
Conference review

Super-convergence. Liverpool John Moores University 7 October 2010

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**'A DAY OF GREAT CONVERSATIONS' (ELIZABETH SELBY,
SOUTHAMPTON SOLENT UNIVERSITY)**



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Around 60 delegates attended a conference hosted and organised by Liverpool John Moores University, the aim of which was to bring together those senior managers working within higher education institutions who are responsible for managing and converging their institutions' support services. Whilst the conference was originally aimed at senior library staff working within or at the head of super-converged student support services in universities, there were many delegates from other areas of higher education, including quality departments, student services departments, registrars and a representative from the UK student services professional body, known as AMOSSHE.

Held at the Foresight Centre in Liverpool, the day commenced with an overview of the various models and drivers behind super-convergence. In setting the scene, much reference was made to the SCONUL shared experience meeting held in February 2009, where the super-convergence debate was first aired.¹

Super-convergence within the context of this particular conference is widely acknowledged as the bringing together, either physically or structurally, of two or (usually) more support services within an individual higher education institution. The drivers behind such convergence vary and may include student experience, student demand, student recruitment or organisational and financial issues.

Lily Rumsey and Jemma Blease-Dudley, the President and Vice President of the Liverpool Students' Union, gave a lively presentation on the particular type of super-convergence at Liverpool John Moores University and how it had been informed by the Student Experience Review, an initiative with the ultimate goal of enhancing the overall student experience by bringing together all non-academic student-facing services.



Elizabeth Selby and Maxine Melling

Maxine Melling, Director of Library and Student Support at Liverpool John Moores University, and Elizabeth Selby, Dean of Learning and Information Services at Southampton Solent University, then held a plenary session, which addressed some of the challenges and questions that leaders and managers are facing within the super-convergence arena. These included the question of leadership of super-converged services and where the leadership of such a service naturally lies, the services being offered within the new department, quality issues, customer service models and liaison structures, identity within a super-converged service and identity within the university, and the inevitable staffing issues which come with such complex organisational structures.

The conference then turned to its main objective, that of identifying different examples of super-convergence within the already established contexts and investigating the current issues and concerns. Delegates were asked to choose between discussion groups, each of which offered one or two case study presentations on different models and drivers of super-convergence, followed by group discussions.

UNIVERSITY OF THE CREATIVE ARTS

Vanessa Crane, from the University of the Creative Arts (UCA), presented a case study entitled 'The long and winding road: from merger to (super-)convergence and beyond'. Super-convergence at UCA emerged from the significant organisational and cultural change that resulted from the merger of the former Kent Institute of Art and Design and the Surrey Institute in 2005. The result is the recently formed Academic Services Directorate, which comprises three previously separately managed departments: IT Services, Library and Learning Services and Student Development Services. The directorate has a presence on the university's five campuses, which are spread across the south east of England from Canterbury in the east to Farnham, 94 miles away to the west. Services are delivered both physically and virtually, to some 6500 creative arts students studying art, design, architecture, media and communication at further education, undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

The UCA super-convergence model fits strategically with the university's vision and mission as a creative arts institution and supports wider sector imperatives relating to the student experience, sustainability and employability and community engagement, specifically in the creative arts.

LIVERPOOL JOHN MOORES UNIVERSITY

The workshop discussion presented by Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) described the detail behind their super-convergence initiative. As has already been mentioned, the key driver behind the LJMU super-convergence has been the student experience and the feedback received over time about how delivery of front-facing teaching, learning and pastoral services impact on the overall student experience and satisfaction. The detail of this particular presentation has been covered in a previous issue of *Focus*² and the delegates attending this session enjoyed some lively discussion about the complexity and practicalities of bringing about such wide-scale institutional

change and the impact that this has on staff. The session allowed those attending to exchange experiences about their management-for-change programmes when dealing with super-convergence and get advice, ideas and reassurance as to how best to go about such changes.

KINGSTON UNIVERSITY

Sue Robertson and Karen Belsham of Kingston University presented their case study, 'Joining things up', to illustrate how Kingston's information services work within a wider structure that includes student services and administration, student recruitment and the university's international office and development office. Information services itself incorporates the converged areas of customer services, learning and research support, content development, corporate information systems, infrastructure and compliance, planning and resources. Super-convergence at Kingston has meant much closer working and collaboration amongst constituent parts of the university and a management-for-change programme that goes back over six years. Key to the success of Kingston's super-convergence has been the integration of service points through close links between information services and student services and administration. The resulting services mean that all information services teams are able to work on the help desks within the LRCs and provide first-line computing and information enquiry support. The LRCs also provide the first line of support for student services enquiries and facilities, as well as student welfare, advice and study support. Once again the driver in this instance has been that of the student experience and the case study showed how the changes that have been made have had a positive impact on the university.

UNIVERSITY OF HUDDERSFIELD

A further example of student experience driving change, although through quite a different model, was presented by Sue White of the University of Huddersfield. The model entails co-location of central student services, as opposed to organisational convergence. A new student centre, located in the university's main library and computing centre, was formed in 2007. All student-facing services are now located in the same space within the university: computing and library services, student services (welfare and immigration, careers, disability support), student finance, student admissions and international admissions, all of which have separate service points within the student centre.

Sue's presentation took delegates through the change processes and timeframe for these developments. Two groups were originally set up to manage the process – a steering group and an operational working group. These eventually formed a single 'student centre group', which meets each term to address issues and to look at enhancing services further and greater collaboration. A student centre webpage now link the separate services, and the constituent teams who operate from the student centre develop joint publicity and take part in joint staff development.

Other areas discussed included student feedback and comments that had been received over the three years of the student centre's existence and how this has been used to inform further developments.

UNIVERSITY OF CUMBRIA

Margaret Weaver and her colleagues gave a fascinating presentation on the super-convergence changes that had occurred at Cumbria with their presentation entitled 'Multi-professional perspectives on super-convergence at the University of Cumbria'.

The University of Cumbria has merged several student-facing services in order better to deliver its institutional mission and strategy, that is, to achieve sustainability in an increasingly constrained economic environment. The new department (Learning, Information and Student Services) has merged library, IT support, classroom media and student support and development services. Margaret explained the rationale for the super-convergence and the structures that have been designed as a result. She focused on the impact that the changes had on staff and the overall staffing of the service. Then colleagues from the various professional groups which had been brought together used a 'talking heads' approach in the seminar, offering insights into the perspectives of different staff from the service's component parts. The implications for managing the services offered and the impact on front-line staff were then discussed in small groups.

PLYMOUTH STATE UNIVERSITY, NEW HAMPSHIRE

The conference organisers were very pleased to welcome Elaine Allard from Plymouth State University as she presented 'The Lamson Library and Learning Commons: what's next?' This session allowed for discussion around the 'learning commons' model to bringing services together as



Sue White and Elaine Allard

well as offering an international perspective on the topic.

The Lamson Library and Learning Commons opened in September 2006. Its original goal was to achieve student-centred integration of information, technology and learning. A central point of service, the information desk, was created featuring not only traditional library services such as circulation and course reserves, but also incorporating the IT helpdesk, classroom technology support and a state-of-the-art media presentation centre for the creation of digital content. Additionally, by co-locating campus service areas (academic support services, the university writing centres, learning technologies and online education) and adding a café, the library and learning commons was able to meet the different needs of students, faculty and staff. Elaine explained that the driving force during the planning and development of these particular changes was the end result: 'academic hub'. She also spoke about the evaluation and assessment of such a service and about the learning commons assessment committee, which comprises all partners co-located within the commons and deals with performance measurement and customer satisfaction indicators beyond the traditional gate- and circulation-counts.

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHUMBRIA

Jane Core and Dilys Young presented a discussion entitled 'Can you see the join? Sustaining service innovation and satisfaction in challenging times'.

At the University of Northumbria new models of convergence are emerging from a fundamental review that challenges us to work across functions, across boundaries and within new service matrices. These challenging changes can feel unfamiliar and, at times, uncomfortable for staff. Library and learning services developed a model of super-convergence which allows services to be scaled and further refined across service boundaries to

join up student-facing services and back-office functions to offer 24x7 services and support.

Using the experience of Northumbria, this session allowed discussion about models of convergence and super-convergence that enable us to think innovatively about service delivery, share skills and expertise and deliver higher quality and seamless access to services for students and staff, whilst demonstrating increased value for money. Such models include sharing common service values and cultures in order for converged delivery to be a success.

OVER-ARCHING THEMES TO COME FROM THE DAY

Throughout the day speakers' and delegates' feedback was recorded on flipchart paper and post-it®-note annotations which formed part of the group work and discussions in each of the break-out sessions. At the end of the day a plenary session was chaired by Elizabeth Selby of Southampton Solent University; she summarised the key themes to emerge from the discussions and presentations:

- Leadership skills are fundamental to the success of super-convergence: how do you lead a team when you do not have and never have had the skills and specialisms?
- Organisational structure and reporting lines must be clear within the university.
- Impact on professional identities: how do you sustain the generalist approach when dealing with customers but still maintain specialist services and make them accessible?
- A new kind of professional is required at the front-end: one who can handle the enquiry and cope with diverse requests, but is able to recognise complex questions when they are raised.
- There is no single model of super-convergence.
- Partnerships with academic staff
 - Are we leaving them out of these developments?
 - The speed of change can sometimes reduce consultation.
- Partnerships with students
 - Be aware of what students really need from our services.
 - Students should not see the joins.
- Partnerships with each other: communicating and working within the partnership / super-convergence
- Space

- Even in complex structures the space should be welcoming.
- Behind-the-scenes areas are also important when putting teams together.
- When designing the buildings be sure to involve the staff who will be working there.
- Need to focus on the vision at all times, especially in the face of short-sighted resistance.

PARTICULAR THEMES EMERGING FROM THE PARALLEL CASE STUDIES / WORKSHOPS

- How do we assure quality of super-converged service?
- Is self-service part of the super-converged model?
- Need to engage with the other professional bodies in higher education such as AMOSSHE, Universities and Colleges Information Systems Association (UCISA) and Association of University Administrators (AUA)
- Marketing and branding of super-converged service across the university
- Key performance indicators and measuring impact
- Where do the specialisms live?
- What exactly are the new roles? Are there enough people with suitable skills to fill them?
- Workforce development. What is the super-converged career path?

NEXT STEPS

In her summary Elizabeth suggested that there were two apparent priority areas to be taken forward:

- **Evidence base, impact and measures**
It was widely agreed that it would be useful now if we were able to identify the relevant performance measures used within super-converged services and to see if there is any benchmarking that we can do. This would allow us to start to build evidence for trends analyses (for example, Higher Education Statistics Agency returns, etc)
- **Professional networks**
Are similar conversations taking pace within AMOSSHE, UCISA, AUA, etc?
Directors of converged services can 'fall between the cracks' of such organisations.

Do we need to create a new professional network?

Is there a role for the Leadership Foundation in supporting managers as they move into these new roles?

CONCLUSION

The conference had indeed been a day of 'great conversations', but what was most apparent was that super-converged services in universities are developing rapidly with a number of different models and drivers. While joined-up services may possibly have been delivered in a more seamless way elsewhere within universities (for example, student services) this still seems to be a relatively new phenomenon for library and computing services. However, it is now very real and the impact that it has on libraries and computing services, their leaders and managers and their staff is great. The conference allowed for a wealth of discussion and sharing of experience around super-convergence and seemed to be very well received by all who attended.

NOTES

- 1 R. Heseltine, S. Marsh, S. McKnight and M. Melling, 'Super-convergence: SCONUL shared experience meeting, 16 February 2009', *Focus*, 46, 2009, pp 121-24
- 2 L. Appleton, 'Living through super-convergence: creating library and student support at Liverpool John Moores University', *Focus* 49, 2010, pp 67-70