Kuwait Ministry of Education

Customer Website: https://www.moe.edu.kw/

Industry: K-12

Organization Size: Corporate (10,000+)

Country: Kuwait

Products: Microsoft Teams, Office 365, Microsoft Stream

A half million students in Microsoft Teams: How Kuwait's Ministry of Education transitioned to distance learning using Microsoft's world-class productivity tools

With the education of more than 500,000 students on the line in Kuwait, the countries Ministry of Education turned to Microsoft Office 365, and particularly Teams. As a result, the MoE ensured that students could access a high-quality education online, while also ensuring the security and safety of these new online environments, and trained more than 80,000 teachers and 29,000 school staff to serve students effectively despite the turn to remote learning.

Perched on the tip of the Persian Gulf between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, the State of Kuwait is a country of 4.5 million people where more than 99 percent of the population has access to the internet. Kuwait's Ministry of Education (MoE) directs the country's schools and universities, which collectively serve more than 500,000 students. Dr. Salah Alnajem and Dr. Abdullah Almutawwa, advisors to the Minister of Education, with the help of the IT Team and TechnoSoft training team, lead the transition to remote learning as the COVID-19 health crisis disrupted normal operations. The MoE had to ensure that students could still access a high-quality education through online platforms for distance learning, while also ensuring the security and safety of these new online environments—in addition to training more than 80,000 teachers and 29,000 school staff to serve students remotely.

To get the job done they leveraged the distance learning environment based on the Microsoft Office 365 A1 Education license. Dr. Alnajem, Dr. Abdullah Al Mutawwa, and their team chose Microsoft's suite of apps because it allowed them to build on legacy back-end infrastructure, and it offered an integrated suite of apps with a single sign-on (SS0) experience for students, staff, and teachers.

"Holistically, we have Microsoft Office 365 in action," he explains, "using Microsoft Teams for virtual classrooms and for asynchronous activities like assignments and chats and other activities. And we also use Microsoft Stream for recording the live lessons, which are taught to the students or prerecorded for them by the instructor. We use Stream to broadcast the prerecorded, professionally edited video materials that they prepared. And, finally, we use SharePoint and SharePoint folders for storing curriculum materials."

By making crucial decisions to adopt an integrated platform, the MoE streamlined the transition for teachers and students across Kuwait.

Teaching and learning with Office 365

Teachers develop habits and strategies over time as they use their classroom spaces, tools, and technologies. Abruptly changing where and how they teach—such as what was necessary in response to the spread of COVID-19—was challenging for teachers. Fortunately, "the transition wasn't that difficult," says Eman Alkhouli, an English teacher in Kuwait. The smooth transition can be credited, in part, to the MoE's robust training program that taught teachers how best to use Office 365 tools. The integration of tools in Office 365, like an SSO for students and teachers, made using the technology much simpler.

From teaching synchronously in Teams to assigning work through OneNote to assessing students using Forms, Eman and her colleagues quickly realized the potential in Office 365 apps to engage and assess students effectively. "For me and my colleagues, we keep our notebooks, our files, PDF, PowerPoint, everything in OneNote. I use the Class Notebook with the students as well. I send them their reports, their worksheets. It is included inside the class notebook in Teams. So, it was easy for the students to follow up with me," explains Eman. "After one unit, we give them a quiz using Forms."
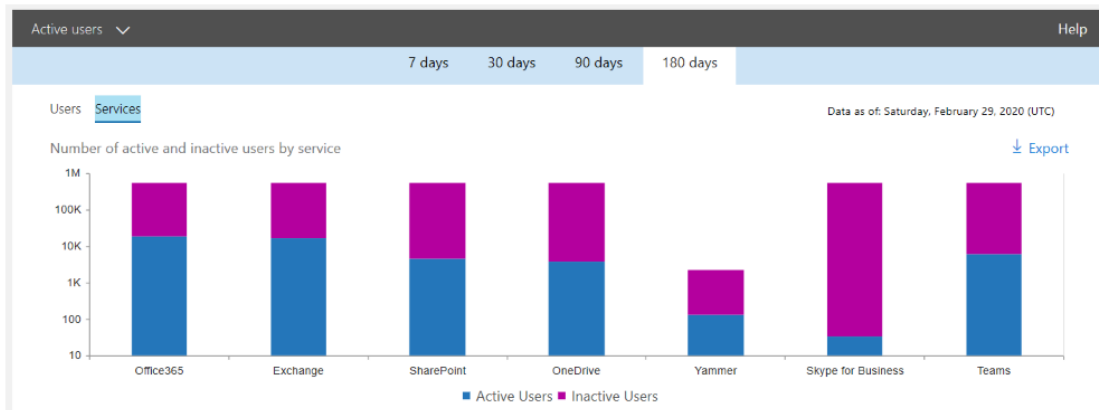
Microsoft Teams is the hub for synchronous online instruction. Nohal Hashim, a math teacher, attests to the value of Teams as a teaching platform. "The Teams app is significant because it harmonizes with other apps in Office 365. It's a very amazing application." Eman agrees, pointing to the ease with which she could incorporate web content into her Teams teaching environment. "Sometimes I have a website, like a website for games. Instead of sending them a link to go outside Teams to the website, I pasted the link, and the website is there, inside Teams itself, no need to go outside and waste time. So, it was easy and a very beneficial experience for me."

Preparing teachers to use the Office 365 integrated suite of apps paid dividends in student engagement and satisfaction. For example, Eman surveyed her students about their experience with Teams. "A major advantage is the flexibility of sharing information. We can share lesson files, PDFs, PowerPoint, and videos all in a single place. And flexibility of time. I can send links with any assignment without waiting for students' instant response, or students can share something with me without waiting for my instant response. We love the flexibility of sharing and responding on our own time, in Teams."
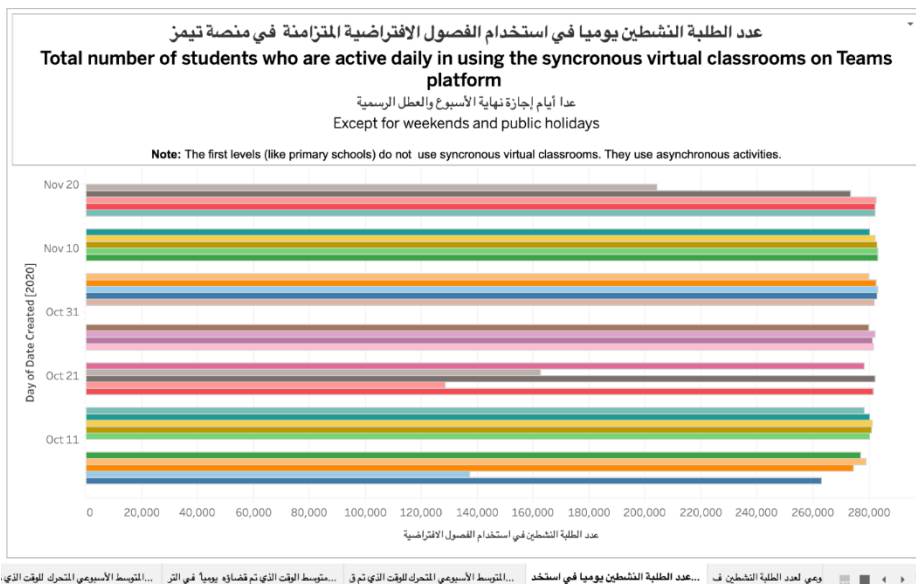
Scaling up to a half million students

The heroic efforts of Eman, Nohal, and other teachers in Kuwait to assimilate quickly to teaching remotely were made possible by strategic choices at the Ministry of Education. Winner of the United Nations–sponsored World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) prize in 2017 for his work on eLearning and virtual classroom systems, Dr. Alnajem was called upon by the Minister of Education, Dr. Saoud alHarbi, to help lead the agency's efforts to build an integrated infrastructure for distance education.
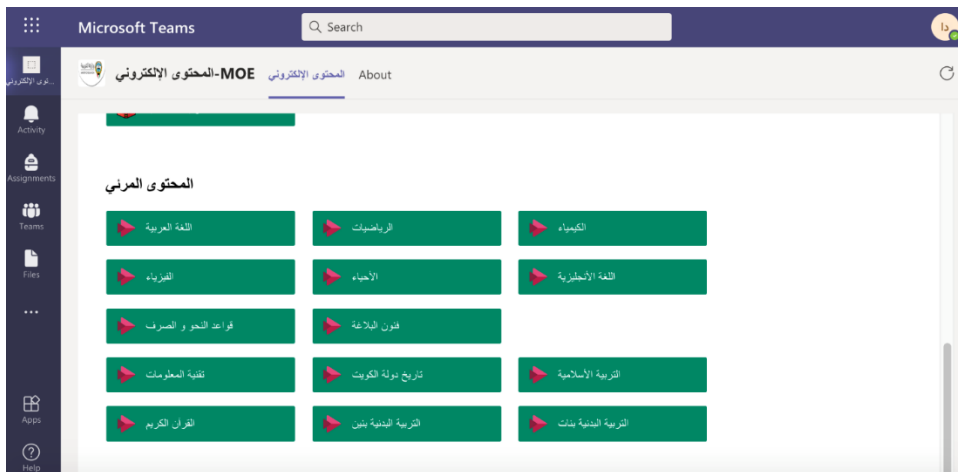
Early on, Dr. Alnajem argued for the adoption of Office 365, because the Ministry of Education already used Active Directory for their student database. But their legacy LMS system was hosted locally and didn't allow for a seamless, SSO experience for apps like Teams and Stream. "This is why we convinced the technical team in the Ministry to stop putting themselves in the box of their infrastructure. We told them think out of the box, try to utilize the cloud, try to utilize Office 365." Making the switch using School Data Sync allowed them to "utilize all the tools that are available like Azure Active Directory [Azure AD], integration with Microsoft Teams, and tight interaction with Stream and SharePoint," he said. The MoE staff followed Dr. Alnajem's advice, and it paid off. With the backend infrastructure in place, students and teachers across the country got access to Office 365 apps and Teams to collaborate remotely.

What did these investments mean in real numbers? Using Microsoft's analytics tools, Dr. Alnajem was able to show that, during the autumn of 2020, approximately 200,000 people participated in daily virtual classrooms in Teams.

Dr. Alnajem also saw the potential of Microsoft Stream as a platform for hosting and delivering existing educational video content. "The Ministry of Education had their own video content, which had been recorded in professional studios. Teachers sat in studios and they introduced their material, they used PowerPoint and other tools, and these videos were edited professionally, more than 2,000 video lessons."

Since Teams was the hub for classes, Dr. Alnajem explains, it was easy to create a Stream channel for a Teams environment for each class, and give students in that class access to specific videos, which were organized according to grade-level and subject, like mathematics, chemistry, biology, Arabic, and English.

Although building the back-end infrastructure and deploying the tools were crucial steps, the technical challenges were minimal, thanks to Microsoft's streamlined cloud integration. The challenges came from the 'human factor'," Dr. Alnajem says. Training teachers and staff, onboarding students and retraining technical staff—who administered the new cloud-based infrastructure—were the main challenges. Even convincing the Kuwaiti public to recognize the value of distance learning was a challenge. "Many points of view in the Kuwaiti society think that distance learning is not useful. So, we had to convince people that there are many benefits of distance learning." To accomplish this task, the MoE created short public service videos to introduce how to utilize this technology and how to benefit from it.

Flexible learning environments as the new normal

While the spread of COVID-19 accelerated the transition to online learning in 2020, the Ministry of Education had been preparing teachers to use these tools since 2018, notes Aljazi Alotaibi, a computer studies supervisor. So, even after they are back to school, Eman, Nohal, and other teachers believe that the Office 365 apps will continue to be crucial to their teaching practice. "We want to be online," says Nohal. "We can do virtual classes for the student who has low marks. Or, before an exam, maybe they need some help, they can access us remotely."

Eman envisions using Office 365 apps to try "flipping the classroom," a course design model that reverses or "flips" the traditional lecture and homework activities. "I can send them all the material needed prior to class. They study it, and when they come to the school, they are well-prepared. It saves my time and effort as a teacher and they are prepared, they know what the lesson is about, so we can check their understanding." According to Dalal Alotaibi, Supervisor for Programming at the MoE, these new tools will offer opportunities for greater communication outside class between teachers and students. "If they want to ask the teacher something after school, that would be a great opportunity to use Teams."

Eman now feels more prepared to respond to the next disruption with the new set of teaching tools and strategies. "We became up to date on the latest technology used all over the world. I think Teams is a global app, and now we use it, so it was great for us. I think we became qualified to face any problem, even a pandemic or anything in the future. That, for me, was a positive experience." It's that new feeling of resilience in the face of uncertainty that gives Eman hope and excitement about the future.

Call out quotes

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