Surf and Turf: issues in the development of academie services

Alasdair Paterson

University of Exeter
Those of you who have eaten in American restaurants, or even European attempts at American restaurants, will be familiar with the occasional appearance on their menus of an item intriguingly described as Surf 'n Turf, which on further description proves to be a chimera, a monstrosity of a dish, half lobster (Surf), half beef (Turf) - a meal which exemplifies, as the critic and man of letters Dr Samuel Johnson remarked of early 17C English poetry, "heterogeneous ideas yoked by violence together".

Potentially no less chimerical, and sometimes quite violent, have been recent trends on British campuses in the operation of their Academic Services - by which should be understood principally the Library and the Computer Unit (on which regions I'll be concentrating), though the list may extend to Media Services, Staff Development, Educational Technology and beyond.

You will not go far in any serious discussion of trends in these services without coming across the key word "convergence". The word features prominently in the two most recent attempts to point a way forward for British academic libraries - the Follett Report¹, to whose analysis of "where we are now and where we're going" all British academic librarians are indebted, and in the wake of which funded projects and building developments are proceeding across the sector; and the Fielden Report², an addition to the Follett Report published separately and dealing mainly, and challengingly, with the human resources implications (and appropriate strategies) involved in the expansion in higher education in Britain.

The Follett Report speaks of:
...the "convergence" under a single managerial structure of library and other support services such as audio-visual and computing services. The aim has been to achieve organisational and managerial integration between library and other services as the best way of ensuring their functional integration and improved coordination in planning. Other institutions have concluded that similar operational compatibility can best be achieved without managerial or organisational convergence".

The Fielden Report’s definition is initially rather austere - the term "convergence" has been used to describe the coming together of the library and the information/computing service - but goes on to make a distinction between two types of convergence that seem to include a measure of what the Follett Report had in mind with the reference to "operational" (as opposed to organisational) compatibility.

"organisational or formal convergence" in which the two services...are brought together for managerial purposes. In its most limited form this may mean that one person is put in overall control of the two services with no other organisational change to the status quo".

"operational or informal convergence" in which the detailed functions or operations of the two services change or are brought together. It is not necessary to have organisational convergence for operational convergence to happen (for example, the heads of two services can undertake joint strategic planning); similarly, operational convergence does not necessarily follow organisational convergence".

Now, it is true that converging lines approach each other, markedly or imperceptibly; sooner or later, extended through space, they will meet at a point. In that sense, all cooperation, all bending towards each other, tends towards convergence. But it is useful still to distinguish between definitely converged services (now the situation in around 35 British universities) and coexisting services, still the majority position.
British universities are in fact of two broad churches in their approach to Academic Services - the converged, the embracers of convergence (to keep the church analogy, reformers or heretics, according to your stance) and the rest, whom we might describe (according to taste) as moderate, or traditionalist, or obsolescent, upholders of coexistence. All the variations which make British university life endlessly fascinating are evident in the outcomes of these two approaches, the meaning of "convergence" ranging from planned, strategically justified unification of services under one director to an opportunistic welding together to cut costs when one of the directors leaves, the meaning of "co-existence" fluctuating from an encouraging and developing cooperation within acknowledged separate missions to worsening situations of mutual mistrust, covert manoeuvring and protection of territory. If one wished to be unkind, and mindful of Surf n' Turf, one might describe the latter scenario as the last stand of the librarian as lobster - an ancient life form, slow-moving, armour-plated, threatened by a slow and painful death - but I do not think this would be fair, for the suspicions and the reluctance to say goodbye to an imagined golden age can still be found in pockets across all the services.

Both situations have had their downsides. Universities, especially in the early days of merging libraries and computer units, did not always handle convergence, organisational convergence, in the best way nor launch into it for the best reasons. In times of austerity, in times when the unit of resource was being driven remorselessly down (as it still is), opportunism, cost-cutting, personality clashes and cults played their part, and people with a background exclusively (or almost so) in one service found themselves in charge of two or more operations in only one of which they were truly comfortable and knowledgeable, with a very steep learning curve confronting them, forced to lean on technical or unit managers whose agenda, priorities and perceptions could be radically different and whose cooperation could be uncertain. Sometimes the strategic overview and drive which the director's post really encapsulated was provided at a senior academic level, with mixed results. At other times the measure was understood as a remedial one, with one service in disfavour being, as it was sometimes perceived, "taken over", or it was seen as a zero-based
measure to redistribute funding between the services. In such circumstances staff in the library or the computer unit could lose confidence in the leadership, feel the sting of implied criticism or see a dismantling of the service they had, so to speak, "joined up" to work in. One thinks (stereotypically of course) of library staff, people of the book, seeing their world turned upside down, but this is just as true of those who cherished the mainframe in computer units. Perturbations of the individual psyche, manifested in grief cycles and the brandishing of personal unwritten contracts, sometimes loomed large in these transformations.

But increasingly, librarians and IT personnel are realising the advantages as well as the inevitabilities of changing their roles and coming closer to each other, as learner support moves to the top of each service’s lists of priorities, becomes its main raison d’être, in a context of a burgeoning of information in electronic formats. Libraries, having already undergone a shift in working emphasis from backroom activities to making the experience of the user the prime concern and critical success factor, are looking – from the shifting ground of the present in which automated housekeeping has been joined by high speed networks, CD-ROM, national datasets and the Internet - towards the "virtual library". Much has to be solved on the way there, but already the assistance of university computing services has been critical. Our own use of World Wide Web (and Exeter has one of the fullest set of pages among British university libraries) only took off after hard enabling work by IT Services, as our computing service is now called.

Similarly, computing services are experiencing a great expansion in their user base - now they are truly a university-wide service as the library has always been - managing distributed access to local and remote computing across extensive networks, with a huge range of activity and (crucially) ability to support. Increasingly learning, teaching and research is facilitated by their efforts, as CAL and multimedia take root. They find themselves dealing with electronic information through providing, testing and demonstrating the means to deliver it; they find themselves involved in user education and quality assessment procedures which highlight user satisfaction.
As can readily be understood, the forces which drive the services together can also foster conflict. "Turf wars", a phrase describing just such differences of opinion over spheres of influence and limits of competence - and another justification for the wording of this title - have certainly been an unfortunate feature of inter-service relationships on some campuses. The overlap of the domains of librarian and information technologist and a mismatch in their perceptions of each others’ mission, not to mention how these missions are perceived more widely within the university, is a fruitful source of feelings of territorial intrusion, eroded status, threatened futures. Whose turf is it anyway?

Yet, at the same time, librarians, information technologists, educationalists et al have found themselves staring in wonder at the pounding breakers of the Internet and, feeling that they have seen the future and that it is a wave they can and must ride, have begun, often quite independently, to "surf the Net" - hence the rest of my title.

As I have said, sooner or later converging lines, extended through space, will meet at a point. This meeting is not something I have yet experienced in any of the universities I have worked in, but convergence in the sense of closer approach to a computing service, of coexistence with growing co-operation, is something I am bound to be involved in, for the Library’s continuing movement into networked information and multimedia learning - into what, in short, will define the future for academic libraries - can only benefit from access to our computing colleagues’ differing skills and perspectives. Peering into the future across the sea of the Internet, it does seem as if our library line of development and that of our IT colleagues will meet at a point, but this may be a trick of perspective. What is true is that teamwork across the services in exploiting this new domain seems a more appropriate use of resources and skills, a closer relationship flagged in many institutional strategic plans, job descriptions and information strategies. So, for example, while Exeter’s IT services pioneered the local use of the World Wide Web, Library staff now play an important role in IT Services’ own university-wide training programmes, giving instruction in the use of World Wide Web and assistance in the creation of World Wide Web pages. A joint approach with
IT Services to bid for University cash has led to a bank of multimedia PCs within the Library space, a start of something which will grow and grow - these examples could be multiplied.

Indeed, when the University of Exeter was considering last year whether to appoint a new Librarian and a new Director of IT Services there was a decision not to converge, in the organisational sense; Library and IT Services were seen to have distinct missions each of which needed individual attention. It is also true that, in an institution with a million volumes and an enduring Arts profile, the medium-term information future was then still perceived as largely rectangular and paginated. This may well be true. My IT counterpart and I, both new, have however been encouraged to co-operate more closely, a rapprochement on which we would have embarked in any case through simple conviction that it is beneficial, indeed indispensable, to our services and to the best interests of this institution. We have also noted individually the problems - turf wars, conflicting goals, mutually opaque management structures - in separate development or indeed where convergence itself has been little more than a stapling together at a directorial level.

At Exeter, then, we prefer to build towards a team approach and a joint strategy which fosters exchange of understanding and of expertise at a sensible pace - I think pacing is crucial because we are often talking about altered perceptions of each other’s qualities - and which has already reaped benefits in the writing of an institutional information strategy (with new reporting and liaising structures), joint equipment bids and networking cases, R & D proposals, planning for open learning, perspectives on staff gradings and a consortium approach to the national Investors in People scheme, leading to our being scrutinised together under the criteria for certification as a "learning organisation". The last paper has dealt comprehensively with information strategies, another outcome of the Follett report’s recommendations, but it is worth spending a little more time on the topic since the process at Exeter was crucial in setting out the future path of co-operation between the Library and IT Services.

The process of writing such an institutional strategy has itself been an important step towards shared understandings of the present and the future. A small committee,
involving four academics (the chairs of the relevant committees), three Library staff, two members of IT Services, one member of Management Services and a student representative, created something which, by an iterative process of shared writing and criticism within the group, together with wider consultations, finally grew into a strategic document "driven by the needs of teaching, learning, research and management and not by the millenium claims for the latest technology", logging the vision, the stakes and the obstacles en route to "increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of users' access to information techniques and to information from all sources in pursuit of the University's excellence in research and teaching and for service to the region". The cynic might, at the end of the day, observe that this is an attempt to press all the right buttons so that money flows towards the services, but it is also an attempt to inform our constituency of the possibilities and to get support for the creation of the right infrastructure, in all senses of the word.

The recommendations of the Exeter information strategy, as they touched on cooperation between the services, were as follows, as you'll see very much geared towards infrastructure, to having an environment flexible enough to respond to whatever barely imaginable opportunities and threats the next decade will throw up. I'll go through the recommendations and their justifications.

Committee structure - a new umbrella committee for the "Information Services" charged with monitoring, reviewing and revising the information strategy to which the directors of the service, after consultation with their user groups, would report.

A Joint Liaison Group to be set up combining representatives of the Library, IT Services and Management Services, seconded for part or all their time and focussed on effective cooperation in the delivery of strategic aims.

The services to produce individual service level definitions.

The Joint Liaison Group to monitor users' information needs and skills and report annually to the Information Services Committee.
These four recommendations, which have no direct costs and therefore greatly recommend themselves to University planners, significantly increase the coherence of planning and delivery within the strategy, making for clearer accountability and more targetted services.

The Joint Liaison Group to propose and cost a comprehensive training programme for all university students and staff, joining too with other campus units in designing a programme to raise staff awareness of all aspects of information provision and how these can be utilised in their own teaching.

The justification here is that training will increase the efficiency and effectiveness of university staff, increase learning potentials, enable the acquisition of life skills and generally enhance effective use of the large capital investment in hardware, software and communications, though this is where the price tags start.

The Joint Liaison Group should advise the University Press on electronic publication; additional resources should also be made available to develop multimedia resources and communications for research.

This will facilitate dissemination of research and enhance the university’s profile (especially abroad); it also gives the Press breathing room to explore new paradigms of academic-controlled publishing.

The Joint Liaison Group should receive funds to improve online access to networked datasets.

This is a tacit recognition of the shift from collection building to an access strategy; potentially, with networking licences and subscription costs, this is also a bottomless financial pit, but the potential for value-added service is hard to overstate - information delivered to the desktop round the clock and in a more searchable format.

The Joint Liaison Group should institute the development of a demonstrator electronic publication within the non-science disciplines, suitable projects to be found from within the Library’s major collections as used by the Faculty of Arts.
The aim here is to increase awareness of and promote learning in regard to the new technologies, particularly among those subjects which are text-intensive and are not the traditional strongholds of information technology.

*Library, IT Services and Management Services* to budget for research into new services and new technologies, leading to the establishment of new services where appropriate. Generally speaking we spend too little on research and development, but such spending will become ever more necessary to sustain the momentum of the evolution of provision by informing choices; areas of potential savings (videoconferencing, digitised texts) can also be thoroughly investigated.

A review of Library funding and the development of a strategic plan for Library space

The Library will continue to argue for increased resources and be required to show increased efficiency of resources - though interesting questions will arise about the need for Library space as the virtual library inches closer. There is in fact an interesting difference in space occupancy between the services at Exeter in that computing support is, to a significant extent, decentralised - numbers of staff are located in faculties and departments rather than physically within a computer unit, no longer machine-room dominated - whereas the Library still centres on a physical stock which is most effectively concentrated in large buildings with prolonged access and information support. But this settled base will certainly change over the next decade.

The Joint Liaison Group and the Regional Advisory Group to develop an electronic information network within a defined constituency of prospective regional users, e.g. those involved in distance learning, and to improve communications links into and across the campus

One of the University's strategic lines is to develop its regional role, thereby promoting equality of opportunity through equality of access; improvement of the quality and efficiency of off-campus teaching and provision also allows the University to tap into a big demand for part-time or remote learning, bringing increased income.
Trial variations of wiring solutions for halls of residence - from clusters to wired-up study bedrooms

Wiring-up of student residences is being achieved in many British universities, so there is an element of catch-up here. Such a development increases the independence of student learning, enhances the image of the University and attracts IT-literate students.

One third of Library reader spaces to be wired for network access

Again the argument is centred on the learning experience - to enhance student research skills, to enhance the learning experience, to promote the complementary use of book and IT resources. The presence of trained information workers who can give assistance with the location and use of information in any format is another important reason for concentrations of cabling in public spaces of the Library.

Maintenance and improvement of high-quality communication links with more distant parts of the University, with the rest of academia and with commercial networks

This is simply fundamental to achieving all other benefits.

A planned cycle of replacement and enhancement of existing major campus systems i.e. the Library housekeeping system, the administrative server, the phone system. Planned expenditure, on a rolling basis, will enable increased responsiveness to system developments and enhance efficiency

These are of course not good times to be asking for money (around £1 million over the first three years for the total set of recommendations) but a repackaging in order of desirability also becomes, interestingly, a repackaging in order of lowest cost. The order of priority was largely agreed by the Library and IT Services and accepted by the rest of the committee, though one was aware that in less harmonious circumstances an order of priority acceptable to each director might not have been arrived at - whereas in converged services under a single director a decision could, at the end of the day, have been imposed.

Out of this we expect to see teamwork, focussed development and the fostering of converging skills - no "heterogeneous ideas yoked by violence together", no unhappy
marriages or Frankenstein creations or angry ghosts here. Admittedly, it works because of the shared perceptions, mutual appreciation and sympathy of the top management in the Library and IT Services. It is, therefore, personality dependent, but it all sets up a structure which makes willingness to cooperate and the continued sharing of perceptions and plans an institutional expectation and a directorial imperative. It may go further still, for the Fielden Report sees another evolutionary stage looming:

"Professional staff will be expected to play a greater role in learner support...and their liaison role with academic departments will become central to their functions. Thus, a new form of convergence, which we call 'academic convergence' will gradually develop".

What is involved here is, therefore, not only an expanded and more focussed user education and support, especially in study, information and IT skills, but also the development of computer assisted learning through academic services and faculty joint teams. The lobster and the cow will perhaps seem a modest plateful by comparison but that will have to be another story, another menu.

References
