University of Brighton

The UK Access Management Federation
FOR EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

Interviewed: Steve Holden (Principal Systems Officer)
Sarah Lowe (Electronic Resources Co-ordinator)

BACKGROUND

The University of Brighton evolved from a number of separate organisations, and now has over 20,000 students and 2000 staff based on five campuses in Brighton, Eastbourne and Hastings. There are five faculties within the university: Arts and Architecture; Education and Sport; Health and Social Science; Management and Information Sciences; and Science and Engineering. In addition, the university is a partner in the Brighton and Sussex Medical School.

Prior to implementing Shibboleth and joining the UK federation, says Electronic Resources Co-ordinator Sarah Howe, the university had been using AthensDA. However, IP-based authentication using EZproxy was used for the vast majority of resources.

The university has deployed a Shibboleth IdP for its primary domain, brighton.ac.uk, and is preparing to launch one for the Brighton and Sussex Medical School.

'The main driver for implementing federated access management was to keep abreast of emerging technologies and appropriate methods of authentication for our users,' Sarah says. 'JISC funding of Athens was coming to an end too.'

The change to Shibboleth had been on the cards for a long time, explains Principal Systems Officer Steve Holden. 'We had been wanting to do this for quite a long time. Shibboleth was mentioned in our operating plans back in 2005-2006 and was very firmly in our plans for 2007-2008.'

Even though Shibboleth is fully deployed, some resources are still Athens-only, so the university is still running its AthensDA service in parallel – using OpenAthens, the Athens/Shibboleth gateway. 'We're hanging in there for them to become Shibboleth-compliant,' Sarah comments, 'but we had to maintain access to those resources which were *not* Shibboleth-compliant by 31 July.'

'We intended to migrate from AthensDA, deprecating that service and moving entirely to Shibboleth,' adds Steve. 'That hasn't happened yet, but we have a long-term commitment to Shibboleth.'

DEPLOYMENT

Deployment was managed by the university's converged Department of Information Services, which combines library and IT services together. Sarah says that she dealt with the library side of things – 'I contacted service providers, made sure we had correct links, got Shibboleth access for new resources we took on.' Meanwhile Steve took the technical lead: 'acting as the technical liaison, undertaking the automated installation and configuration of the systems, and even getting my hands dirty with a little Java programming!' he says.

Direct monetary costs for the project consisted simply of a pair of servers, says Steve; other than that, the cost was simply human resources and time. The work was done in-house because, as Sarah says, 'we already had the skills.'

While they wouldn't do anything significantly differently, if they were to do it all over again, Steve concedes that 'I might read different books and web pages in a different order!'

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As a project, Steve enjoyed both the technical challenges and the positive social experience of cooperating with colleagues in other organisations. 'The first JANET Shibboleth Training course ran just as the project was getting underway, which was fantastic timing. The Shibboleth *Installfest* in Birmingham in July was particularly enjoyable, epitomising the advantages of working with a helpful community of open-source software users and developers,' he says.

BARRIERS

'It was a slightly new way of working,' Sarah recalls. 'Athens was the middleman in dealing with service providers; with Shibboleth it's down to me to contact them. With the sheer number of resources, having to contact each provider in turn (and if you don't have a contact, *getting* that contact) is a problem. So there is a slight learning curve and more work to do, but the benefit is you then have a contact at that provider.'

Steve found that 'while the rolling out was very clear cut, there were some technical glitches at the service provider end. Knowing exactly which attributes they wanted was an issue; there seemed to be a lack of consistency at their level in terms of how users access a resource, and that had to be overcome.'

Technologically, Steve describes deployment as 'a steep learning curve. I didn't have any direct experience with Tomcat or Java. Trying to find sufficiently detailed and relevant information in one place was difficult – though the UK federation website helped.'

Steve and Sarah both agreed that time and human resources were the most significant non-technical issues that they faced. And how did they overcome that particular problem? 'We just got on with it,' Sarah says simply. 'You just have to do it.'

TRANSITION

The transition went very smoothly. The university had been using AthensDA since 2004 so its students hadn't had standard Athens accounts in that time. Users, says Sarah, had got used to logging in with their university usernames and passwords; thus, with the Shibboleth implementation, there was not a huge amount of difference. Meanwhile the university had implemented EZproxy in 2005 so the majority of resources are IP authenticated on campus. So, even though there may have been considerable behind-the-scenes change, to users the process has been transparent. In their perception, nothing huge has changed.

'We warned people in the summer it was going to happen,' Sarah says. 'Athens is very entrenched and I think it will continue to be for a little while longer. We've still got people asking about Athens resources. So we did warn people and we have web pages up on our site directing people to more assistance.'

Some *services* have changed dramatically, Sarah points out, and these have been documented. 'Mostly the line is that you access resources by our online library, and we set up the authentication that is correct for that resource.'

BENEFITS

Sarah sees keeping abreast of new library technologies as key for a university. Even though the university has yet to transition fully to Shibboleth, important work has been achieved. Steve sees it as 'a platform to start more single sign-on work. Now we will hopefully start to consider the integration of existing systems and perhaps an internal federation of services.'

Our thanks to Steve Holden and Sarah Lowe for agreeing to be interviewed for this case study.

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