From Library to Learning Centre:
the experience of UK universities

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SUMMARY

This paper considers the development of the Learning Centre as a new model to deliver services and stimulate educational development. Drawing on experience in the United Kingdom, the paper has four aims. First, to set the context by identifying the key changes which have affected higher education over the past ten years or so, and, second, to consider the impact of these changes on students and academic staff. The Learning Centre model is described, using experience at Sheffield Hallam University as a case study, and finally, a number of key issues for the role of librarians are identified.

KEY WORDS: Libraries; Learning Resource Centres, Learning Centres, UK, Universities, Higher education, Educational developments, Teaching and learning, Staff roles, Congress proceedings.

THE CHANGING EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE

If you were to talk to staff working in universities in the United Kingdom about the changes which they have experienced over the past few years, it is the substantial increase in student numbers which they will emphasise. Student numbers doubled over the ten years from 1985 to 1995, and the age participation rate of school-leavers entering higher education increased from 15% to 33% [1]. Although there have been only slight increases in more recent years, the current government ambition is for 50% of people aged under 30 to be engaged in higher education by the year 2010 [2].

At the same time as increases in student numbers, there has been a marked decline in the funding for teaching, with a reduction (in real terms) of 40% since 1976. Tuition fees for undergraduate students, of approximately £1000 each year, were introduced in 1998 and this has increased the financial pressure on students, with a corresponding impact on recruitment, particularly of mature and poor students. Many students also work part-time, to help fund themselves through university, and it is now the norm for students to graduate with substantial debts to repay - £5300 on average in 1999, according to a recent survey [3].

There is an increasing trend towards lifelong learning, a priority for the current Blair government which regards education as a key element of its strategy to deal with social exclusion. Indeed, a challenge for all universities is to recruit students from families with no tradition of higher education. It has been pointed out that much of the expansion of universities has been achieved by recruiting less able middle-class children rather than bright working-class children. For universities, this means that programmes of study will increasingly need to be delivered in ways which meet the needs of students (with flexibility of time, place and pace), rather than to suit the convenience of institutions (full-time, on campus, based on traditional teaching methods and geared to academic years).

There is a continuing shift in the UK away from tutor-based activities, such as lectures and seminars, and towards independent and resource-based work by students. This is driven partly by an educational philosophy which recognises that students learn best when they are actively involved, and also by financial pressures which are putting academic staff time under pressure.

New technology is regarded as the key to changing teaching and learning styles, and in the forward to the government's proposals for the learning society, the Prime Minister noted that 'technology has transformed the way that we work, and is now set to transform education' [4].

However, the issues relating to the effective use of technology are complex, and the production of interactive learning materials is expensive. The evaluation of the UK Teaching and Learning Technology Programme showed a very disappointing take-up of multimedia material [5]. The use of electronic information resources and a staged implementation of electronic learning environments seem likely to prove more effective.

Quality assurance arrangements have had a major impact on universities, and are currently the subject of considerable debate. Teaching programmes have been inspected on a rolling programme which has considered a number of subject areas each year. In addition to examining teaching activities and outcomes, the inspection framework covers learning resources provision, including libraries. The system, which is about to change, currently scores six aspects of each course. The results are public, and increasingly used by students, their parents and employers, to inform their choice of university [6].

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education also operates a inspection system for institutions and professional bodies inspect provision, including library provision, for courses which are recognised for their own qualifications.

The public scrutiny which is intrinsic to these quality assurance processes has been accentuated by the emergence of league tables for universities – similar to the football league results! These are now published each year by all the quality newspapers, including the Financial Times, and by the Times Higher Education Supplement. The methodology and evidence varies slightly from publication to publication, and from year to year, but typically a table will score 10 or 20 factors, including library expenditure, to give a total weighting. The results are, as you may imagine, hotly contested! [7].

This approach reflects the tendency for students to behave as consumers in the education marketplace. There is increasing competition between institutions to attract students, and students themselves are becoming more discriminating as they are now paying tuition fees.

THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The changing student experience is captured in the comment by Peter Scott, Vice Chancellor of Kingston University in south-west London:

"The heart of the university is no longer found in its lecture theatres and seminar rooms but in the learning resource centre. But students still want to be taught by well-informed and lively teachers. And they want to be able to interact with their peers, but increasingly with more part-time students and increasing numbers having to work to support themselves, the opportunities for doing this are diminishing." [8]

This reflects the shift from tutor-based activities noted earlier, and notes the increasing use of libraries – though the reference to learning resource centre acknowledges that the traditional library has changed. However, students also come to university to meet teachers and other students. Surveys at a number of new universities give an insight into how students typically spend their time each week:

	hours
Lectures	10
Seminars	2
Tutorials	1
Supported independent study	13
Unsupported independent study	14
Total:	*40*

This suggests that students spend one third of their time with tutors and a further third working without support, at home or in halls of residence. The remaining third, some 13 hours each week, is spent in a supported environment: a library, computer centre or learning centre. You will see later from the snapshot of a week's activities in my own department, that this translates into a very heavy volume of use.

The table also explains the importance which students now place on library and computing provision. The annual student experience survey at Sheffield Hallam University asks students to rate the importance of the services provided to them. The five most important areas are Learning Centre resources, access to computers, quality of computing, Learning Centre advice and access to the Learning Centre [9].

These changes in higher education, the use of technology and changes in teaching and learning have had a considerable impact on libraries. There has been pressure on space, particularly study space, which has been addressed through a £140 million building programme for libraries in the higher education sector which was recommended by the Follett Committee [10].

The requirement for more flexible patterns of study and increased access to computers has brought a general extension of opening hours, in spite of continuing pressure on budgets. Weekend opening is now the norm, and some university libraries and learning centres, including Hertfordshire, Bath and Sheffield Hallam, are open 24 hours a day during teaching weeks.

However, it is the development of resource-based and independent learning, the growth of electronic information and the requirement to work differently with students and academic staff which has encouraged institutions to review the traditional role of libraries and from which the Learning Centre has evolved.

THE LEARNING CENTRE MODEL

A Learning Centre might be defined as 'a dynamic environment which integrates provision to support a range of independent and group learning activities' [11]. The intention which lay behind the thinking of the first Learning Centre in UK higher education, at Sheffield Hallam, was to create a department which would draw together a range of facilities, resources, accommodation and expertise which would both anticipate changes in teaching and learning - and lead them.

The Learning Centre at Sheffield Hallam University was established in a new building in September 1996. It integrates the following range of provision:

- library collections, including half a million volumes of books and journals occupying over five kilometres of shelving;

- IT provision; access to electronic databases and the Internet as well as desktop services such as word processing, electronic mail and spreadsheets, multimedia courseware and the newly-developing electronic learning environment;

- production facilities such as graphic design and photography units, a TV studio, a multimedia production team, print unit and the University's publishing house;

- the Learning and Teaching Institute, which acts as a professional centre for teaching staff by working on new approaches to course delivery particularly resource-based and technology-enabled learning.

- the Learning and Teaching Research Institute which evaluates educational developments and co-ordinates educational research across the University.

The city campus Learning Centre contains teaching accommodation, including two lecture theatres, seminar rooms and meeting/tutorial rooms, all equipped with high specification presentational equipment for use with audio-visual and electronic material. A second learning centre was opened at the University's Collegiate Crescent campus in September 2000.

A snapshot survey of a week's work in the department was carried out in order to brief members of the University's Board of Governors. This illustrates the range and volume of work, and also gives an indication of the skills and expertise which are available.

SNAPSHOT OF LEARNING CENTRE ACTIVITIES

This week Information Services staff will have:
- received over 53,000 visits to the three campus buildings
- issued and returned 65,000 books
- answered 2,336 information enquiries
- taught 48 large groups and given 62 tutorials
- arranged information services for 40 distance learners

This week Studio staff will have:
- provided AV equipment for over 900 classes
- made 98 TV recordings and issued 800 video recordings to tutors
- taken and processed 800 photographs and slides

- scripted, recorded and edited 30 minutes of TV
- sold publications worth £1500

This week LTI staff will have:
- negotiated an external contract worth £200,000
- advised School staff on a forthcoming TQA
- researched block timetabling in the HE sector
- supported tutors using 55 multimedia packages
- published an evaluation of computer-based learning
- run 5 seminars and a one-day workshop for teaching staff

The creation of the department was regarded as a strategic investment by the University which was essential if the challenges facing higher education were to be met. The integration of a wide range of provision has created a critical mass of activity which has brought gains in both efficiency and effectiveness. The common focus of this new and major department has also enabled it to have a major impact on the institution's work in a way that would have been very difficult with separate services, each with their own agendas and priorities.

Integration is the key to the operation of the department. The buildings are open and flexible, designed to stimulate use and interaction between people. The departmental structure integrates a wide range of provision. A new staffing scheme was introduced for front-line staff, which integrates library, information and computing support roles with responsibilities for supervision and day-to-day management. This was designed to facilitate the most important aspect of the department's integration - working arrangements which are based on a strong culture, but which allow individuals to work flexibly across the entire operation.

Each individual is based in a team (the team structure is contained in Figure 1) which reflects their location and professional identity. Staff are then actively encouraged to work across the department to bring together the appropriate expertise required for each problem and project.

This approach has given staff an understanding of the skills which people with different professional backgrounds can bring to bear on a problem; the staff development framework also encourages each member of staff to develop a profile of skills across the key areas of the department's work: information, computing, media, teaching and learning and management [12].

LOOKING AHEAD

A number of key developments have taken place recently which will provide a foundation for developments over the next three to five years. A second learning centre has been opened at the University's campus at Collegiate Crescent, and 24 hour operation was introduced, during teaching weeks, in September 2000. In contrast to practice at some other institutions where overnight provision is restricted to computers, 24 hour access is provided to all the facilities in the buildings, including collections of material.

The development of the electronic learning environment, led by the Learning and Teaching Institute, has had a major impact. The intention is to create a comprehensive virtual environment which complements on-campus provision, so that students can move between the two environments in a way which suits their programme of studies and circumstances. This work has been well-received by academic staff, who have used the opportunities offered by the software to re-think their approach to their work with students.

New delivery methods for programmes of study make it necessary to review the support provided to students, and there are opportunities here for librarians and learning centre staff to develop their role to encompass learner support. Clearly, this will need to be carefully negotiated with academic staff, but the use of virtual learning environments provides a neutral test-bed to experiment with new approaches.

The introduction of 24-hour operation has stimulated demand for virtually continuous access to Learning Centre provision, and a major challenge will be to develop ways of working, and appropriate resourcing models, to meet the requirements of students - both on and off campus.

It will also be necessary to forge new working arrangements with staff across the University, in both academic Schools and academic services, to deliver seamless support to students. Given the pace of change, it will be important to carry out rigorous evaluation of our work to ensure that services are developed on a sound basis.

THE ROLE OF LIBRARIANS

I would like to conclude by drawing out some implications for the role of librarians of the changes described in this paper.

The use of the term Learning Centre indicates our belief that librarians have a central role to play in learning. Most developments in teaching and learning rely on the use of information resources, and librarians have major expertise to contribute here.

The key challenge for librarians is to collaborate with academic colleagues to exploit the potential of information resources in programmes of study. It is perhaps relevant to note some potential dangers here, particularly the emphasis given by librarians to the development of programmes of tuition. Although information skills are important, there is a danger that librarians will focus their effort on teaching skills programmes to students, rather than working with tutors and course teams to exploit information resources.

The use of information resources - of whatever type - can fundamentally change the character of programmes of study and the student experience, and it is here that the major effort is needed. It is also, of course, a difficult area.

The key is for librarians to develop creative partnerships with academic staff. And this is where librarians come into their own. Networking with people of all kinds is essential for all aspects of library work - and we are very good at it!

NOTES

1. ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC COOPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT. Thematic review of tertiary education: UK background note. August 1996.
2. Blair's revolution for learning: plan for huge rise in university numbers. The Guardian, 8 March 1999, p 1.
3. GREEN, Diana. Government should act to combat student debt. Times Higher Education Supplement, 9 February 2001.
4. Connecting the learning society: the national grid for learning. The government's consultation paper. Department for Education and Employment, 1997. Also available on URL http://www.open.gov.uk/dfee/dfeehome.htm)
5. Communications and information technology materials for learning and teaching in UK higher and further education: Summary report [commissioned by the UK HE funding bodies, the Further Education Funding Council and the University for Industry]. Higher Education Funding Council for England, 1999. URL: www.niss.ac.uk/education/hefce/pub99/99_60.
6. Information about quality assurance procedures in UK universities, including proposals for the new framework of academic review, is available on the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education Web-site, URL: http://www.qaa.ac.uk/
7. League tables are typically based on evidence such as entry requirements, student/staff ratios, quality assurance ratings, degree results, graduate employment, expenditure on libraries and computing facilities, research income. Tables are produced by all the quality papers: for example, the 2001 survey was published in the Financial Times, 7 April 2001.
8. SCOTT, Peter, quoted in an interview by Peter Kingston, Feeling out of touch. The Guardian (Higher Education section), 29 September 1998, pp ii-iii.
9. SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY. Student satisfaction survey, 1998.
10. JOINT FUNDING COUNCILS' LIBRARIES REVIEW GROUP. Report. [Chairman, Professor Sir Brian Follett] Bristol: Higher Education Funding Council for England, 1993. (This document is also available through URL http://ukoln.bath.ac.uk/follett/follett_report.html)
11. This definition was proposed by the author at a conference on library buildings organised by the British Council in Glasgow in September 1999.
12. Further information about the Learning Centre is available on the University's Web pages, URL: http://www.shu.ac.uk/services/lc/ An article, the development of the Adsetts Centre, Sheffield Hallam University, based on an interview with Graham Bulpitt, Director Learning Centre. in Deliberations on teaching and learning in higher education. URL: http://www.lgu.ac.uk/deliberations/lrc/sheffield.html.

Sheffield Hallam University

Figure 1

Learning Centre
Team Structure Chart

Senior Staff	Director, Learning Centre	Head of Learning and Teaching Institute	Head of Technical Services and Development	Head of Academic Services and Development
Central Teams	Finance and Administration	Marketing	Collection Development	Systems
Learning and Teaching Institute	Learning and Teaching (Research) Institute	Centre for Multimedia Education	Educational Consultancy	Projects
Media Production	Audio-visual Services	Design Studio	TV	Photography	SHU Press

Media studio

Information Services	User Services	Science and Engineering Team	Business Team	Collegiate Crescent Campus	Psalter Lane Campus

City Campus