SPAM ON THE INTERNET:

Is it here to stay or can it be eradicated?

Sara de Freitas and Mark Levene

ABSTRACT

This report outlines the growing problem of spam (unsolicited bulk e-mail), which has become a pervasive problem for Internet activity and has important implications for further and higher education institutions. The report provides a brief history of the development of spam, an explanation of how to define the different types of spam and an overview of technological and social ways of combating spam. The report provides a starting point for understanding the scale of the problem and begins a consideration of what further and higher education institutions can do to readdress the pervasive problem of unsolicited bulk e-mail.

INTRODUCTION:

At a recent address to the World Economic Forum, Microsoft's Bill Gates promised that 'spam will soon be a thing of the past' (Weber, 2004). Although others do not share Bill Gates's optimism (Arthur, 2004), his hopes to completely eradicate all spam by 2006 reflect a growing impatience with the problem of escalating amounts of unsolicited bulk e-mail.

Unsolicited bulk e-mail – or spam as it is popularly called – currently accounts for 63 per cent of all received e-mail in March 2004 (Brightmail, 2004; Salem, 2004). Of the 70 million e-mails that Brightmail filtered in September 2003 alone 54 per cent was unsolicited mail and that percentage is increasing year on year. In addition, Shinya Akamine, chief executive of Postini Inc., a US spam-filtering company, told a recent US Congress hearing that she believes spam has grown from 78 per cent to 83 per cent of all e-mail traffic this year (Krim, 2004). But although Bill Gates's plan to use a combination of different ways of filtering e-mail may lead to a significant reduction of spam in the short term, many are concerned that spam will never be completely eradicated (Hypönnen, 2004; Linford, 2004).

Spam has increasingly become a problem for all sectors of industry and education since the development of the World Wide Web and the increased use of e-mail for business and education (Salem, 2004). A series of attempts, both technological and non-technological, have been made to try to combat the increasing problems of congested mailboxes and to counter the heavy weight of unwanted e-mail traffic, which will have a strong effect upon the overall performance of the Internet. This has obvious implications for further and higher education in terms of the priority of maintaining institution-wide systems that are being used to support administrative tasks, and are increasingly being used for the delivery of learning materials and to support online communities of learners (de Freitas and Roberts, 2004).

In order to more fully consider the possible solutions to the spam problem, this paper will provide: a brief overview of the development of spam from the earliest direct marketing of Charles Ponzi to the modern day spammers, and a consideration of the different types and examples of spam. We will also consider the scale of the problem