C A S E   S T U D Y

October 2008

Halesowen College

Interviewed: Will Davidson (Technical Resources Director)

The UK Access Management Federation

FOR EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

BACKGROUND

Halesowen College[1] has approximately 4000 full time students and will handle another 4000 part time students over the course of the academic year. The College prides itself on offering a very diverse range of courses – Technical Resources Director Will Davidson describes it 'part of our appeal.' New and specialised facilities for hair and beauty courses sit alongside more traditional subjects such as catering, IT, music and performing arts.

Will says that the College had previously used ATHENS for a number of years as a means of providing a wide range of resources to the students and getting best value for money from the resources being used. That aim has always been the driver for the College's use of access management. Having multiple user names and passwords is a barrier, he says: it leads to low utilisation, which means less value for money, and students miss out on resources. ATHENS gave one extra username and password to remember but gave you access to a wide range of resources in return.

When it was announced that ATHENS would no longer be funded by JISC, the College had to look at other means of keeping the number of passwords and usernames low. Will looked at AthensDA as an alternative but says he was advised to hold fire on this by the West Midlands RSC. 'They said there was this new thing with the silly name coming in!' That turned out to be Shibboleth.

Will describes federated access management as 'devolving access management issues to the institution, involving a trust relationship between service providers and service users.' A couple of years ago the College started considering the idea in earnest. Over time the concept gained a higher profile and an increasing amount of support became available. Eventually it was time for the College to join the UK federation.

Will admits that, as a contingency plan, the College talked about paying for ATHENS if Shibboleth had not been implemented in time. As it was, the problem did not arise and the main objective had always been to start using Shibboleth technology.

COSTS

All the work was done in-house, though Will says he got a lot of helpful advice from West Midlands RSC[2] and colleagues at Kidderminster College, who had already gone down the Shibboleth route. His team also went on an RSC training course: 'an absolute bargain – the best £60 I ever spent. We set up an IdP from scratch and it was fantastically helpful to see all the pitfalls in advance. It gave us a massive head start in getting the box set up.'

The work did not draw heavily on Halesowen's resources: Will's team was able to accommodate it into their usual workflow. 'The work was spread over a long period of time so we managed to squeeze it into our workload. We are running the box on a virtual machine so hardware hasn't cost us anything. It's difficult to quantify the amount spent – we haven't really spent any noticeable money on it. Of course, that wouldn't necessarily be a typical experience.'

_____

1. http://www.halesowen.ac.uk
2. http://www.rsc-westmidlands.ac.uk

DEPLOYMENT

Will had the federation's implementation roadmap[3] stuck to his wall for a number of months and says that the College roughly followed the recommended stages. 'We already had a reasonably strong user directory in house – MDS and Active Directory – which we were developing. We were lucky to know early on this was coming, so we had time to get used to some of the technologies. It was a very organic process. A lot of the work was done by a small number of people. The main things were getting the directory structure right in the first place and getting the Shibboleth technology to work. We set up a test Shibboleth federation first, and once that was working we could very quickly make it live.'

Overall, the process took about 18 months, starting quite slowly but picking up momentum as the deadline approached. All the identity provision work was in place by May 2008.

Teamwork played an important part. 'We are lucky to have a strong in-house team. There's a good split between the IT team and the library team with a pretty good relationship between them. IT built the box while the library liaised with service providers and found out what attributes were needed. As a result over 90% of the service providers were already up and running by the end of July.'

CHALLENGES

Getting the directory service in order was the main challenge that Will had to overcome – which, as he points out, is 'a job you should do anyway.'

Even though the process was quite straightforward, Will cautions: 'The technology is not necessarily easy to put together. It can be frustratingly difficult. To balance that there is still a lot of support available. If you're building a fairly standard model you shouldn't have any problems in finding help. If the worst had come to the worst we would have paid someone to help us. It's a challenging project but not insurmountable.'

JANET(UK)

To be a member of the UK federation, the College signed up to JANET(UK)'s Server Certificate Service.[4] Will comments that this was 'quick, and the staff were really helpful.

FOR THE FUTURE

At the moment, all the services accessed by the federation are external. Will says he also plans to set up a service provider on the College's Moodle VLE in the future – 'that's on the roadmap.'

BENEFITS

Will points out that it is early days yet, but already an increased usage of resources can be observed. The fact that end users have one username and password is not only convenient for the students, but it has led already to a massive reduction in administration time for library staff. They no longer have to maintain an effective userbase because the directory is already being maintained as part of the IT group's function. There is no longer any need for the library staff to duplicate that work.

ADVICE

Will's advice to other organisations joining the federation is: 'Seek out advice and help! There's a lot of it available. Any organisation could put things together with the help and support that is out there.'

---

3. http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/publications/famroadmapleaflet.pdf
4. http://www.ja.net/services/scs

Finally, he adds: 'I'd tell any organisation that is wavering that they should jump in and give it a try. There's very little risk and it's all free.'

Our thanks to Will Davidson, Technical Resources Director, for agreeing to be interviewed for this case study.

www.ukfederation.org.uk