Queen Mary, University of London and Homerton University Hospital: resolving the connectivity conundrum for a great student experience on placement

Have you ever been in a presentation or workshop and realised you've forgotten a vital fact, but your connectivity is shot so you can't look it up? If your answer is "yes", you'll know how students can feel when they are unable to check vital information while they're on work placement.

Students from Queen Mary, University of London (QMUL) were having this problem at Homerton University Hospital because the hospital's public wifi was over-stretched. Not being able to look things up or review a training video piled on complications when they were already feeling the pressure, but QMUL's chief information officer Dr Rachel Bence knew that an extension of the eduroam wifi solution beyond the QMUL campus would resolve the issue at a stroke.

Rachel enlisted head of change and student experience at QMUL Agi Jankowska to help in getting the work approved. Agi told us:

"The student voice is powerful at Queen Mary and I keep my ear to the ground with the students' union to hear what's bothering people.

"It's essential that students can get the most out of the time they spend in the NHS trust's clinical settings, which are located all over London."

A priority that NHS England offers funding to address

Rachel and Agi found that, in some respects, they were pushing at an open door. Students' off-site connectivity is a well-known, widespread issue for hospital trusts and NHS England (NHSE) is working to fix it.

Until March 2025 funding is available through NHSE for the trusts under its umbrella to work with Jisc to configure and deploy eduroam. Doing this will give students secure, seamless access to wifi-enabled devices both on- and off-campus. Eduroam resolves the connectivity conundrum at a stroke, allowing students to use their university credentials to access their institution's resources and platforms from wherever their studies take them.

But even with funding available to help, conflicting workload priorities can be a challenge for busy NHS IT departments. So how doable is an eduroam implementation for a healthcare organisation?

Advocacy

Queen Mary's experience shows that effective advocacy for students can be the final piece in the puzzle to get wireless connectivity and authentication the attention they deserve.

NHS England is surveying NHS trusts and working with their IT departments to assess readiness to deploy eduroam. They identify any blockers, check whether the trust can accommodate the infrastructure needs and ask whether they would like to proceed.

And with Queen Mary's enthusiastic stakeholders behind them, Homerton's IT department wanted to go ahead, so NHSE put them in touch with Jisc.

Jon Agland, our technical services manager for trust and identity, says: "We always start with a free scoping call. We aim to come up with the best and most affordable delivery plan for each organisation and to do the heavy lifting in terms of configuration so the IT department can deal with the other demands on their time."

In most cases, the NHS trusts are ready to go with little or no need for additional equipment. However, for Homerton, we worked with the trust's network infrastructure manager Samuel Ghebreab on a solution and he made a brief business case to the trust's managers for the implementation. He specified a standalone on-premise remote authentication dial-in user service (RADIUS) server to protect the eduroam deployment at times when the trust's other systems might be being updated or modified. This approach helps avoid any complications related to additional licensing requirements.
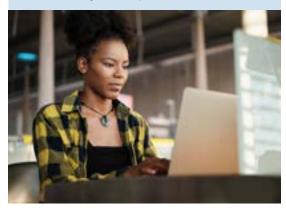
"In Homerton's case we advised that bundling the necessary infrastructure into their existing Windows package and using third party support would offer best value as well as long-term resilience for the deployment," explains Jon.

Queen Mary's stakeholders and advocates for student experience helped to keep the project from being relegated to the back burner while NHS procurement and governance procedures were under way. And once funding for infrastructure was secured and governance work completed, Jisc could get on with the deployment – which took us around four days in all, including testing.

"Most of it can be done over the phone, sharing screens with the network lead at the hospital," says Jon. "At Homerton it was straightforward because Samuel had overall control and had prepared thoroughly."

"When students first go on placement they can feel isolated and disoriented if they lack connectivity to the university and other resources, so it is fantastic that eduroam connectivity gives our students the reassurance of being in the virtual Medical School while they're on clinical placement.

"Giving them the flexibility to attend online teaching and other allied activities while on placement is so important with the cost-of-living crisis and their tightly packed schedules. Eduroam also has huge potential for colleagues who teach our students in the NHS trusts, enabling us to work more closely in partnership, and for our NHS colleagues to take advantage of what we can offer in terms of training, networking and cross-collaboration."

*(**Professor Arunthathi Mahendran, Director of the School of Medicine and Dentistry, QMUL**)*

Parity of experience

The team at Queen Mary are very satisfied with the improvement.

"Students at Homerton have instant access to resources now, and it has been achieved without them having to jump through any new hoops or learn any new systems," says Agi.

"They just log in as they do when they're on campus.

"Now we've proved eduroam's value we want to make sure all our students have the same benefits. We have enlisted our students to advocate for eduroam with the 20 or so other trusts where they sometimes go on placement, to give those students the same seamless access that's now available at Homerton."

Want to know more about eduroam?

Visit our eduroam web pages or contact us: trustandidentity@jisc.ac.uk

NHS trusts can find out more about funding at england.tel@nhs.net

Don't miss this time-limited opportunity to sort connectivity issues!

Until March 2025 NHSE funding is available on a first come, first served basis for England's NHS trusts to deploy eduroam, which supports roaming for the education sector and allows students to access their university's resources quickly and easily when they work on NHS premises. Trusts can also choose to deploy Govroam, to support public sector workers with connectivity when they are working away from base.

If you'd like to know more about funding send an email to NHSE: england.tel@nhs.net

To find out how Jisc can support your organisation please contact:

help@jisc.ac.uk
jisc.ac.uk