North Warwickshire and Hinckley College

Saving time and money with the implementation of the UK Access Management Federation

North Warwickshire & Hinckley College is one of the largest and most successful colleges in the region. Its 2,000 full-time, and several thousand part-time students study everything from foundation learning courses up to foundation degrees, across the whole spectrum of subjects.

The College switched to using Shibboleth within the UK Access Management Federation in 2013, and is already reaping considerable benefits, in terms of both time and money.

Group Systems Librarian, Cara Clarke, was the driving force behind the move from OpenAthens MD, developed by Eduserv. Cara, who joined the College in June 2011, works within a team of ten in the library and manages all the software, systems, library catalogue, online streaming e-resources and off-site authentication.

Joining forces

In January 2013, the College earned a place in national history when it joined forces with South Leicestershire College to create a formal Federation – only the second time two FE colleges have joined in this way.

Cara’s library team works across both of North Warwickshire & Hinckley’s two campuses, as well as South Leicestershire College – which followed suit and also moved to using Shibboleth within the UK Access Management Federation.
Time consuming

While the College had a long-established and successful relationship with Eduserv, Cara wanted to investigate alternative, less time-consuming solutions. “We had no real complaints with the system,” says Cara. “The students and staff understood it, but it was taking a lot of time for us, as we had to create individual accounts for each student, with separate usernames and passwords.”

This also gave students another username and password to remember, so re-setting passwords was a regular occurrence. And, often, further hindered by the emails going into students’ junk mail.

Financially, the College also needed to look to make changes, Cara says. “Because of the Jisc band we’re in, Athens was quite expensive and with depleting Government funding in FE colleges, there’s pressure on all departments to make savings wherever possible.”

Removing barriers

In Spring 2013, Cara set about researching alternatives by speaking to her local Jisc rep, who put her in touch with other colleges that participated in the UK Access Management Federation.

“The other colleges I spoke to confirmed it saved time, was more cost effective and removed the barrier to learning for students – anything that does this in our book is a winner. I approached our IT Technicians to see if they thought the move was a possibility for the College and outlined the positives and benefits to the library.”

Although in favour of the move, they simply didn’t have the man hours to put into the project, so they decided to outsource the implementation. “Our IT Technicians had to give the outsourcing company access to our systems, which involved configuring our firewalls and they spent quite a bit of time communicating various attributes, such as IP address ranges. But the actual ‘nitty gritty’ of making the migration live was a seamless process, and took less than a week,” explains Cara.

The College had to contact each of its service providers to make sure they were compliant with the new system, which all bar one were. “They made the alteration at their own pace,” Cara says. “From the day we enquired it took three weeks. So, a piece of advice I would give to anyone considering making the switch is to give advance notice to your service providers.”
Reaping benefits

Already, the College is saving a huge amount of time through not having to create individual accounts for students, resetting passwords and troubleshooting.

Cara says: “A recent restructure has reduced the size of the team, so the gift of time is invaluable. I can't underestimate the benefit to the library. I was worried the usage of e-resources might decline, but there's not been one dip in usage throughout implementing the change, and very few enquiries.

“A huge benefit was we didn’t need to buy any new equipment – our only financial cost has been the outsourcing company. And, we’re now saving £3,500 a year.”

Learning curves

The move has also raised the profile of the library, with others contacting Cara for information and advice. But while there’s a lot of interest, the general consensus is people are worried about disruption – something Cara says they don’t need to be. So what tips does she have for anyone considering the move to the UK Access Management Federation?

“Before implementation, check your service providers are compliant and if they aren't, don’t be afraid to ask them to consider enabling access. Make friends with the IT Technicians in your organisation and stand firm, because people question change. You need to know the benefits of it, expected outcomes and what you’re going to achieve.”