Better access to digital resources – with trust and identity consultancy from Jisc

When a further education (FE) college had problems enabling federated access to digital resources using Shibboleth, its IT team decided to retain Jisc’s trust and identity expertise – with positive results.

The challenge: getting value from digital resources
As an FE college with a diverse range of students, Abingdon & Witney College seeks to deliver vocational, professional and technical training of the highest quality. So it makes significant investments in digital resources for students, such as ebooks and online journals.

These resources are held on multiple third-party platforms – and the college offers access to them via the UK Access Management Federation, using the open-source Shibboleth identity solution.

But as library and learning centre manager Debbie Southwell explains, a complex user experience meant resources weren’t being accessed as they should.

“Accessing a digital resource required a 12-step process, which you had to repeat on multiple platforms until you found what you wanted – so people would give up,” Debbie says. “Not only that, but most of the platforms were only available within the library itself – not off-campus.

“Our challenge was to dismantle obstacles, promote the library’s resources – and get better value for the money we’re spending.”

The solution: retained expertise from Jisc
To improve the student experience, in 2019 the college decided to install an ‘umbrella’ discovery system from a third-party supplier, EBSCO – which would allow students to search digital resources via multiple platforms.

This meant the college would need to integrate this user-friendly layer with multiple publisher platforms and with an existing library management system.

The college recognised that it needed specialist Shibboleth and Linux skills to get authentication working smoothly – but it no longer had these skills in-house, so it turned to Jisc.

“It worked out better to pay for a retained service from Jisc, with a set number of hours in the year – as Jisc have in-house Shibboleth and Linux experts,” says Lee Reszeter, head of IT services and resources at the college.

This retained service included work in November 2019 to set up Shibboleth on a virtual Linux server – integrating it with an existing Azure-based authentication system, so there are fewer authentication prompts and fewer interfaces for users to understand and trust.
Before and after this, Jisc also conducted work with the college and with third-party providers to clarify configurations and technical issues – to help get a complex authentication system working in a simple and seamless way for users.

**Benefits to students: access to learning resources**
Partly thanks to Jisc’s retained service, Abingdon & Witney College is able to offer easier access to online resources.

> "With Jisc's guidance, we were able to get systems available, off campus – removing up to 10 steps of the login process," says Debbie.

The college had launched EBSCO’s discovery system in beta in September – but it was able to make it a live service in December after Jisc's work.

There are still technical issues to be resolved – but using the system, students can access resources across multiple vendors.

> "Results from all platforms now show up simultaneously, using a simple search, giving students instant access to a range of resources," says Debbie.

**Benefits to staff: dealing with ongoing issues**
The college’s technology for accessing digital resources is still a work in progress. But the "retained expertise" model means the college can turn to Jisc when dealing with issues – which may involve third parties.

> "I don’t think there are words to describe how amazing the Jisc trust and identity consultant has been," says Debbie. "Nothing is too much trouble; Jisc’s expert responds to emails promptly and helpfully, and breaks it down into terms I understand rather than just baffling me with technobabble.

> "I email with issues, and nine times out of 10 the consultant replies within about 10 minutes with the answer. It has been revolutionary for our library."

From an IT point of view, Lee has confidence that Jisc will be there if the Shibboleth server needs patching. “Jisc are proactive about updates, which helps mitigate security risks.”

**Benefits to the college: more value from resources**
Value, of course, is always vital in FE. Lee says that Jisc provided this service at an affordable rate for an FE college: "They understand colleges and the financial challenges in the sector – and provide a commercial-style service without the commercial rates."

From Debbie’s perspective, the key factor is the value the college can derive from the resources it is already paying for. “We’re spending money on digital resources – and Jisc’s work has made a difference in terms of helping students access them.”

**Covid**
The work carried out by Jisc, in tandem with our Library Management System moving to a hosted platform, enabled all resources to be available off campus for the first time. When the College closed due to the Covid pandemic, this development enabled students to continue to access high quality digital resources whilst working from home. Staff and students were able to access online books, journals and articles from anywhere in the world, and use these to support their teaching and learning. The Library and Learning Centre was still able to operate in a digital capacity, and realise its core aim of providing support and resources for College members.

To find out more about Jisc’s Trust and identity consultancy, please:

- Contact your account manager
  email: https://ji.sc/ContactAM
- or visit jisc.ac.uk/trust-and-identity