The Turn of the Wheel: Projects and Politics at the University of Southampton

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Institutional context

The University of Southampton has its origins in the Hartley Institute, which was founded in 1862. It moved from central Southampton to its present site in Highfield in 1919 and was constituted by Royal Charter as the University of Southampton in 1952. The institution's historical emphasis was on science and technology, but it has evolved into a broadly-based multi-disciplinary university and expanded its academic portfolio significantly in the 1990s by merging with La Sainte Union College of Higher Education, Winchester School of Art and the Textile Conservation Centre (formerly at Hampton Court).

In common with the rest of the sector, Southampton has experienced substantial increases in student numbers, particularly over the last fifteen years. In 1952, there were 900 undergraduates; by 1990, this figure had risen to 6,000; and in 2004 there are almost 20,000 students at the University, with a growing proportion of postgraduates. It is now ranked among the top research-led universities in the UK and currently operates from seven main campuses, all with centrally-managed libraries and a mix of centrally-managed and school-owned computing facilities. The library system includes several collections of national and international importance, including the Ford Collection of British Official Publications in the Hartley Library at Highfield and the National Oceanographic Library at the waterfront campus, which is jointly funded by the University and the Natural Environment Research Council.

According to Bernard Naylor, writing as University Librarian in 1989, the story of convergence at Southampton "can be traced to an initiative in the field of word processing taken by the University in 1978". However, a whole decade elapsed before the shared interests among the Library, the Computing Service and the Teaching Media Department were formally acknowledged in the decision to appoint Naylor as Co-ordinator of Information Services *in addition to* his existing role from August 1988. This appointment marked the beginning of the first of two distinct phases of service convergence at Southampton, which lasted until December 2000. The second, shorter, phase ran from March 2001 until December 2003.

Circumstances leading to convergence

Moves towards convergence at Southampton in the 1980s were *technology*-led – a response to the opportunities for enhancing research, teaching and administration offered by advances in technology – but had an *information* orientation from the start. A Working Group on Word Processing Equipment was formed in 1978, which soon evolved into an Advisory Group on Information Handling and was involved in several initiatives, but not seen as having a central role in the University. The situation changed in 1986 with the arrival of a new Vice-Chancellor, who took over as chair of the re-named Information Services Advisory Group and then "projected it into the centre of the University's affairs" (Naylor 1989).

A vision of 'the screen-focused working environment' was emerging, which recognised the centrality of information to university activity and the need to provide a single point of access (on the desktop) for administrative and academic data processing and computing facilities, enabling the manipulation and creation of information by a diversity of users. Although not labelled as such, the description of "the single VDU screen…as friendly to the Grade 2

secretary in the Registry as to the Dean of Arts, or for that matter the Professor of Electronics" (Naylor 1989) was an early articulation of the 'common desktop' that many institutions are still struggling to implement today. Meanwhile, the Librarian, the Director of the Computing Service and the Director of the Teaching Media Department began meeting informally to discuss opportunities for technology-enabled service developments that cut across traditional departmental boundaries. One potential barrier to progress was the strongly embedded system of budgetary devolution that worked against collaborative efforts.

By the late 1990s, the arguments advanced were multi-faceted and multi-layered, reflecting the growing complexity of the external environment and the managerial (and political) dynamics of institutional ambitions. In March 1999, the University Management group (UMG) set up a Working Party to explore the future structure of academic support services, in anticipation of the retirement of the Co-ordinator at the end of 2000. It was chaired by the senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor and its membership was small and specialist, comprising only three senior professors – the chairs of the two policy committees for the Library and Computing Services and a professor of microbiology, who doubled as the head of computing support and information strategy for the School of Medicine.

The Working Party's approach was thorough, giving in-depth consideration to its subject through desk research and extensive consultation within and beyond Southampton. Individual members investigated experience elsewhere by website scrutiny, e-mail enquiries and telephone conversations with institutional contacts. They were particularly interested in experience within the Russell Group, but also covered other old and new universities in their research. In addition, they tracked down relevant literature from both the UK (eg Collier 1994, Lovecy 1994, Pugh 1997) and US (West and Smith 1995). They produced an interim report in July 1999, a revised version in November 1999 and a final report in March 2000. The first two reports were informed by consultations with the services covered, the second was also informed by responses from UMG and the final report took account of thirteen formal submissions, made on behalf of faculties, schools, departments, the large multi-departmental Administrative Budgetary Group (ABG) and various library groups.

The main external forces for change were again seen as technological advances, but this time coupled with changes in the student marketplace related to expansion, participation, globalisation and consumerisation through tuition fees – the 'customer-provider model' – all pointing towards an increased requirement for innovative and sophisticated programme delivery in a flexible and seamless style. Considerable emphasis was placed on the need to embed technology in the learning and teaching process and to integrate developments and support among the services and across the institution. Similar needs for sophisticated provision and seamless services were also identified for research.

Internal concerns now centred on the perceived shortcomings of the existing model: the role of Co-ordinator (now of *Academic Support Services*, rather than *Information Services*) was seen as poorly defined, inadequately resourced, not taken seriously by senior management and not properly recognised in the decision-making structure. The postholder was not a member of UMG, so the major services were not effectively represented at the top level of the institution and were unable to exert or reflect the strategic influence necessary to achieve the type of integration envisaged. The key internal issues were thus about improved role clarity, strengthened consolidated representation and a substantial strategic contribution, all seen as essential to achieving the service enhancements, strategic advantage and operational efficiencies thought to be possible in a converged environment.

Information strategy planning

In the first phase of convergence at Southampton, information strategy planning can be seen as both cause and effect of the academic support services working together. Naylor prefaces his 1989 case study with the observation that

"The penetration of the Southampton University academic community by electronic technology and the *formation of an information strategy* have been important parts of a process in which separate strands of development are, in due course, perceived to have essential common elements, requiring that they be brought together into a coherent programme and in which some of the diverse members of the academic community realise that a *university information strategy* is something which needs to be devised and to which they ought to give their commitment." [Italics added]

Although the term 'information strategy' was not widely used at the time, it seems an accurate reflection of the emphasis of both the overall vision and specific initiatives under discussion at Southampton, further evidenced by the title given to the body set up to guide the University's progress towards a technology-based future – Advisory Group on *Information* Handling (later Services). In this context the twin drivers of convergence were the opportunities offered by advances in *information and communications technology* and the dawning realisation that higher education institutions are *information-intensive organisations*. The formation of the Advisory Group and informal meetings of the service heads enabled a vision of the future to emerge, which marked out a development path for the information strategy, though not yet in the form of a fully articulated plan.

By the time of the second phase, the notion of an information strategy had been around for a decade and had become institutionalised at Southampton, in that both a formal document and a university committee with that title existed. Reports of the Working Party on Academic Support Services placed emphasis on the need for strategic direction and development of the services and for the services to influence and contribute to the strategic management of the University. These reports did not mention the Information Strategy specifically, but concentrated on the need for the services not only to support and respond to the Research Strategy and the Learning and Teaching Strategy, but also to "contribute substantially to institutional strategy". The focus here on the core business/academic strategies rather than on information can be attributed to the Working Party's belief in the need "to focus on the *academic* process rather than on the *information management* process", which is reflected in the job title of the post recommended (and in the later title of the Co-ordinator).

In practice, the new Director of Academic Support Services was seen as a key player in information strategy planning and this role was stressed in the information for applicants, which stated that "a main responsibility will be the further development, acceptance and implementation of an Information Strategy to underpin the University's Strategic Plan" and then linked this explicitly with convergence by adding, "To make best use of the information and delivery channels available it will be important to develop plans to promote closer working between the Library and Computing Services, to unify their approaches and systems, to best exploit synergies between them and to provide a user oriented focus".

Services included in the converged organisation

During the first phase, the services covered by the Co-ordinator were the Library, the (academic) Computing Service and the Teaching Media Department. This continued until Naylor's retirement in December 2000, though by that time the Computing Service had

gathered in related technology-based functions, including first telephony and then the audiovisual and digital elements of what was then known as Teaching Support and Media Services (TSMS). A working party on the future of this unit had decided to separate the developmental/pedagogical and operational/technological elements and place the former in the Research and Graduate School of Education.

By the start of the second phase, the audiovisual and e-media services from TSMS had been subsumed within Computing Services and the initial remit of the new Director was then to lead the management of two large service departments – Computing Services and the Libraries. More specifically, the task was defined as delivering "a strategically focused, integrated, proactive and user-oriented Academic Support Service".

However, the possibility of expanding the portfolio was a live issue from the outset. The July 1999 report of the Working Party proposed "an evolutionary approach to the integration of the services, starting now with the three core groups" (i.e. library, computing and teaching media), adding that "the later definition of which services should be included can be as wide or as narrow as the strategic imperatives and drivers for change require". The Working Party's final report reiterated its belief in "an evolutionary process, in which other aspects may be added", citing the experience of other universities that had done this and mentioning specifically the Centre for Learning and Teaching (formed from the residue of TSMS transferred to the School of Education) and the Management Information Computer Service (MICS, which was a small unit located in the Planning Department within ABG).

In the event it was not long before the case for unification of MICS and Computing Services became overwhelming, key factors here being the need to join up systems and services in evolving the e-learning platform into a seamless managed learning environment and in developing student and staff portals. Thus in autumn 2002 those two services were formally merged to become Information Systems Services. At the same time, against a backdrop of comprehensive institutional restructuring, the Academic Support Services group was further extended by bringing in the Careers Advisory Service and the Quality Assurance Unit (from the Academic Registry). These additions recognised a shared interest in academic liaison and skills development among the services concerned and the desirability of co-ordinating IT, information, academic/study, research and enterprise skills development and of embedding and integrating skills interventions in academic programmes.

The regrouping also reflected the extensive involvement and influence of the Director of Academic Support Services in institutional learning and teaching developments, which had reached a point where it made sense for the organisational structure to evolve in line with the practical reality of day-to-day working relationships. The responsibilities of the QA unit were broader than the name implies and included the development and monitoring of the University's strategies for Learning and Teaching and Widening Participation. Another purpose in transferring this activity from the administrative support group to its academic service counterpart was to signal an intended shift in emphasis from quality *assurance* to quality *enhancement*. This message was then reinforced by changing the QA unit's name to Educational Development Service and brining in other staff involved in widening access. At the same time, the word 'support' was dropped from the title of the group and the director, who then became Director of Academic Services.

The model adopted

The appointment of the Co-ordinator in 1988 coincided with the retirement of the Director of the Computing Service, which opened up the possibility of the postholder becoming the

single reporting point between the three services and the Vice-Chancellor. In the event, following negotiation with interested parties, the model adopted was that of a *peer co-ordinator* rather than *executive director*, with the role rotating at five-yearly intervals between the heads of the two largest services and all three Departments retaining financial independence as 'budgetary groups', each with comparable status to the academic Faculties and to ABG (which included Academic Registry and Public Affairs, as well as departments such as Finance and Personnel).

In this first phase, the role of Co-ordinator (who reported to the Vice-Chancellor) was intended to provide strategic and, to some extent, operational co-ordination, but did not have formal management responsibility across the services. The services retained their budgetary independence and the first postholder also writes of "retaining the integrity of the three activities" and continuing "to lay strong emphasis on the viability and value of the different service traditions of the three service departments" (Naylor 1989). The role was seen as a recognition of 'common threads' among Computing Services, the Library and Teaching Media and its purpose as being "to ensure these threads were pulled together" (Marshall 1991).

One example of more formal co-ordination was the university committee structure: the existing committees for the Computing Service, Library and Teaching Media continued to play their former roles, but there was an attempt to pull things together more explicitly by requiring these three separate committees to relate actively to the previously free-standing Information Services Advisory Committee (formerly the Advisory Group on Information Handling) as a single over-arching body.

For the second phase, the final report of the Working Party in 2000 revealed considerable opposition to the proposal to replace the role of Co-ordinator with a more strategic higher-level post of Director of Academic Support Services: four of the six faculty responses were against the idea, and ABG was totally opposed to it, submitting a range of counter-proposals accompanied by data gathered from a survey of 46 institutions. However, the chair successfully overcame all these challenges and UMG approved the recommendations in his report, with only a few amendments.

As a result, the new post reported to the Vice-Chancellor, as the Co-ordinator had done, but in addition had management responsibility for both the Library and Computing Services and was also to attend UMG, as well as being a member of all the main University strategy and policy committees. The existing policy committees for the services were merged to form a new Academic Support Services Committee. Despite the stated intention to provide "a single voice backed by a single budget", the budget situation was confused by the decision to 'ring-fence' the service budgets for the first three years and the seemingly inconsistent assumption that the new Director's salary and running costs would be funded from these budgets. More positively, UMG agreed a small additional ring-fenced annual allocation as a strategic initiatives fund for the new group, to facilitate collaborative service developments and innovations.

Change management process

The new Director opted for an evolutionary path towards an integrated service via closer working and collective thinking on strategic developments. She took the view that structure should follow strategy – not pre-empt it – and accordingly decided not to rush into substantial reorganisation, but instead to build on existing collaborative activities. There were other compelling arguments against early restructuring: a new structure had only recently been

introduced in Computing Services and then adjusted following the assimilation of audiovisual and media staff; the prospect of other services being added to the portfolio had to be taken into account; and there was plenty of evidence from elsewhere of structural change taking up time and energy that might have been better directed at service enhancement and innovation.

Nevertheless, several deliberate steps towards unification were taken in the first few months: a cross-service management group was formed, which immediately began to identify common themes and shared objectives in the strategic plans of the services; staff meetings were held at all sites, to provide opportunities for discussions and questions about the nature of change envisaged; and the Director visited Deans, Deputy Deans and Heads of Schools on separate sites to talk through their perceptions and expectations of the services. Collaboration between the Library and Computing Services was already established practice in several areas, notably computing support for the library management system, co-operative provision of CD-ROM database services, a jointly resourced Assistive Technology Centre (ATC) and reciprocal involvement in each other's staff reviews. The last two examples offer interesting illustrations of the different professional cultures and traditions.

The ATC had been managed in an informal co-operative way through a 'management group' comprising mainly the staff involved in the service. Although all those involved were keen to develop and expand provision, their preferences and priorities were different: the Library staff liked to provide in-depth specialist help to a tightly defined user group, whereas the Computing staff wanted to roll out specialist software to as many people as possible. Tensions arose as these differing aims were seen by the protagonists as conflicting and contradictory. A way forward was found by engaging all group members in the development of a vision and strategy for the service, in which the two approaches were seen as complementary rather than competing. The process also resulted in a unanimous request from the group for formal management responsibility for the service to be given to a particular member of the Library senior management team. The ATC represents only a tiny part of a large group, but shows how the creation of a shared vision can help strong personalities to agree and achieve pragmatic goals (Bown and Corrall 2002).

The staff review process was conducted annually to identify and approve cases for salary increments and regradings, with discussion and decisions taking place at departmental, group and then institutional level. Although the Library and Computing Services used the same salary scales and similar grade definitions, there were significant differences in interpretation and application. Not only was the 'career grade' for computing staff set at a higher level, but it was also established practice for new staff to progress rapidly towards this by receiving double increments each year. Bringing the two services together into a unified management structure exposed these differences to further scrutiny and questioning, particularly after the group was expanded to include careers advisers and QA staff, reinforcing disparities. A case could have been made for upgrading the liaison librarians and careers advisers, especially with their growing involvement in teaching students, but this would have posed serious budget challenges and was therefore left as something to be resolved in the new pay and grading structure currently being implemented.

Success and influence

The distinctive features of the Southampton model have been the continually evolving portfolio of the co-ordinator/director, the focus on academic activity – rather than information management – as the change driver and a continuing debate over whether the postholder

should act primarily as a high-level change agent (akin to a Pro-Vice-Chancellor) or concentrate on the more conventional line-management role. The author took the view that she could contribute more to the institution by leading and integrating strategic initiatives than by providing an extra layer of management, bearing in mind the experience and competence of the existing service heads.

The Academic Services managers developed a shared vision of a unified structure which combined concentration of expertise in specialist units (organised along traditional lines) with the development of multi-professional teams for common functions (academic liaison, information provision, learner support and quality assurance) in a matrix arrangement. They were committed to joint strategic and operational planning and also close collaboration with other services and academic units. In practice, progress towards multi-professional teamworking was more evident in relation to development projects and strategic initiatives than in operational processes, reflecting the priority and attention given to the former by the Director.

Notable examples of cross-functional working included the digitisation and provision of access to exam papers and the design and development of an institutional repository for research output. While collaboration among the different services was a critical factor in the success of several ventures, development of effective partnerships between the services and academic groups was an equally important dimension of the Director's role, indicated by the wide range of boundary-spanning projects led during this period, in areas such as academic skills development, computer-aided assessment, institutional website design, personal development planning, student feedback mechanisms and student entitlement.

Several of these developments were pump-primed from the Director's strategic fund, showing how relatively modest sums can make a significant difference. Another key contribution of the post – in addition to time and money – was making connections between the various initiatives, ensuring linkages between activities and avoiding overlaps and gaps. The Director's oversight of so many projects and her position at senior management meetings also meant that potential contributions of the services were more likely to be spotted in good time and actual contributions were more likely to be mentioned and acknowledged. It also enabled the services to tap into new income streams, such as HEFCE project capital allocations, which significantly benefited assistive technology, e-learning platforms and workstation provision. In addition, the services gained more prominence in the institution and the Library in particular used such opportunities to raise its profile in learning and teaching.

In the event the Directorate of Academic Services proved a short-lived phenomenon. Within a few months of the Director taking up post, the Vice-Chancellor had left the University and the key Deputy Vice-Chancellor had completed his term. As indicated above, the new Vice-Chancellor decided on a radical restructure, which expanded the Director's portfolio, but changed the reporting line to the Secretary and Registrar, although attendance at senior management meetings continued. A year later, the Vice-Chancellor reduced the size of the senior management group and excluded the Director from meetings, making it impossible to fulfil the role in the style envisaged. The Director decided to move on, the post was not filled and the Directorate was dismembered, with the Library and Information Systems Services reporting to the Secretary and Registrar and the two smaller services moving into Student Services (formerly the Academic Registry).

Evaluating the experience

It is too soon to gauge the full impact of the demise of the group and the loss of the post and the author is obviously not in a position to offer an objective assessment. Nevertheless, it is probably fair to say that it is unlikely that as many projects would have been initiated and completed within a three-year period without a change agent of this type to make it happen. The prime focus of the role was on pulling things together within a strategic framework and making necessary connections across the whole institution. As such, the competencies needed were those generally sought in strategic leaders, but with particular emphasis on vision, teambuilding, flexibility, assertiveness, energy and resilience.

The Southampton experience has shown that creating a post devoted to strategic development can have significant impact by articulating a vision, building bridges and pump-priming initiatives. It has also shown that personalities and politics can exert huge influence on events and often with unexpected outcomes.

Converged information organisations vary significantly in both the services included and the models adopted. All management structures have advantages and disadvantages, but must also fit with the strategy and suit the culture of the institution at the time. Ultimately it is people – not structures – who deliver services and working together depends more on creating the right climate than finding the best design.

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