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# Living through super-convergence: creating library and student support at Liverpool John Moores University



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## BACKGROUND

In February 2009 ten SCONUL service directors attended a shared-experience event to discuss an emerging trend, the convergence of a wider range of student support services than the usual library and IT (reported in *SCONUL Focus*<sup>1</sup>). Just over one year on, a new service – library and student support – has been created at Liverpool John Moores University and a range of services is now offered from the three learning resource centres. This article outlines the rationale for the convergence, describes the change-management programme designed to achieve it and looks forward to the next stages of service development.

‘Super-convergence’, as it is now known, involves bringing together – either structurally or physically – a range of services such as the library, IT support, student administration, careers, welfare, counselling, study skills, student finance and programme administration. Typically the key drivers for change include the desire to enhance the student experience, improvement of service quality and demand for longer service hours. At the 2009 exchange-of-experience meeting, the service directors also identified issues such as local organisational politics, the potential for



Atrium

efficiency gains and the high institutional priority now given to improving student recruitment, retention and satisfaction rates as factors that are leading to the creation of larger, more integrated service departments.

Several different models of super-convergence are emerging. In some institutions super-convergence is achieved by locating a variety of student-facing services in the same space that continue to be managed by different teams. Other models operate as a single service department with the different business processes delivered by specialist groups of staff. The exchange-of-experience group noted that the range of services converged and the management model adopted will vary according to the local drivers for change and the objectives of the convergence.

## LJMU STUDENT EXPERIENCE REVIEW

At Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU), the key driver for super-convergence was a review of the student experience undertaken in 2007/08. The student experience review implementation group (SERIG) made a number of recommendations relating to the management and delivery of excellent student administration and support across the university. These included:

- developing a standardised admissions procedure
- delivering efficient, integrated and accessible student support

- 24x7 access to resources
- consistent administrative support across all programmes of study
- consistent communications channels relating to student administration and support.

The main recommendation from the review group was that all student-facing services should be delivered from a single location in each of the university's three campuses. The existing learning resource centres (LRCs) were identified as the most appropriate spaces because they were conveniently located, very accessible and already providing student-facing services with long opening hours. At the end of the process it was agreed that the services to be delivered from the LRCs would be:

- library and IT services
- flexible learning
- research and learner support
- student administration (enrolment, coursework submission)
- programme administration (enquiries, progression advice)
- student finance (bursaries, student loan payments)
- access to welfare, employability and careers services.

When the review outcomes were known, a number of previously planned refurbishment and building works in the LRCs were quickly amended to accommodate the new service requirements. The key development was the creation of a 'student zone' located on the ground floor of each LRC, providing seamless access to all the services offered in the buildings.

#### ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

A major restructure was required to bring together the services that now operate from the student zones. Prior to the merger, three campus centres adjacent to the LRCs supported student enrolment, coursework submission, student finance, welfare and counselling. Programme-based administration was delivered from 23 school- and faculty-based offices. The review group recommended that all student administration and programme administration should be delivered from one service team and location, which became library and student support, delivered from the learning resource centres.

The objectives of the merger process were:



Ground floor

- to create the new service responsible for library, IT support, student administration and programme support
- to bring the services formerly offered by the campus centres into the LRCs
- to move the programme-administration processes and staff resources from the school and faculty offices into the LRCs
- to develop new ways of working and offer the other student-facing services (welfare, careers and employability) from the LRCs.

The director of library and student support, Maxine Melling, led the process to develop the management structure and key process areas:

- student administration
- research and learner support
- customer services
- business and planning
- staffing
- business and information systems.

The first stage was to appoint the senior management team in June 2009, define the service structure and develop the new service model (see Figure 1).

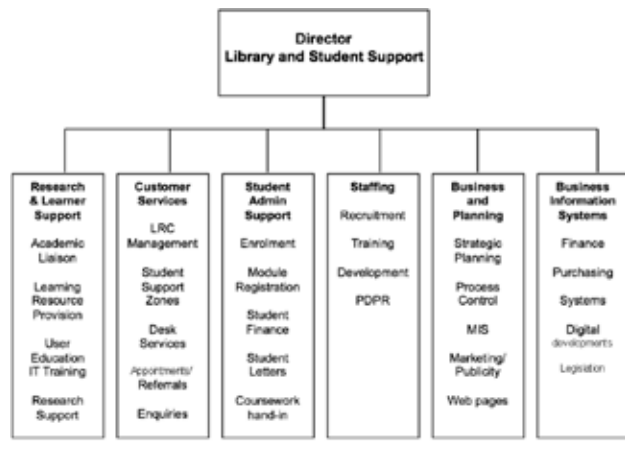


Figure 1.



Students

#### **SERVICE MODEL**

The distinguishing feature of the model adopted at LJMU is the focus on customer services and the way they are delivered. The research and learner support and student administration teams manage the majority of the staff in L&SS, but they deliver their specialist services within a standardised and consistent customer-services environment. Physically this takes place in the student zones on the ground floor of each LRC. Each student zone has three service points: a hub for reception, general enquiries, library and IT support and booking appointments; a transaction desk for coursework submission, student administration and programme enquiries; and a finance office. These service points have been designed to restrict the space taken up by staff within each student zone, with the remainder of the LRC being given over to students and other clients for social learning, group study, individual study and access to resources. As well as the fixed service points, roving support is offered during core hours to ensure that students and other clients have quick and easy access to help and support.

#### **CHANGE MANAGEMENT**

Achieving the new organisational change and the new service model was extremely challenging. A structured change-management programme was developed as soon as the review outcomes were known in January 2009 and it is still taking place at the time of writing. This programme has been designed to assist staff to move from their original roles, locations and identities to the new service while retaining a certain degree of stability and team identity. Everyone involved in the process has experienced a great deal of organisational and cultural change and the university's staff-development team was brought in right at the start to help design the programme and provide ongoing support. The main elements of the programme are:

- *Getting to know you*  
Introductory workshops in which staff from all the teams being converged were able to exchange experiences and develop an awareness of each others' areas of expertise
- *Managing yourself through change*  
Workshops for all staff to understand the theory, practicalities and personal realisation of the change process
- *Managing others through change*  
Workshops for all managers and supervisors to help envisage change from the perspective of their team members and support them through the process
- *Customer service training*  
Refresher workshops for all front-facing staff to reinforce customer service standards
- *Learning 2.0*  
Training for all staff in technology-enhanced learning to assist in making the transition into new 'multi-skilled' roles, offering enhanced levels of support to students
- *Programme administration training*  
Sessions for all student administration staff delivering enhanced levels of student and programme administration to students
- *Coaching and mentoring*  
For all staff in a supervisory position to enable them to mentor their staff teams, particularly with regards to the new service values and cultures
- *Vision and values*  
A large-scale project in which all library and student support stakeholder groups have been consulted as to how the service should operate
- *Rolling programmes*  
Ongoing training in IT skills and student-administration processes.

For managers, one of the most encouraging aspects of the process was the willingness of the frontline staff to engage in it and contribute their ideas. During the 'Getting to know you' sessions when staff talked about the best aspects of their jobs there was very high commitment to improving the procedures for students. Staff from both the former library and student administration teams identified frustrations on occasions when

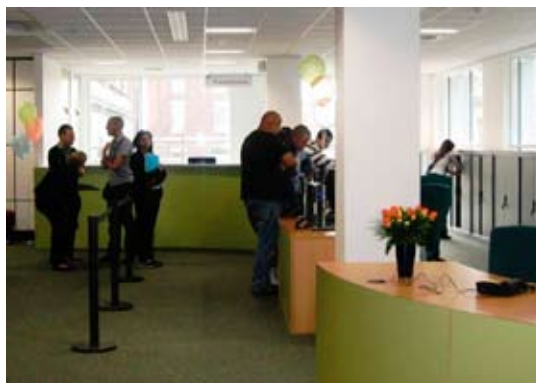
they had been unable to complete a process for students or had been unsure where to refer them. When addressing the more difficult aspects of the merger it was invaluable to have this very strong common ground on which to base decisions.

#### **SERVICE IDENTITY AND BRANDING**

Communicating the location, functions and ethos of the new service to students, academic staff and other university service teams was a very important part of the process. Working with the university's corporate communications team, a new service identity was developed for use on a range of materials including print leaflets, web pages, posters and signage. The new publicity materials aimed to convey a number of key messages:

- *Everything under one roof*  
The students' immediate support needs housed in one location: finance, welfare, counselling, IT support, e-learning support, access to technology, library services, student administration
- *Student-centred*  
Convenience and a holistic student-support experience. Support services delivered in a joined-up way, in collaboration with schools, faculties and other service departments
- *Seamless student experience*  
The LRCs offer a blend of services, facilities and resources; students do not need to differentiate one team from another; L&SS staff will provide access to all services, with efficient referrals to the appropriate experts where necessary
- *Flexible learning space*  
Practical and versatile spaces throughout the LRC are 'owned' by the students, who are able to find the appropriate learning space to suit their study requirements and learning styles; bookable student seminar rooms, flexible and social learning spaces, group study areas, quiet study areas and PC workstations all available
- *Technology-rich*  
Up-to-date, fit-for-purpose technologies are available for learning throughout the LRCs; mobile learning, through the use of wireless laptops and handheld learning devices, is encouraged and all student spaces are equipped with appropriate learning technologies

- *Knowledgeable staff*  
L&SS staff at the hub direct and guide students to the facilities, services and resources that they require.



*Transaction desk*

#### **WHAT NEXT?**

2009 was an extraordinary year for all those working in L&SS. The super-convergence represented the largest-scale change to organisational structure and services that most of the staff affected had ever experienced. The changes were entirely driven by the student experience and the university's strategic commitment to provide the very best services for its students. This is underpinned in the university's and now L&SS's values. Staff are working within this values structure to achieve excellence in everything they do.

The changes associated with the super-convergence are still in progress and will continue to evolve for some time. Some amendments have already been made to the layout of the student zones, which will continue to evolve in response to changing needs. L&SS Staff are still learning and acquiring new skills, and so too are the staff in the faculties and schools where administrative processes have moved into the student zones. A benefits-realisation exercise has just begun to identify the outcomes and implications of this major change, which has had an impact on most of the university.

As anticipated, there has been a great deal of interest in the changes made at LJMU and in the new service model from colleagues in other universities. A number of events are being arranged to facilitate further exchanges of experience and to identify areas where we may be able to share best practice.

#### **REFERENCE**

- 1 R. Heseltine, S. Marsh, S. McKnight, M. Melling, 'Super-convergence: SCOUNL shared-experience meeting, 16 February 2009', *SCOUNL Focus* 46 (2009), pp 121-4