
Super- convergence: SCONUL shared- experience meeting, 16 February 2009

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INTRODUCTION

A shared-experience event for ten directors of service was held in London on 16 February 2009. This event followed a posting to LIS-SCONUL which asked members about their experience of so-called super-convergence, especially in relation to the bringing together of student support services. At present it would appear that a relatively small number of universities, mostly in the post-1992 group, have moved to bring together a range of services – either structurally and/or physically – often under the auspices of the director of library and information services. It is not clear if this is a relatively limited development which will remain confined to fewer than 20 institutions in

the country, or whether the institutions currently affected represent the 'first wave' of a change that will become more widespread. For this reason, the group who met on 16 February has provided this report for LIS-SCONUL. The report provides some background information as well as notes on the key themes that were discussed on the day. The group's members intend to keep in touch with each other as a shared-experience group and aim to meet again in the autumn of 2009 to compare progress.

BACKGROUND

Nineteen directors of LIS responded to a LIS-SCONUL posting in November 2008 which asked about experience of bringing together student-facing support services. Many of those who responded were either developing super-converged services or were aware of interest in them in their institutions. Models vary considerably, but the general trend appears to be to bring together a range of support activities that are generally focussed on student support and are structurally converged. In some institutions these super-converged services are supported by a common help desk and are sometimes provided from one building. The services include library, IT and AV support (where there is, of course, a tradition of convergence) with additional support services including – but not limited to – careers, welfare and counselling, student administration, chaplaincy support, student finance, learning development, study skills and programme administration. Although the term 'one-stop-shop' is less popular than it once was, the general approach is to bring all aspects of student support together in order to streamline provision.

The shared-experience group was keen to discuss what these developments meant for our own skills set and professional identities as well as how we might approach organisational structures, staff roles, service models and student expectations. We were aware of very practical challenges such as the need to complete the Sconul statistics each year! More fundamentally, we wanted to discuss the change programmes that might assist us and how we might work with colleagues from a wide range of professional backgrounds and cultures. As an aside we discussed a tendency for library and information professionals to talk (mainly) to other library and information professionals. Is this sort of fundamental change an opportunity for us to liaise more actively with other professional groups?

THEMES AND OBSERVATIONS

1 *Who's in the mix?*

The group considered the types of services being considered for super-convergence. There were examples in the sector of all of the following:

- library
- IT, including infrastructure, services and support
- multimedia/learning objects creation
- reprographics
- classroom support
- VLE support
- student administrative support, including registration and fees payment
- course management, including submission of assignments
- programme and module advice to students
- student support services, including counselling of all types, health and well being, PDP (Personal Development Planning), careers and employability, chaplaincy
- academic skills for students, including IT and information skills, study skills
- educational / learning development / staff development activities in support of academic staff
- advice to staff and students around issues such as copyright and plagiarism.

There was no evidence available to the group of quality assurance work being included in the mix.

It was recognised that the specific constituents of the 'mix' in any particular institution depends on the main drivers at work in that institution; there is no set of activities definable independently of the institutional context.

It was noted that the expansion of the boundaries of the physical learning environment, and the support needs associated with that, are bringing those responsible for designing and supporting (for example) classroom environments into closer relationship with estates/facilities departments.

2 *What are the drivers?*

The group identified a wide variety of drivers, not all of which would be present in every institution, and which would have varying degrees of force in different contexts:

- improving the student experience, with the emphasis on providing more coherent,

understandable, consistent and better-quality services and support

- organisational politics, including developments such as shrinking the senior management team by making bigger portfolios; attempts to balance the power of support areas against that of academic areas; retirement of key staff providing an opportunity for change; and naked empire-building
- a need to provide longer service hours and better accessibility
- growing emphasis on quality enhancement
- potential for efficiency gains/cost cutting
- shifting student expectations in terms of being able to have their problems resolved in a single place, not observing the traditional distinctions between different types of advice and support (e.g. library, student administration, student welfare)
- student recruitment, especially when organisational changes can be given a high profile in 'iconic' new buildings.

There were some differences in perspective about the relative strength of these drivers, some believing that politics is normally the real driver, often masquerading as an effort to improve the student experience, whilst others felt that the desire to generate efficiency gains and improve the student experience is genuinely felt in some cases. It was recognised that successful super-convergence could relieve a great deal of the pressure on academics to sort out students' non-academic issues. Does this have any implications for the concept of personal supervision by a member of academic staff?

There was discussion as to whether the interest in super-convergence was a phenomenon of post-92 universities. The group noted that pre-92 universities were in a small minority of those present at the meeting and of those who had originally expressed an interest in attending. Is it the case that post-92 universities are dealing with much more diverse student populations, and that this gives student support services a higher profile and priority in these institutions, leading to more creative thinking about their delivery?

3 Impact on the student experience

There was a feeling in the group that universities sometimes embark on convergence projects without even taking the time to ask students what they want, or perhaps not asking the right questions – instead asking questions framed by the beliefs and assumptions of staff. We need to identify

the impact on the student experience before we implement changes in order to rectify/minimise any potential adverse impacts.

Do we in fact know how to measure the impact of super-convergence on the student experience? The group did not have time to discuss KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) and other performance measures but recognised the importance of these. In this connection, there was an important insight around the belief that students do not in fact evaluate services by comparison with other universities but by comparison with their other real-life service experiences. So how, for example, do our services compare with those experienced by students when they shop in the local supermarket, or go to a GP surgery, or go online to Amazon?

There was a further query about our ability to provide a personalised service in an homogenised environment.

4 Physical and virtual spaces

The group wondered why libraries, as places, seem to be the favoured location for super-converged services. It was felt that they generally offer attractive, customer-focussed, neutral spaces with long opening hours where students are already accustomed to congregating, and that they are often on established student 'pathways' across campuses.

It was suggested that our organisation of physical space is often based on what makes staff feel comfortable, not on how customers want to access services. For example, it was doubted whether there is any validity to the commonly held belief among staff of student welfare services that students will not access their services through an open, multi-purpose service desk. Conversely, it was recognised that a single common service desk might not meet the needs of every single group of customers, some of whom might not feel happy accessing services in an environment geared predominantly to the average undergraduate (mature overseas students on executive MBA programmes were mentioned).

The group noted an issue about the relationship between the place where the institution's own converged services are offered and the place where the student union offers services.

It was felt that there is a need to provide a virtual space for customers that is every bit as attractive and imaginative as the physical space, and that

this is essential in enhancing the availability of services and making sure that all customer groups have an acceptable way of accessing them.

The need for a single problem-reporting and monitoring/CRM (Customer Relationship Management) system was stressed, and it was recognised that it is easy to underestimate the amount of knowledge needed by staff if they are to provide a fully rounded service. This is not just a matter of possessing more factual information but of having a technology-enabled map of the information/organisational universe of the institution. There was much interest among the group in the portal-based dashboard developed at Kingston University to assist staff on combined service desks in finding the information they need. A general point was that we need to maximise the amount of information readily available to customers in order to minimise the volume of information that staff need to keep in their own heads.

5 Staffing the super-converged service

It was recognised that staffing the super-converged service presents large challenges in terms of skills, training, delivery models, job descriptions, job grades, and line management. However, the group was clear that at the heart of all this is a need to focus on the development of shared values and a shared culture. A number of tools were suggested to help with this, such as cultural web analysis and customer value discovery workshops. The value of joint training and shared social activities was stressed. An output of a successful convergence programme might be shared values, stories and vocabulary.

In terms of service delivery models, the group raised issues around the balance between expertise on the front desk and in the back room, about triage methods and about the use of students and roaming support. We wondered if we should look at other service delivery models, such as in local councils.

There was much discussion about the skills that would be needed among the people operating and managing super-converged services. Should we be recruiting more people whose capabilities lie primarily in customer service? Is there a danger of customer-facing staff being undervalued as 'jacks of all trades'? Where will the directors of these new services be found in the future? What are we doing in the library profession to develop such people, especially those currently at 'deputy' level? What are we doing to develop the

multi-skilled professionals who will be needed at all levels in the future? Should we be doing more to link up with fellow professionals in those areas coming together in super-converged services? Are our conferences and other professional gatherings too inward-looking?

There was some concern about the position of the post of chief librarian in super-converged services. It was noted that only two members of the group still had the word 'librarian' in their titles, and that there was evidence from other institutions of the chief librarian falling down the organisational hierarchy. Is the librarian taking over or getting lost? However, the group generally took a positive view, believing that super-convergence offers new and exciting opportunities, as is ever the case in life and higher education.