

SCONUL Shared services – case study – University of East Anglia

Transcript of talk given by Nicholas Lewis, Library Director, on 22nd November 2010

I'm going to talk for a few minutes about the methodology used for some of the case studies (domain 1) work that is now planned as part of the next stage of the study. At the University of East Anglia (UEA), we have piloted a case study to identify possible shared activities that could be underpinned by an Electronic Resource Management (ERM) system.

There are many different views about which aspects of Library administrative work would benefit from being shared with others. When first discussing this topic, it is difficult to get a consensus; perhaps because it is hard to measure the value of a shared service we don't yet have? Perhaps also because many of the possible benefits seem rather intangible? Perhaps because each institution has a different approach to ERM issues?

This case study work is all about trying to identify those activities that are currently problematic and time-consuming or duplicated for no gain and that would most benefit from some kind of shared service: those activities may involve shared metadata, licensing, or rights management – in fact, any activity in the lifecycle from procurement of resources to delivery to the user's desktop. It is about making the intangible more tangible, tying down and teasing out what some of the actual and potential benefits might be.

The early work in the SCONUL Shared Services study was quite rightly strategic and top down and made an overarching business case; the case study process takes more of bottom up approach. We set aside about half a day for our case study discussion which was facilitated by consultants David Kay and Owen Stephens.

We had four staff take part, representing a cross-section of management and operational staff. The team had already been briefed about the broad aims of the study and gives a list of a dozen or so scenarios – the aim was for each person to come with some ideas in advance. However we felt it best not to prejudge the outcome and to let the actual topic chosen emerge as the discussion develops. The reason for this approach is to ensure that the priorities of staff actually doing the day-to-day work are fully taken into account. As Library Director, it is all too easy for me to make assumptions about the core activities – which ones are most time-consuming or which are most likely to be duplicated back-of-house in other academic libraries too. But the devil really is in the detail and it could well be that the best idea for a

shared service will emerge from the coal-face rather than the strategic thinking.

Having built up a story of how UEA approaches its back of house and ERM activities, we then chose our case study area: the work that we undertake when a publisher changes their e-journal platform (with the recent Wiley Blackwell changes very much in mind).

At this point, the conversation became more structured as we used a 'Requirements Capture' template to ensure that we recorded all the key details.

Firstly the Case Description: describing the Core Activity, the Actors (i.e. People) involved, and the Data Flow.

The next step was the Motivation or Rationale for doing the work. What was the nature of that activity and how time-consuming was it? Why was the activity needed? What services did it provide? To what extent was the activity unique to our institution, UEA, and to what extent was it likely to be being duplicated across many other institutions nationally?

Then Step 3, what would be the Benefits? Looking specifically at our chosen scenario, if information about URL changes was done via a centralised, national level service, publishers might be able to communicate with fewer organisations and be confident that all their customers would receive up-to-date information. Libraries would be able to rely on a centralised service to ensure links were updated in a timely manner. Obvious benefits you might think?

Well our structured approach ensured we did not leave it there. Weighed against any perceived benefits, we also needed to tease out what those cost benefits might actually be and any downsides we may not have thought of – for example, a centralised service might be a single point of failure. Also institutions might still want to do local modifications anyway that might cancel out some of the cost benefits.

Also whilst there might be administrative, back-of-house cost benefits, would there be any related benefits, for example to the actual users of the resources themselves: Less broken links? Or to the front-of-house services: less time at the reference desk dealing with e-journal problems?

The next step challenged us to think about Consequences:

- What would actually happen if a shared service was implemented for this activity?
- What would be the potential opportunities and, conversely, the risks?
- What would be the consequences of not implementing it?

We then reflected on any Implementation (step 5), the standards and protocols involved, how any shared service might work with different library systems, the administrative and technical skills needed and the technical challenges that might need to be overcome. The cost of those aspects also needed to be taken into account: the setup costs and the ongoing costs.

The final step was to articulate a new Workflow which summarised the potential step-by-step process required to deliver the new service functionality, some of which may be automated (as part of the ERM), some of which may be manual 'value added' processes.

You see, asking these questions in a structured way helps to look at any proposed activity from a number of different perspectives and angles, testing each hypothesis and challenging assumptions.

The other main benefit of this structured approach will come at the next stage when these case studies are brought together centrally and the findings are synthesised into a Scoping Document. This will allow the cost and non-cost benefits to be compared and contrasted by the SCONUL Shared Services project team in a more structured way, ensuring that each activity has had sufficient scrutiny. Some of the case studies will not cut the mustard, especially when compared on a level playing field, whilst others may already be in a form suitable for an outline business case for moving forward (even if funding is limited).

The important thing about the approach is to ensure that a full range of different types of institutional approaches to, and issues with e-resources management and licensing processes have been explored and that staff at all levels have contributed.

Who knows, some of the best ideas may just arise from one of the case studies that at first sight seemed the least promising. The important thing to focus on is the final outcome: a Shared Service Requirement which should be available by Spring 2011 that clearly articulates what the requirement should look like – a blueprint.

These case studies are essential for ensuring a robust process has taken place to underpin the shared service proposal that emerges. And that core proposal will be all the stronger, and have greater buy in, from having emerged as part of a structured process.

What will the commitments of each participating institution be over the next few months?

- Devise and work to a project plan
- Share reports and outputs on a project blog
- Liaise with other institutions taking part in case studies, physically and virtually via the HE Library Technology wiki (helibtech) – accessible via the SCONUL web site
- Communicate with the SCONUL shared services steering committee
- Participate in events and workshops

In conclusion, this is not about doing the Shared Services business case over again but instead considering what shared services might actually mean at an institutional level and what the actual, practical building blocks will be.

Finally, what is to like to take part? Even leaving aside the shared service aim, the process is a beneficial one to take part in anyway, as our Acquisitions Team leader said:

“It gave us an opportunity to review our workflow within this scenario, without any assumptions. This type of dialogue makes you reassess the process and justify why we do things the way we do. In addition, it is always good to feel that recounting your experiences can be of benefit to others and that you are contributing to something that may benefit us all in the future.”