

Brighton & Sussex Medical School



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

BACKGROUND

Brighton and Sussex Medical School (BSMS) presents interesting organisational challenges to those managing its IT resources.

BSMS is five years old and produced its first graduates in summer 2008. The organisation is run jointly by the University of Brighton and the University of Sussex, in close collaboration with the Brighton and Sussex University Hospitals NHS Trust. Responsibilities for different aspects of the school are divided between the two universities. The University of Brighton has historically been the ICT lead, explains Steve Holden, 'so it made sense for us to take the main responsibility for the school's Shibboleth implementation.'

Shibboleth has not yet been deployed fully, says Steve, 'but it's all ready to go.'

DRIVERS

BSMS accesses resources from all three partner organisations as well as a few additional resources of its own via OpenAthens. This multiplicity of authentication methods was just one driver for the school implementing Shibboleth. Resources specific to BSMS are available only to its staff and students via standard Athens; resources funded by Brighton are available via OpenAthens or EZproxy; and resources funded by Sussex are also available by standard Athens. Then it was necessary to confirm the legal status of the medical school in the eyes of the federation, says Sarah; from a licensing point of view, could it assert membership of both Brighton and Sussex? 'The UK federation was very helpful in working through these issues with us,' says Steve.

For all these reasons, having a simple and consistent single sign-on solution was a welcome prospect. 'Shibboleth is a good match for the school's overlapping authentication realms,' says Steve. 'The school's members will benefit from the combined resources at their disposal, whilst feeling that they are primarily part of the Medical School.'

BARRIERS AND HINTS

The project was stretched in terms of human resources. There was no dedicated BSMS technical team to do the work; the effort had to come from the existing staff at the University of Brighton, on top of their usual duties. As a result, Steve wanted to maximise the return on his effort, and designed the Brighton and BSMS identity providers to share as much common ground as possible. 'The servers were installed and configured in an entirely automated way, with the differing parts using configuration templates. This drastically reduced the time required to scale modestly from one to two virtually-hosted IdPs,' he says.

He adds, 'We are grateful to our colleagues at both the medical school and at Sussex. Sussex were way ahead of us, and were very generous with their time. Deploying Shibboleth for BSMS has been a fantastic example of inter-institution teamwork.'

There is a lesson that can be applied to any other inter-organisation project like this, he says: 'talk as one voice. Meet early and often with your partners and peers.'

FUTURE

The work at BSMS is still on-going. Perhaps paradoxically, says Sarah, 'we will get to the point of having **no** BSMS-only resources. Resources will belong only to Brighton or to Sussex – but access will be seamless.' Thus the administration of the resources will become easier; falling into the natural workload of the team at one organisation or another; but BSMS members will find them all equally available and be unaware of the difference.

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