loaded this configuration onto the production unit, so only minimal work was required to install it. Adam had to register a DNS record but other than this, minimal changes were required to the network and the installation caused virtually no disruption. It took less than an hour to get the system working.

“ I have used this link several times over the weekend and have found it very useful. Really handy being able to access files from home. Navigation from/through Outlook was a pain at first until I found the home button on the small toolbar. Full marks to you and your team! Thanks. ”

**Tony Hawkins, Lecturer at St Albans Smallford Campus**

## Remote access benefits all

During the first few weeks of the system going live Adam received mainly positive feedback from users about the system including some recommendations about how the system could be improved – but Adam says these were all minor tweaks: "It's been very simple to make minor changes to the system

to optimise the service to users using 'out of the box' functionality. We have not had to do any special customisation which always adds cost and complexity".

There are currently around 200 people using the system and this number is growing all the time as word spreads through the college about the benefits and how easy it is to use. The response from staff and students has been very positive. Richard adds: "The feedback from our users has been fantastic! It's a real boost for staff who can now get on with work at home during the evenings rather than having to stay late in the college buildings. This is particularly beneficial at very busy times such as in the run up to an Ofsted inspection."

“ Just to let you know how great it is to be able to access the college files from home! A truly wonderful improvement. Thank you. ”

**Edita Strelciunaite, Lecturer at Welwyn Garden City Campus**

## Project is a great success

The SSL VPN solution has also realised Oaklands' ambition to provide enhanced distance learning facilities and is helping the College to meet the DfES objective of providing a personal online learning space for all learners. In the Government report, *Harnessing technology* released in March 2005, Ruth Kelly, the Secretary of State for Education, says "I am particularly excited by the idea of giving every student and learner a personal online learning space where they can store their own materials and assessments in digital form, and record their achievement."

Students can now securely access their email and the college's Virtual Learning Environment, which contains a library of online course materials, whilst staff can access the HR, college and inspection information that is held on the college intranet. The college recognises that it needs to provide a good service to distance learning students to encourage them to return to take further courses.

Adam concludes by reflecting on the success of the project: "It has been refreshing to work on a project that has delivered such tangible benefits so quickly. I have even had emails from users thanking me and saying how great the system is – which is virtually unprecedented! I would definitely recommend Data Integration to other colleges that want to provide remote access for students and staff."

For further information please contact your Data Integration Account Manager on +44(0)20 8875 6500 or email [info@dataintegration.com](mailto:info@dataintegration.com)

For further information about Oaklands College, visit [www.oaklands.ac.uk](http://www.oaklands.ac.uk)



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