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The Full Monty: two mutually incompatible views of organisational convergence that leave nothing to the imagination

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Abstract
At the University of Sheffield, the Library and Computing Service formed a new Division of Information Services in 1999. Concurrently, the two services achieved breakthroughs in formulating corporate information strategy, and planning new learning space. This paper looks at the issues arising from organisational convergence and realignment, specifically in terms of the relationship between IT and library services. It puts these in a national UK context and also looks at some of the cultural issues involved in working relationships within these two key arms of the higher education information infrastructure.
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The University of Sheffield is a large and successful research-led UK University with some 20,000 FTE students. Historically, it had three principal information services: the Library (which by North American standards is of modest size, with some 1.4 million items, 160 staff and an annual budget of $8 million); Academic Computing Services (responsible for the network infrastructure, student computing and support for IT-intensive research); and Management and Administrative Computing (focused on payroll, student and staff record systems). In 1996 this last service became Corporate Information, when it added responsibility for the University web presence; and in 1997 Corporate Information and Academic Computing merged to form Corporate Information and Computing Services (CiCS), with an institution-wide remit for IT infrastructure and support, 125 staff and a budget of $10 million. In 1999, a new unit – the Division of Information Services – was established to achieve integration of planning and resourcing for the Library and CiCS. The services are currently managed separately within the new Division, but opportunities for closer working on a range of issues are being evaluated. Until recently this unremarkable – and possible typical – picture hid a good deal of anxiety and uncertainty. Below we try to explore how these tensions arose and examine some of the misunderstandings that caused them, with particular attention to the human resources dimension.

The range of organisational relationships between libraries and computing services has been a recurring theme in our conference and journal literature – and not least at Educause conferences – over the last decade. The possibilities and trends have been well explored by Creth and others in North America (1), and by Pugh and Loveley in the UK (2,3). Nevertheless, the experience of each institution is different, and events at the University of Sheffield over the last few years suggest that our experience, while not untypical of many large institutions, may have some value for others, if only in helping them to avoid some pitfalls.

As a starting point, we want to identify and characterise some of the organisation tensions that existed (and to some extent still exist) between the Library and the Computing Service during the 1990s.
The first of these is the traditional tribal tension between the two units. It’s 
an astonishing to reflect on how little interaction there was between them until the last 
decade, being limited to modest technical collaboration over the library management 
system and the annual import of student registration data. Mostly this collaboration 
was carried out by systems staff, and there was little or no discussion of strategic 
matters. The introduction of PCs and the first tentative use of the internet instead of 
dedicated networks for mediated bibliographic database searching brought further 
contact, but still at a technical level.

The first sign that the relationship was going to change in a major way came with the 
advent of CD-ROM in the Library in the late 1980s. To the Computing Service, CD-
ROM was an interesting technical development that did not impact on their core 
business. To the Library it meant a transformation of the way in which information 
resources and search facilities were made available to end-users, and the number of 
CD-ROM installations increased rapidly. However, during this early phase 
librarians had to get their screwdrivers out and install the PC cards for their CD-
ROM players, set breakers, and generally provide their own technical support. The 
librarians were not impressed. But the computing staff were similarly unimpressed 
that a client department had taken it upon itself to adopt a new technology without 
discussing the support implications first. Their view was that the librarians had 
decided to go it alone by not asking for any technical support, so why should any be 
offered?

Networking CD-ROM was the next battlefield. It was the early adoption by the 
UK’s Health and Safety Executive of CD-ROM as a medium for distributing both its 
own data and its bibliographic database that prompted Computing Services to find 
technical solutions to the need to network CD-ROM across the campus, and not the 
pressure from the Library. Eventually, however, the sheer volume of applications, 
and pressure from end-users, meant that the two services began to get their act 
together. These early skirmishes took place without the Service Directors’ 
involvement, but they set the tone for collaboration for some time.

A major factor in the relationship between libraries and computing services in the 
early 1990s was the contrasting management cultures. In Sheffield, as elsewhere, the 
Library was more hierarchical in its management structure, and oriented towards 
handling large volumes of face-to-face interactions with patrons. As the Library saw 
it, the Computing Service had large numbers of senior staff with responsibilities that 
seemed poorly defined, and relatively little contact with patrons, especially 
undergraduates. However, in the Computing Services’ view the Library’s very 
vertical structure meant that they were too bureaucratic, and had more senior staff 
than was strictly necessary. One consequence of this was the development of 
multiple, and sometimes conflicting, channels of communication. Around this time, 
in the UK, the first steps towards mergers of libraries and computing services were 
being taken, partly in an effort to improve coordination, but also with the objective 
of achieving economies of scale. Sensitivities about whether such change was on the
agenda at Sheffield were heightened with the retirement of the Director of Academic Computing Services in 1995.

The Web brought more tension. The first web server was a collaboration between Computing Services and an academic department, and the first central web server was launched by Computing Services in 1993. However, it was the Library that recognised the need for a managed corporate web presence, and bid successfully for the funds for a project to establish the University’s Campus Wide Information System (CWIS). Although the CWIS was delivered, and was one of the first UK services, having different units responsible for the content and the server (and registration) proved unsatisfactory. A great deal was accomplished in the CWIS in terms of content, but this had been achieved at the expense of a corporate look and feel, navigation and usability. A new department, Corporate Information, was therefore set up in 1996 to bring together the corporate web presence, administrative computing and management information provision.

It was increasingly apparent that Academic Computing Services and Corporate Information shared a common network infrastructure and staff skills, and that there was merit in merging them, to create the new Department of Corporate Information and Computing Services (CiCS) under the leadership of an Administrative Director.

This organisational change naturally gave rise to speculation about whether further consolidation of information services, involving the Library, might be on the agenda. By 1997, the two big information services had similar numbers of staff and similarly sized budgets. Merging them would create the largest single management unit in the institution. Would it happen? And if it did, who would win?

There was no formal debate about merger, because at this stage the various components of CiCS were dealing with the major organisational challenge of operating as a single department. And the Library was no keener to have responsibility for computing than it was to be in charge of car parking. Nevertheless, the fact that the possibility hung in the air for a while highlighted some continuing anxieties.

Among some Library staff, there was concern that the relatively new business area of electronic content might somehow be gobbled up by CiCS, leaving the Library to deal with the print collections and the important, though declining, business of issuing books to patrons. Already, it was noted that nowhere in the top level web pages for the new CD-ROM server did the word “Library” once appear. Yet the Library owned those databases! It paid for them, it had owned the print-based predecessors of most of them, and it delivered the information skills teaching that enabled patrons to use them! To CiCS this argument was futile - it had spent a considerable amount of time evaluating the technologies necessary to deliver networked CD-ROM’s, it had paid for the CD-ROM server, installed and commissioned it, and dealt with user problems through its Helpdesk. All the
Library had done was sign a few order forms and moan when things didn’t quite work! The thought that this would be so much easier if it was all managed by the same department was voiced in a number of corridors and coffee rooms in CiCS.

The expansionist tendencies in the Library, though uninterested (apart from personally) in business areas such as the payroll and network management, thought that now might be a good moment to send in the 82nd Airborne and annexe CiCS’ user services activities, such as student PC clusters (some of which were in any case within Library buildings). At around this time, the two units’ Directorates, aware of these anxieties, started a series of liaison meetings to explore areas of shared interest and to reassure staff in both that there was no hidden merger agenda.

Two factors helped to put these anxieties into perspective. One was a period of tight financial restriction which concentrated minds throughout the academic services on the continuation of existing core services. The second, and more important, were new opportunities that followed the appointment at the start of 1999 of a new Registrar and Secretary (the chief administrative officer). We look in more detail at these opportunities, and the progress that was made, below.

Meanwhile, in the UK Higher Education sector, by 1998 some 50% of institutions had achieved a degree of converged or merged management. In over 80% of the cases where a single manager was in charge of the integrated service, that manager was a librarian. For a humorous review of the cultural factors, see the report of a debate held in Manchester in 1998 at a conference entitled "50 Years of Information Developments in Higher Education" (4). In a more serious reflection on the differences, Phil Brady (5), one of the small number of IT professionals managing converged services, has commented: “There is a huge cultural difference. I see librarians as working more with certainties, while IT involves unpredictability, uncertainty and to some extent trial and error. Most IT people will admit to an incomplete understanding of their craft, and there is maybe a greater need to rely on the expert knowledge of others.”

There are almost as many models of organisational convergence in the UK as there are universities, but they can be loosely sorted into three categories:

(i) fully converged at all levels, with service delivery from integrated service points using multiskilled staff

(ii) an integrated management structure, but service delivery and operational management from separate service points

(iii) separately managed services under the coordination of a single senior officer (usually at Pro-Vice-Chancellor/Registrar/Vice-Provost level), sometimes with a title such as “Director of Information Services”.

Frequently, other services than library and IT are brought within the converged service, most commonly media production, and learning and teaching development. Responsibility for University Presses (where they exist) is less commonly included, in contrast with the US.
The march of convergence, however, has slowed in recent years, and there have been some high-profile examples of de-convergence. Moreover, there has been much more enthusiasm for mergers in the so-called “new” universities (those chartered in 1992, and which were formerly Polytechnics). In general these institutions are characterised by an emphasis on learning and teaching, on applied subjects, a relatively small (though growing) research base, and smaller library and computing services. Among the 20-strong Russell Group, the UK’s heavy-duty research-led universities, only one (the University of Birmingham) currently has a fully-integrated Information Services unit, described in detail by Field (6).

In parallel with the process of institutional-led organisational change have come a number of external drivers for change in the UK. One of the most important agencies in this respect is JISC, the Joint Information Services Committee (7), which is jointly funded by the Higher Education funding agencies in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and England. JISC has been hugely influential in both the library and computing areas, managing the UK’s eLib programme for electronic library development, and the SuperJANET high-bandwidth network that links all universities in the UK.

In 1995 JISC published its guidelines for developing information strategies (IS) in universities (8). These were backed up by the requirements of the funding agencies that all universities should develop information strategies as an integral part of their corporate plans. The guidelines followed extensive consultation with the community, and were prepared jointly with the management consultants Coopers & Lybrand. The guidelines defined an IS as follows:

an Information Strategy is a set of attitudes in which:

- any information that should be available for sharing (and most will be) is well defined and appropriately accessible (allowing for necessary safeguards);
- the quality of information is fit for its purpose (eg accuracy, currency, consistency, completeness - but only as far as necessary);
- all staff know, and exercise, their responsibilities towards information;
- there is a mechanism by which priorities are clearly identified and then acted upon.

Six pilot institutions were selected to implement the guidelines, but take-up in the sector, and progress with developing information strategies, was slow. This reflected in part the substantial length of the guidelines, and the rigorous approach to identifying information needs and flows implied by them.

The policy push behind the development of IS by each university was renewed by the Dearing Report of 1997 (9), the most comprehensive review of Higher Education in the UK since the 1960s, which stated:

“we recommend that all higher education institutions in the UK should have in place overarching communications and information strategies by 1999/2000”.

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JISC followed this up by issuing a much more concise and pragmatic set of IS guidelines in 1998 (10), appointing a national co-ordinating officer for IS development, and holding a series of conferences and workshops to help institutions make progress with the IS process. Nevertheless, the new guidelines still emphasised the primacy of understanding information needs and undertaking an information analysis; and while most if not all universities will have sections in their corporate plans headed “Information Strategy” by 2000, by no means all of them could claim to have produced and implemented a coherent information strategy.

In the University of Sheffield, the 1995 guidelines were considered by a committee, composed entirely of academic staff, which produced an extensive paper about how to approach an information strategy, without actually starting the process of writing one. Similar papers entitled “Toward an Information Strategy” or “Developing an Information Strategy” emerged from other universities around the same time.

Earlier in this paper, we referred to new opportunities that followed the arrival of a new Registrar & Secretary in 1999. Not surprisingly, the Registrar & Secretary wanted to look at the organisation of academic services, where speculation about mergers and convergence was rife. An early conclusion was that there were no significant opportunities for economy to be achieved by merging the Library with CiCS; and that overlap between staff of the two services was actually very small. The Library’s servers that ran its Talis library management system, for example, were already housed in CiCS’ facility; and the Library’s temptingly named Technical Services department was concerned with serials, bibliographic records and collection management, not IT. Recognising the need for better strategic coordination between the two services, a new Information Services Division was established, initially headed by the Registrar & Secretary, but with the possibility for a dedicated senior officer post to be created at some later date.

Accompanied by some relief that the speculation about organisational structures was now ended, attention turned to a number of areas of outstanding business, of which the Information Strategy was one. The authors of this paper were asked to move this forward, and to produce proposals for implementation. We approached this with three basic premises:

(i) that a substantial amount of the work that the JISC guidelines had identified had already been done: for example the Library already had a strategic plan, and CiCS had produced a number of written policies in areas such as data quality and data sharing;

(ii) that the JISC requirement for an information needs analysis, though important, was not in the critical path for writing an Information Strategy; and that in fact its compilation could be one of the early products of the IS;

(iii) the IS should be a framework document with a “light touch”, regularly reviewed and updated, rather than a comprehensive account of how information is created and used.
Encouraged by these thoughts, a draft IS was produced by the authors by June 1999, and after appropriate consultation was approved by Senate and Council (the University’s governing bodies) in December 1999. An IS Implementation Group has been established, and the process of developing the more detailed policies and processes is now underway. Making progress with the IS has been an important early achievement for the new Information Services Division.

A second critical area for attention was physical planning. The University Library’s facilities were overcrowded and in poor condition, and expensive to operate, being distributed between ten sites. At the same time, CiCS’ student PC clusters were cramped, and the level of provision, at roughly one PC for every 18 students fell well below the standard recommended in the Dearing Report (qv) of 1:10. The Library had produced a series of proposals for new or extended facilities in the 1990s, but due to the lack of both central funds and wealthy alumni (one respect in which UK University managers gaze wistfully across the Atlantic), none of these proposals had progressed beyond the scenario stage. In 1998 the Directors of CiCS and the Library made an important decision to consider the requirement for networked study places on campus as a shared one, reflecting the increasing need of students and researchers for integrated environments where they could use print-based and electronic resources. Following establishment of the Information Services Division, this decision led to a new joint proposal for a Learning Resources Centre (LRC). The LRC, expected to open in 2003, will feature student core text provision, along with a high level of networked PC provision and facilities for network access by patron-owned portable PCs. The proposal was strongly endorsed by the Registrar & Secretary, and is now incorporated into the University’s Estates Strategy.

A third area in which CiCS and the Library are collaborating is the University’s newly-implemented Service Quality Enhancement (SQE) process. This process is looking at ways of increasing service responsiveness, engaging with stakeholders in discussion of priorities, and developing a Service Level Agreement (SLA), that links resources to service delivery. The two services have worked together on the development of the SLA, a process which has improved mutual understanding of roles and responsibilities.

These early gains from improved collaboration – information strategy, physical planning, and service quality enhancement – have helped to boost confidence and morale among the staff of both services, and to reduce competition and suspicion between them. The pressure to maintain services within a static resource base, and to demonstrate to academic (faculty) colleagues that the services offer good value for money in the face of concern about institutional overheads on research income, are more significant that the tensions between the two services.

At the moment the Information Services Division is largely a planning and organisational concept; the two services currently operate under their existing “brands” (the Library’s brand recognition in particular has been shown by surveys
to be at a level higher on campus than those of some well known consumer brands nationally. Large-scale launch of the ISD as a public brand is likely as the commissioning of the LRC approaches.

So, having revealed (almost) all, can this picture of confusion and anxiety followed by renewed enthusiasm hold any lessons beyond Sheffield? We hope it can. In particular, we offer the following thoughts.

1. Users/patrons/clients generally couldn't care less about how the academic services are organised, so long as the right services are delivered, efficiently and effectively. The literature of organisational change may seem fascinating to us, but a customer-focussed organisation needs to leave it behind.

2. After several years of getting leaner and fitter, there's far less overlap, and far less scope for cost-saving, between libraries and computing services than one might have thought. Merging/converging is thus not a quick fix for institutional financial problems.

3. The library is not just another client of the computing service – it's a partner in the delivery of information and knowledge-based services. This first view of the library caused problems at Sheffield.

4. By the same token, the library cannot expect the computing service to drop everything just because the library has a problem.

5. Regular liaison and consultation between library and IT personnel are thus essential at both strategic and operational levels regardless of what the organisation chart looks like.

6. The concept of organisational convergence implies a symmetry between the forward progress of the two services that simply doesn't exist. The library may have more history, and more physical assets; but the computing services are much more mission-critical to institutional operation (think payroll) in the short term. Organisational integration between the services may be a more helpful model than convergence.

7. Finally, if things seem somewhat strained in your institution – they can get better!

References

7. http://www.jisc.ac.uk


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