Steady state – constant change: the evolution of libraries in learning.

1. **Introduction**

1.1. This paper takes the form of a case study, exploring the impact of the changes in higher education (HE) in England, on Library Services at the University of the West of England, Bristol (UWE). ¹

1.2. The paper first outlines some of the key characteristics of the English HE sector. It then looks at UWE and its library service as it is now, before moving on to how the library service needs to adapt to help the University meet its strategic objectives within the context of the wider HE environment. This includes looking at organisations and structures; the implications for library and other staff: the skills they will need to have or develop; the motivation and disposition they will be required to demonstrate; and, so on. It concludes by looking at some possible ways forward for libraries in the longer term.

2. **Higher Education in England**

2.1. The HE sector in the UK was never uniform and it has got less so since devolution a few years ago. Over recent years some of the key features of the sector in England have been as follows.

- Managing and sustaining an ageing infrastructure. This includes for example: old buildings; classrooms of the wrong sort for delivering learning rather than teaching, that are not networked, and probably too small; libraries that are either very new or very old, and especially if the latter, probably over full and not as accessible as they should be for disabled users; the ability of IT networks to cope with electronic resources, etc.

- The challenges and opportunities posed by changes in information and communications technologies, e.g., networked learning, electronic sources of information, growing demand for remote access to services and information, independent of time and location, and so on.

- The implications of delivering mass high quality HE with declining income, especially from government sources and in an increasingly competitive research market, combined with rising costs, e.g., staff, materials, buildings and maintenance, and so forth.

- The impact of growing student numbers who, as paying customers, are getting more assertive and more demanding about their wants, and/or their rights.

- An expanding range of legislation, some of which is contradictory, that necessitates fundamental revisions to basic processes and practices,

¹ The varying differences between HE in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the countries that make up the United Kingdom, follows the devolution of certain powers, along different lines, to these countries. One consequence of this is that the four HE sectors are evolving along diverging models, e.g., there are different funding and quality enhancement and assurance processes. This means that the challenges in each country are different, hence the focus on a HE library Service in England.
including for example, data protection, freedom of information, regulatory investigative powers, and so on.

3. The Whitehall agenda

3.1. Recently the government issued a strategy paper, outlining how it intends to support a bigger and enhanced higher education sector in the future. This paper, *The Future of Higher Education*, will impact mainly on HE in England and could have a far-reaching effects. Some of its key aspects are:

- an uncertain financial future for although the funding settlement is generous and recognises the under investment in HE in recent years, it does not completely redress the balance, whilst also appearing to favour, without a rationale based on evidence, a small number of distinctive universities;

- greater concentration of research in a small number of institutions despite evidence from Europe and the USA;

- positive developments in reach out activities between HE institutions (HEIs) and the community, including business, via knowledge exchange and transfer;

- a welcome focus on enhancing the quality of teaching, but with little reference to learning;

- radical changes in how HE is defined in England as evidenced by renewed, increased support for two year foundation degrees, which are quite distinct from the accepted three or four year traditional honours degree, and undergraduate teaching only universities, indicating a disregard – or ignorance – of the Bologna process and European developments; and,

- new fee and student funding models that appear likely to increase the level of debt students will incur and thus appear to run contrary to the government’s aims to facilitate access, and increase participation in HE to 50% of 18-30 year olds by the year 2010.

3.2. Hence, like other HEIs, UWE is facing considerable change over the next few years.

4. UWE’s current position

4.1. UWE is a new university with a deserved reputation for delivering innovative, high quality teaching and learning. It regularly receives 22 or above, out of 24, in the official external quality assurance audits. Based on a multidisciplinary, fully modular, credit based scheme, and as such still relatively unusual in England, both the undergraduate and post-graduate programmes offer students great flexibility.

4.2. With a growing reputation for research and professional practice, the University is establishing itself in niche markets. Examples include robotics, aerospace, applied sciences and animation.

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2 Whitehall is an informal, or slang, way of referring to the Government.
4.3. The focus is the quality of the student experience for all 25,000 students spread over the seven campuses. This applies whatever combination that student may be of undergraduate, post-graduate, taught, research, part-time, full-time, campus based, distance learning, block release, continuing professional development, and so on.

4.4. With a strong reputation that challenges some of the more established and traditional universities, the proposals outlined in The Future of Higher Education provide UWE with opportunities and challenges. Looking at the University’s strategic aims illustrates what these might mean in practice.

5. The University’s strategic objectives

5.1. UWE’s ten strategic priorities are as follows.

5.1.1. Improving the nature and quality of the student experience.

- The University continues to build on its strong reputation for teaching quality, and is further developing the existing modular scheme and new e-learning initiatives, restructuring student support arrangements, and strengthening connections with employers and careers services.

5.1.2. Changing the profile of the student intake.

- The admissions process is being streamlined and new initiatives are helping to attract and retain highly motivated undergraduate and postgraduate students from all sectors of society.

5.1.3. Developing research, consultancy and postgraduate education.

- The strategic plans emphasise the importance of nurturing an ethos of inquiry, reflected in substantial growth of postgraduate and research activities. The University is improving support for postgraduate education through organisational structures and investment in infrastructure, as well as a more integrated support service for post-graduate and research students. There will be further investment in research to reinforce excellence in selected areas.

5.1.4. Investing in infrastructure improvement.

- UWE envisages a £90 million capital programme over five years and has identified a long list of potential development projects that will help to deliver its strategic priorities.

5.1.5. Advancing UWE’s regional agenda.

- The University remains committed to making a distinctive contribution to the region. Stronger partnerships with schools and colleges will help widen participation in HE, and the University will use its IT, library and other capabilities to develop services to regional partners.

5.1.6. Developing strategic partnerships.

- Partnerships are being further developed with other HE institutions, FE colleges and schools, cultural organisations, employers and professional bodies.

5.1.7. Promoting participation, equal opportunities and social inclusion.
- UWE is helping to tackle poverty of aspiration by working with other HE institutions, FE colleges and schools, particularly those serving disadvantaged groups and communities, to promote successful progression to University. There is an ambitious plan of activities to achieve this.

5.1.8. Developing international profile.
- The University is developing international partnerships to support research as well as teaching, and improve its representation and presence in key international arenas, including Europe.

5.1.9. Responding to the demands and opportunities of e-world developments.
- UWE is enhancing support for the use of ICT in teaching, learning and research. The University is also exploring the potential of e-commerce to address a range of operational issues, including the whole cycle of student administration from admission to graduation.

5.1.10. Investing in quality through people.
- The University's ambitions can only be realised through a genuine concern for the well being and quality of its staff. Staff development, training, organisation and rewards are being reviewed to improve communication, recognise exceptional performance and create consistent high quality.

5.2. This is the institutional strategy that UWE Library Services is seeking to support. Combined with the government's HE strategy, the dominant characteristic is increasing demand for and to services, however “service” is interpreted, regardless of time and location. Users, whether academic staff, administrative and support staff, researchers or students, want to be able to access their teaching and learning materials, research, information sources and systems, e.g. student records, at anytime and from anywhere. Higher education is becoming a 24 hour, seven days a week, business. This implies high levels of change for the staff delivering those services.

6. Library Services’ current position

6.1. UWE Library Services’ guiding principles underpin its service delivery. These principles are that it should offer user orientated, comparable services across all campuses. These services should be responsive, and high quality. Their development must be informed by the library’s integration into the University’s core activities and their quality assured by rigorous processes involving extensive user (staff and student) feedback and counter checks.

6.2. A few facts and figures will put these principles in context.
- From a budget of over 4 million Library Services spends over £1,420,000 on information resources.
- There are 9 ‘service’ points with a total of 2,400 seats, supported by 159 full-time equivalent staff (223 in number).

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3 The last year for which complete figures are available is the academic year 2001/02.
The stock comprises 560,000 plus items, and there are 8,200 subscriptions to print and electronic resources.

For the last year that figures are available, library staff undertook 22,800 hours teaching, and dealt with 2,630 enquiries, provided 424 sessions on e-resources, and issued 740,800 items.

6.3. UWE’s libraries are not part of a larger service integrated with, for example, the computing service (Called ITS at UWE.), or a learning, development, and student support unit. Although such integrated services, of which there are a number of models, are not uncommon in the UK, libraries that are not integrated with other services continue to predominate.

7. **Getting there – moving from A to B**

7.1. So what are the implications for an academic library service, like that outlined above, of the changes to the HE sector in the national and European arenas. What does UWE’s library service need to do to help the University achieve its aims in this dynamic environment?

7.2. My response to these questions is to look at organisational issues; structures, cultures, etc., and then their impact on the library staff, including the skills and competencies they need to have or develop. This leads me to suggest that we need flexible organisations that are independent of structures, and generic not specific skills to cope with the constantly changing environment in which e operate.

7.3. **Organisational issues**

7.3.1. Previous papers in this conference have explored the impact on libraries of changes in European HE some detail, and I have indicated some of the things influencing the development of library services at UWE. One way in which UWE responded to some of these factors was to initiate an in depth review into the inter-relationship, and the interaction between, a variety of services including ITS, library, audio-visual support and so forth.

7.3.2. The question underlying the review was, could more be achieved towards enabling round the clock access to systems and services by changing the University’s organisation? Could (some) services merge, facilitating access, improving flexibility, enhancing support for international and postgraduate provision, enabling developments in innovative delivery through networked learning, and so on. The review was completely open and nothing was ruled in or out.

7.3.3. **EDUCAUSE** have done a lot of work on merging various services and have some useful reports that outline some basic principles that are equally applicable outside the USA. Their findings indicate that services with established professional backgrounds and strong specialist cultures should not be integrated unless there are extremely strong strategic drivers. Integration of services, implying major changes to organisational structures, should not be made for short-term opportunistic reasons.

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4 [http://www.educause.edu](http://www.educause.edu)
7.3.4. The outcomes of UWE’s review supported this approach, and the decision was taken not to merge or integrate any services. The University’s view was that other things are more important than organisational structures. I would take this further and argue that structural arrangements are less important than an organisation’s ability to:
- communicate effectively;
- learn from what it has done in the past and is doing currently;
- exploit new technologies appropriately;
- manage change effectively;
- manage projects efficiently; and,
- collaborate well at an operational level between services, and/or between services and faculties.

7.3.5. The ability to deliver a seamless “one stop shop” service to a large number of users with a diverse range of needs, so that they do not realise the service has a number of different providers, is more important than the management and organisational structures that support that service. Any organisation, except for the smallest, is going to have internal “boundaries”; a point where one planning, budget and delivery unit, e.g., a service or a faculty, is going to stop and another start. An organisation has to have internal structures, and hence boundaries, if each unit is to be manageable.

7.3.6. From the user’s perspective, whether the user is staff or student, the lines between each unit are artificial. A hypothetical and illustrative example follows.
- A PC or photo-copier in a library that does not work is the library’s problem as far as the user is concerned. However, at UWE, the PC is the responsibility of the computing service, ITS, and the copier is the responsibility of the Printing and Stationery service. The library can try to influence both services but has no control over them. The other two services are as equally in tune with the organisation’s objectives as the library, but each has different ways of helping achieving them and hence different priorities. They also have different constraints.

- As a consequence, to try and avoid this scenario, a decision is made to merge the library, computing and printing services. Because this makes an unduly large service that is in practice unmanageable for a number of reasons, administrative computing is separated from academic computing and merged with finance and the student records department.

- There may (or may not?) be greater alignment of priorities between the library, computing and printing areas, but there is greater divergence with the priorities of the administrative computing, finance and student record area. So, for example, a nightly data feed from one administrative system to another academic one, essential for a service development, does not happen.

7.3.7. The outcome is that the user still does not get one stop, seamless access to all services independent of time and location. To the library or service user organisational structures are irrelevant.
7.3.8. The review was 3 years ago and the University’s subsequent experience has proved that this was the right decision for UWE. In other words, the structure of the organisation was and is not the key factor. The key is how the institution works as a collection of units, staffed by individuals, striving towards common goals and objectives. (As an aside, if there are not common aims, a common culture and vision, then that is the place to start!) It is how the institution works on a task by task basis, or on a strategic level, how it achieves each of its strategic aims.

7.3.9. With this approach, project based teams become more important than formal structures. They cut across traditional organisational lines, bringing different permutations of groups or individuals together to achieve specific aims. New project teams emerge and others disband as they achieve their goals, or the development becomes integrated into mainstream provision. Project teams have varying life spans. This leads to a matrix structure where staff work in a service or faculty and in one or more project teams that have a wider remit across the institution.

7.3.10. For the University it enables flexible, targeted and efficient use of resources. Whilst this matrix approach leads to more change for staff (New teams, new colleagues, new tasks.) it can help motivation, by giving staff new challenges, opportunities for development, etc.

7.3.11. This raises questions about the skills and competencies needed by staff, and it is these that are explored next.

7.4. Staffing issues

7.4.1. Many of the traditional professional skills are redundant in a modern library in the current dynamic environment. Technology means it does not matter who is the primary author of a work, so cataloguing skills are less important. Likewise, a class mark, the information on a spine label, is no more than an address – a location label, although users browse. The classmark, e.g., 944.378912, is a finding device only telling the typical user little the item’s subject content.

7.4.2. However I would also argue that the skills that library and information staff require to cope with this matrix structure in the present environment are not so different to those we have increasingly sought as employers and managers. We are not talking about a radical change, but consolidation of recent trends.

7.4.3. In other words effective interpersonal and transferable skills are needed. Well developed skills in the areas of:

− communication;
− time and organisational management;
− project management;
− influencing and negotiating; and,
− good team working.

7.4.4. For some staff there will be opportunities to develop or demonstrate higher level management skills, leadership and good budget management for example.

7.4.5. Other competencies and personal strengths that library and information staff need include:
highly developed information and communication technology skills and an aptitude to develop them still further;
- the ability to work with a diverse range of people, from differing backgrounds, with varying skill sets;
- the capacity to cope with and manage high levels of change;
- flexibility, as evidenced by the ability to accurately assess and respond to competing and changing priorities; and,
- the ability to contribute to a number of different projects, each seeking to achieve different outcomes at an operational level, concurrently.

7.4.6. Library and information staff need to be able to function effectively as teachers in term of how users retrieve, analyse and synthesise information. This is not new. Increasingly library staff are guiding users and facilitating their search for information and learning. Library staff are supporting a diverse range of users in terms of social, ethnic, cultural and educational background, across a broad mix of subject and professional specialisms. This requires a different competency and skills set to those needed previously, making “soft” skills more important than professional ones.

7.4.7. With independent, student centred learning, libraries are an important element in delivering high quality learning in a student centred environment. Library staff need to be able to work with the full spectrum of staff involved in HE. This list includes academics, administrators, support staff, technicians, cleaners, porters, and the full extent of external contacts, e.g., partners, quality inspectors, and so on. Again, this demands an effective mix of interpersonal and transferable skills. It also needs resilience to cope with competing and changing demands, and not least, the ability to juggle!

8. **A longer term way forward?**

8.1. Whilst recognising that aims and related plans will need to evolve, academic libraries, and their parent institutions in the UK, need to think much longer term than has been typical in the past.

8.2. In fact all libraries not only need to think longer term, but to do so in combination with thinking more radically. To consider delivering, and supporting services in completely different ways. To date the provision of library and information services, in the UK at least, has been highly segmented between different sectors, e.g., between HE, FE, public, and specialist services. Each sector has, understandably, defended its own needs and specialist areas of expertise.

8.3. Collaboration exists between libraries the UK, both across and within sectors. Some support access and borrowing of materials, others are, for example, purchasing consortia, or offer collaborative staff development. There are other more sophisticated models as well.

8.4. Experience to date, e.g., UK Libraries Plus, Sconul Research Extra, and numerous cop-operative schemes based on libraries in the same locality, have shown that agreements based on mutual reciprocity and clear identification of the responsibility for the home institution and library for their users work well. They benefit service users without detriment to the institutions involved.
8.5. Collaborative arrangements can, for example, facilitate support for distance learning or work-based learning, so supporting wider access to higher education, movement of students between institutions, etc. However within the UK, libraries have not fully exploited the potential of large scale collaboration on more innovative and undoubtedly complex lines.

8.6. If libraries, not necessarily just academic ones, could further develop the co-operative model to share common functions, e.g., acquisitions, and gain the consequent economies of scale, it would free resources (staff time, budgets, etc.) for more specialist, value added roles and activities. Not only should this benefit their users, through more cost-effective, pro-active and different services, it would benefit the library staff, facilitating the development of new, possibly higher level skills, and enhancing motivation. It could for example create time for working in imaginative ways with colleagues in other services, e.g., developing user support, real and virtual, with academic and IT staff. The model I am outlining is a network or networks of libraries based across regions or internationally. To most of our users a library is a library regardless of how it is funded or who manages it.

8.7. Developing such collaborative networks would mean greater exploitation of the relevant technologies, developing different relationships with other services within our parent institutions, lobbying of suppliers, funders, governments, etc. In other words, working in project teams across organisations.

8.8. This is just one possible way forward, and there are others. I have explained this example very simply and in outline only. This is not to ignore the issues of local politics, funding streams, etc., nor is it to minimise the impact that it might have on staff and services for whom it would represent further change. It is put forward as an idea simply to encourage us to think more boldly.

9. Conclusion

9.1. I have given you a brief glimpse into HE in England, one particular University in that sector and within that one library service, and the sort of challenges it is facing. I do not believe we are talking about drastic changes in organisational structures. They are not necessary. If the units that make up the organisation can communicate and work together well, can learn from each other and contribute to projects and be flexible, then resources can be focused and utilised more effectively. Perhaps more crucial than organisational structures, are the skills and competencies of the staff.

9.2. Staff need to be effective interpersonally and have a highly developed range of interpersonal skills, combined with a capacity to cope with change. A shared vision amongst all those involved, especially those in positions of leadership is important as the staff need the will and inclination make it work. Those responsible for delivering the service, i.e., the library staff, must have ownership of and engagement, with the services they are developing and delivering. The staff are the fixed object in a state where change is constant.