WHELF Shared LMS
Delivering a shared library management system for Wales

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Introduction

By August 2016 all nine universities in Wales, together with the National Library of Wales and all National Health Service libraries in Wales, will be using the same cloud-hosted library management system and discovery layer, Ex Libris Alma and Primo.
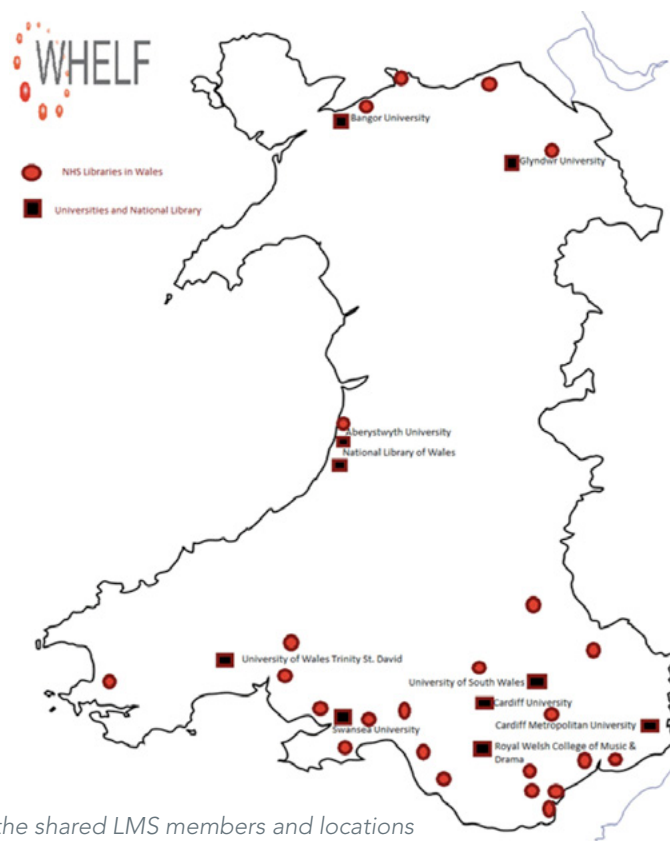
This article will outline:
- the context for this project, including the drivers that have made collaoration successful;
- the benefits already achieved and work currently under way in order to realise further benefits.

WHELF: the Shared LMS project partners

The WHELF (Wales Higher Education Forum) Shared LMS project consists of eleven members:
- Aberystwyth University
- Bangor University
- Cardiff Metropolitan University
- Cardiff University, including Welsh NHS Libraries
- Glyndwr University
- National Library of Wales
- Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama
- Swansea University
- University of South Wales
- University of Wales Trinity Saint David

These eleven institutions, spread across nearly ninety library locations, have around 600 library staff, 170,000 customers and approximately ten million bibliographic records.

WHELF: the shared LMS members and locations

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Enabling collaboration

The project to procure and implement a shared LMS across eleven institutions in Wales builds on a solid record of achievement in collaboration and partnership in the library sector in Wales, much of it facilitated by WHELF. This is a network of the chief librarians of all higher education institutions in Wales, and the National Library of Wales. Cardiff University also brings in the libraries of the National Health Service in Wales as it hosts their library management system and discovery layer.

WHELF was established as a forum for networking across university libraries in Wales in 1993 with a mission 'to promote library and information services co-operation, to encourage the exchange of ideas, to provide a forum for mutual support and to help facilitate new initiatives in library and information service provision'.[1]

Since 1993 WHELF has developed a range of partnership initiatives to make real its mission. These include the Welsh Repository Network, an Information Literacy Framework for Wales and more recently the Wales Higher Education Electronic Library.

The shared LMS project builds on these achievements, and is a high water mark in realising WHELF's mission as well as opening up further opportunities for collaboration.

WHELF's procurement of a shared LMS was enabled by a range of factors and discussions within WHELF, pre-dating the establishment of a formal project to drive forward the work.

A 2008 report on library systems, part-sponsored by Jisc, observed that the convergence of technological advances was an opportunity to explore consortial arrangements between academic libraries in order to 'increase critical mass and network effect, whilst potentially reducing system and service costs'.[2] However, the same report also noted that the LMS market in the UK was stagnant and dominated by a small number of vendors offering limited product differentiation.

By 2013, however, Jisc had recognised changes in the LMS landscape, with rapid growth in system developments and offerings centred around user experience and usability, as well as greater integration and interoperability, all providing a stimulus for system change in the academic library sector.[3]

At the same time there was strong support in Wales from the Welsh Government and government-funded bodies for partnership working and collaboration. This resulted in structural changes in the higher education landscape in Wales, with the merger of academic institutions, and specific projects across institutional boundaries.

The Welsh Government's 2012–16 strategy for the library sector in Wales, *Libraries inspire: the strategic development framework for Welsh Libraries 2012–16* [4] includes objectives to 'innovative models of delivery' and developing 'partnership working in procuring and improving access to resources'; the shared LMS project is closely aligned to these priorities and is included in the Welsh Government's Libraries inspire delivery plan 2014–15. [5]

WHELF incorporated the shared LMS as a key milestone in its forward planning, and subsequently secured funding from Jisc to undertake a feasibility study in 2012, which set out to 'provide a practical vision and road-map for a shared model; exploring opportunities for integration and collaboration across the WHELF community'. [6]

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This led to the development of a business case and agreement to move to a joint procurement for a cloud-hosted next-generation shared LMS, in an All-Wales consortium with formal governance. All members of WHELF signed a 'firm commitment to this initiative, and… to proceeding with a joint tender exercise for procurement of a shared system'.

This provided the authority for Cardiff University to manage the tender process on behalf of all members of WHELF.

The tender process comprised the following stages:
- issue of EU Notice and Pre-Qualification Questionnaire;
- issue of invitation to tender (ITT);
- visits to reference sites and presentations from suppliers.

At the end of the tender process, the top-ranking supplier, Ex Libris, was awarded the contract and all participating WHELF institutions opted for implementation of both Alma and Primo.

The tender and implementation process has been driven by a committed and knowledgeable project board, which includes representatives from each member institution, overseen by a steering group of chief librarians, who give strategic direction and leadership. A programme manager was appointed to lead the work, providing a voice and perspective independent of individual participating institutions, an important 'corrective measure' to allay potential fears that one or two institutions could wield undue authority and influence over the outcomes of the project. [7]

Achieving benefits

No large-scale programme of change is undertaken unless participants are convinced that the change will bring benefits.

Aled Gruffydd Jones, then Chief Executive of the National Library of Wales and Chair of WHELF, stated that 'all WHELF members expect to realise transformational benefits from our collaboration on a shared library system, including the provision of a single bilingual search interface for Wales higher education and research, plus the potential for deeper collaboration around collection development and management'. [8]

The project has been driven from the start by the aim of adding value to operational services and achieving benefits for library staff and users, home institutions and government. The feasibility study identified high-level benefits from a shared LMS, including driving down costs, increasing efficiencies and improving services and user experiences.

The proposed benefits were described in detail when participating institutions submitted business cases for approval to proceed to tender. At Cardiff University, for example, the business case cited the benefits of improved user experience and cost savings, while at University of Wales Trinity Saint David, key drivers for change included consolidation following recent mergers and the implementation of new functionality to manage electronic resources more effectively.

Procuring as a consortium had the potential to achieve cost savings. Some of the anticipated savings identified at the feasibility stage have already been realised. The Cardiff University business case anticipated that the shared LMS would deliver savings through:
- sharing the cost of the EU procurement;
- supplier discount for buying a system as part of a consortium;

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- reduced hardware costs through operating a cloud-hosted system, plus additional savings on data centre costs.

The savings achieved by employing a programme manager to work across WHELF are difficult to quantify fully, as the level and type of resource that participating institutions would have devoted to separate tender exercises varies. However, there is evidence of savings to each participating institution.

For the programme manager post, Welsh Government funded half the cost, the remainder being shared between WHELF institutions. For Cardiff University the cost savings here for financial year 2014–15 are around £75,000 (including on-costs). These savings will also be achieved for financial year 2015–16.

In addition, since Cardiff University led the procurement (as the tendering authority, providing advice, liaising with suppliers and managing the online tender process), each participating institution will have achieved a saving by not engaging their equivalent procurement staff in the tender exercise. The procurement cost relating to the shared LMS for Cardiff University for the financial year 2014–15 was £25,000, and there will be an equivalent saving for each participating institution.

The major cost saving anticipated, of course, was for the actual procurement of the LMS and discovery layer. At tender stage, the project indicated (based on a scoping exercise of suppliers carried out at the feasibility stage) that consortium discounts would be expected and suppliers were asked to indicate the discount that would be applied.

The contract was valued at around £8 million at the outset of the tender process, and suppliers who participated in the process offered a range of significant discounts.

Further cost savings are anticipated, but have not yet been realised. Some will relate to changes in operational practice as a result of adopting the new system. Other savings, relating to hardware costs, have not been achieved yet but can be estimated.

Cardiff University can be used to illustrate the likely hardware savings.

Cardiff University will go live with the shared LMS in August 2016, and the move from a locally hosted to a cloud-hosted environment is estimated to produce savings of around £40,000 between 2016 and 2020. Again, other WHELF members should anticipate equivalent savings.

Although cost savings were identified as benefits, the real driver for the project was the potential to deliver improved user experience through collaboration.

By the end of 2015 Aberystwyth University, the National Library of Wales, Swansea University and the University of South Wales will be live with the new system. They will also gain a key user benefit – a fully bilingual LMS at both the front- and the back-end.

All WHELF members are required to provide the LMS public interface (discovery or equivalent) in both Welsh and English, reflecting the official status of both languages in Wales and ensuring legislative compliance. However, WHELF has also secured a fully bilingual back-end interface available across all participating institutions, which will give Welsh-speaking staff across all institutions the opportunity to use either or both official languages in their work.

Other predicted opportunities and benefits include:
- single search across library collections across Wales (including

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maintaining and enhancing existing arrangements in place for NHS Libraries in Wales), with the National Library of Wales catalogue and digital collections providing significant benefits to researchers;

- fewer system outages as a result of using a more resilient cloud-hosted system;
- improved workflows leading to service improvements;
- enabling opportunities for further collaboration through use of the common system, which could include:
  - reciprocal arrangements for borrowing and licence management;
  - shared management information and real-time analytics leading to improved service delivery.

Although improved user experience cannot be properly evaluated and reported on until the system has been implemented across all institutions and embedded in library operations, the project is acutely aware that it is not too soon to map and manage benefits realisation.

WHELF is working to develop a rigorous and long-term benefits realisation framework, which will focus on identifying, defining, managing, monitoring and reporting on benefits.

A benefits realisation working group has been established under the project board to:
- develop a framework for managing benefits realisation across WHELF shared LMS institutions in order to secure the continued benefits of the consortium and continued stakeholder buy-in;
- manage and report on benefits realisation across WHELF institutions;
- ensure that benefits realisation is aligned with activities of other working groups (e.g. system development, business change);
- identify, monitor and manage any associated risks and issues.

This remit recognises that benefits realisation is central to the project and that all other activity should be aligned with it.

Alongside this, a joint WHELF and Ex Libris collaboration working group is scoping and planning for the delivery of improved user experience.

Conclusion

The WHELF shared LMS builds on a culture of collaboration and also provides a mechanism for broader and deeper collaboration in order to deliver a range of benefits to users and participating institutions in Wales.

In awarding Wales Higher Education Libraries Forum (WHELF) as the winner in the outstanding library team category, the Times Higher Education Leadership and Management Awards recognised the 'scale, ambition and achievements' of the project. [9]

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