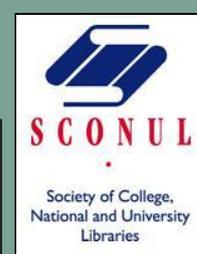


The impact of the economic recession on university library and IT services

Final report for JISC, SCONUL and UCISA

September 2009



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Foreword by JISC

The research has highlighted some interesting findings in relation to how the current economic climate *is* and *will* impact library and IT services within UK Higher Education. The findings suggest that senior management within IT/library services have experienced fluctuating budgets in the past and have ensured that the impact on services is minimised. However, given the likelihood for deeper financial cuts imposed on these services in 2010/2011, it is clear that services will be impacted unavoidably in a number of ways, such as reduced opening hours, decreased opportunity for developing staff skills and limitations in procuring and providing resources. Such impacts, certainly for libraries, are likely to be compounded by the decreasing value of sterling in an international market for acquisitions, and the ever changing demands of students and academic staff on their services.

Library and IT services form an essential part of the delivery of learning and teaching, assessment, research and administration within institutions, and consequently it is essential that measures are put in place to protect this. The impact of any cuts is likely to have wider implications on institutions' delivery of their overall strategic aims such as enhancing the student experience. However, it is not clear what impact the global economic downturn will have on these services and universities in the longer term five or more years from now; indeed the IT and library managers participating in this research were largely unable to speculate this far ahead. Thus a number of questions remain unanswered; for example, to what extent will access to resources be reduced as subscriptions are cancelled and what impact will this have on future users, will workstations for students and staff be underpowered because replacement cycles are lengthened, will services be able to operate satisfactorily if significant staff redundancies occur?

ICT can deliver efficiencies in all areas of an institution's operation, not just library and IT services, and provides an opportunity to help mitigate these impacts. A number of opportunities are at universities' disposals to realise efficiencies and cost savings; shared services¹, Green ICT², outsourcing³ and cloud computing all have the potential to do so. Many institutions are already exploiting these, and tools to help assess impacts and savings have been developed⁴. However, to plan for the future, further work is needed.

The report highlights the importance of improving and developing social learning spaces to enhance the user experience, part of which depends on the library's ability to procure digital equivalents to printed materials. Given capital budgets are probably going to come under even heavier pressure than recurrent spending, cuts to estates' budgets may further compromise libraries' abilities to repurpose square metres from storage to social learning spaces much valued by users. Learning spaces are expensive to build, maintain and support and must be suitable for an ever widening range of learning scenarios. Since 2006, JISC has been helping institutions develop physical spaces that anticipate the pervasive use of

¹ E.g. HE library consortia sharing the provision of Library Management Systems (LMS) could be a productive way forward in reducing costs:

<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/documents/librarymanagementbp.aspx>

² http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/programme_jos/susteit

<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/documents/sustainableictfinalreport.aspx>

³ <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/documents/outsourcingemailcasestudies.aspx>

⁴ e.g. a new tool from JISC (Suste-IT) is helping universities and colleges estimate the carbon footprint left by their computers to help target areas for energy saving (<http://www.susteit.org.uk/files/index>)

technology in learning and teaching, enable innovative, learner-centred pedagogies and inspire and motivate wider participation in learning⁵.

There is clearly an emphasis from the library sector on the need for increased consortium purchases, and JISC Collections will continue to play a key role supporting institutions in achieving the most cost effective and consistent deals possible. Alongside this Open Access models should help mitigate increased costs in journal subscriptions⁶.

A key need for IT and library services is to understand better how their services and resources are being used and valued, both to demonstrate value for money and as a planning tool to help target investments. Work through the Strategic Content Alliance⁷ (a three year initiative funded by JISC) has produced a number of guides, toolkits and case studies on how to identify how services and resources are used and valued by appropriate audiences, to, among other things, inform long-term planning⁸. There is a need however, for further work to help identify impacts and actual costs of IT and Library systems to enable senior managers to make informed choices about investment priorities and how to provide services.

In conclusion, the report shows IT services and libraries are not immune to the more commercial approach that we are already witnessing in universities as a whole, and will need to be equipped with the tools to assess their impact, value and costs. The ever changing demands from learners, teachers and researchers for services to be delivered in ways that meet their sophisticated use of on-line resources and systems, will require continued investment in innovative ways to meet these demands, if UK universities are to continue to offer a competitive research and learning experience.

⁵ <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/documents/bpelearnspacesv1.aspx>

⁶ http://www.jisc.ac.uk/fundingopportunities/funding_calls/2009/06/modellingtransitionitt.aspx and the Economic Implications of Alternative Scholarly Publishing report (Houghton et al.2009)

<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/publications/rpconomicoapublishing.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/themes/content/contentalliance.aspx>

⁸ <http://sca.jiscinvolve.org/publications/> and a tool from JISC Collections to help make informed decisions about future subscriptions to bibliographic and full text databases: <http://www.jisc-adat.com/adat/home.pl>

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Summary

Summary

The main focus of this research, as the title suggests, was to assess the impact of the economic downturn on university library and IT services. We conducted 40 interviews with representatives of each of these services in 36 different institutions across the UK. We included a wide selection of universities – old and new, campus and city, and small and large. While each institution is unique with respect to the way it reacts to student and staff needs, there are concerns and issues that cut across all of them when it comes to the potential impacts of the economic recession on services.

The situation today

Most institutions we spoke to are not yet feeling the ‘pinch’ of the recession on their services, which may be due in part to the fact that this research was conducted early in terms of the budgeting year. There is also a strong sense that both the library and IT departments occupy a protected place as central and essential services, and most report that the impact of the recession on budgets has currently been contained to small, easily managed cuts – for now. That being said, many institutions are anticipating deep cuts starting next year and are attempting to plan for reduced budgets now.

For most universities the 2009/2010 financial year is not of great concern. Even those libraries and IT departments that have been instructed to deliver 5% efficiency savings and believe they can meet the challenge of reducing costs without impacting services.

2010/2011, on the other hand, is anticipated to be harsher with deep budget cuts, competition over fewer students, and a change in government all increasing the pressure to deliver real savings over maintaining service delivery. Many universities are already adopting a more private sector/commercial approach to the business of the university as a whole and believe that ‘no institution has the right to exist anymore. We’ve got to prove our worth.’

Both libraries and IT departments have changed dramatically over the past five years. They have had to adapt to a larger body of students who are increasingly technologically adept, and who also look for increasingly personalised services from the institutions they attend. While the fundamental function of both libraries and IT departments has remained unchanged, the way in which services are delivered have evolved as the use of online resources has become more sophisticated.

This shift to a more ‘customer’ focused service delivery has meant changes to the way libraries and IT departments interact with one another and with students. For many universities, this means longer opening hours for libraries and 24 hour access to electronic resources and ICT facilities. Most participants in the research felt that this need for ever-more enhanced service delivery might make the next few years of recession even more difficult.

Looking to the future

Every university expressed a concern about currency fluctuations and none have any concrete plans to mitigate for these changes (either at a departmental or university-wide level) beyond keeping their budgets and spending under review. For the most part, larger universities are anticipating a greater impact on their international

subscriptions and ICT acquisitions due to currency fluctuations than smaller universities who tend to limit their subscriptions to national publications.

In addition to the recessionary impact on budgets, many are concerned about demographic changes (fewer 18-19 year olds to commit to an undergraduate programme), the cap expected on student numbers, the cap on fees, and anxiety over a general election and change of government with a new approach to higher education.

Specific issues for libraries

Libraries have an acute sense of vulnerability. There is a growing concern that their services may be seen as an easy target for savings and efficiencies, while they struggle to meet an increasingly high level of service demands from students and academic staff.

Library stakeholders fear that the recession may affect libraries in the following ways:-

- Small cuts across the range of services, or the loss of entire services perceived to be of less value to users, which librarians perceive will lead to a decline of overall service quality
- Having to achieve savings by cutting opening hours, in a world where users are only going to demand *more* access to resources, and increased access to library space;
- Hard-copy books and journals will be more difficult to get hold of, which will be exacerbated by budget cuts which weaken libraries' purchasing power; this may negatively impact user experience;
- Difficulties may result from being locked into existing publisher deals originally negotiated under a standard purchasing model whose value for money has decreased in light of currency fluctuations;
- Pressure to increase self-service – seen as a positive in terms of efficiency savings after an initial investment;
- Difficulties retaining and recruiting staff with the necessary skills to reflect the changing library service offerings and evolving needs of its users, in the face of potential recruitment freezes or cuts to training budgets;
- Concern about future tensions between the current union-negotiated pay and benefits packages for staff, and the economic environment that may eventually require staff cuts.

Specific issues for IT departments

IT departments, on the other hand, feel more secure with respect to potential cuts and believe that any institutional move towards efficiencies is simply 'business as usual' and offers a good opportunity to review current spending habits and streamline services.

They are, however, anticipating pressure with respect to:

- Increased scrutiny on existing budgets/reporting in an environment of increasing service demands;
- Staff redundancies more likely than in library environment, given difficulty in driving down non-staff costs;
- How to manage staff. If cuts are necessary, but redundancies are difficult to achieve, they feel they may need help managing and communicating recruitment freezes or staff restructuring;
- More renegotiating/reviewing of existing contracts due primarily to fluctuations in currency rates causing difficulties in purchasing new hardware;
- Increased competition when seeking funding from internal revenue streams; there may be a need to bid on a time-consuming, case-by-case basis

Responding to the pressures

Response to these pressures varies slightly depending on the size of the institution. Most have plans to renegotiate existing journal subscriptions and software licences (both major expenses) as one way of reducing their costs in coming years. Most feel they would be in a better position to do this as a part of a larger consortium of universities and would welcome a national consortium of universities in order to pressure publishers and benefit every institution equally.

With that in mind, where budgets are expected to be cut (although this is not a universal expectation), libraries are looking to cut journal subscriptions and book purchases rather than staff. The same is true of IT departments, which are looking at lengthening their hardware and software replacement/maintenance cycle in an attempt to mitigate the impact of the recession, as well as renegotiating contracts and leasing agreements with suppliers.

Introduction

Introduction

University libraries and IT services will feel pressures on budgets in some very direct ways due to the current economic situation (the weak pound makes buying in the academic journal market more difficult, for example); and in more subtle ways as well with tensions between research and teaching institutions.

Indeed, a recent briefing note⁹ by the Research Information Network (RIN) drew attention to these challenges within the library context (many of which are echoed in this report), stressing the need for collective action to avoid compromising the scope and quality of research and teaching in higher education and subsequent knock-on effects to the wider economy.

In the last recession, university applications increased as employment levels fell and individuals needed to retrain and update qualifications. Some commentators say that this time round, there may not be such give in the system to allow for increased applications, as we are already nearing saturation point when it comes to well qualified candidates applying to university courses. So some universities, if the cap comes off fees, may need to differentiate themselves on price in order to retain good candidates. This all means that cost cutting will be required, to deliver differentiating services at a cheaper price.

Recession may drive an increase in international competition; this means that UK universities need to stand out and attract the overseas student and research markets – which may require a level of technology which differentiates the UK in the international market as well as differentiating individual institutions. On the other hand, the drop in the value of the currency is good news with respect to recruitment of overseas students in particular institutions or for postgraduate degrees for whom the UK has been comparatively expensive in the past.

Universities may also be subject to competition from the private sector seeking to beat the recession. If private companies and trainers can award degrees, in a harsh economic climate some vendor-specific qualifications may have greater value in some markets than academic qualifications.

Innovation in information systems, with potentially an increase in distance learning, online teaching and learning, and other newer solutions could be the answer to keep universities competitive – but this will demand upfront investment, which it may not be possible to achieve.

There is a need, then, for the sector to learn from case studies of any institutions which are finding innovative ways to maximise their resources at home and internationally, while still serving their constituencies of researchers and students.

Government expectations

There are high expectations of the Higher Education (HE) sector from government. Knowledge Transfer between institutions and businesses is expected to generate innovation and stimulate the economy; which may be more challenging if resources are diverted from IT and library services.

And the less easily quantifiable benefits of Higher Education are also under scrutiny. The Mayor of London, for example, is seeking to build an overarching HE strategy for

⁹ RIN 2009, Scholarly books and journals at risk. (www.rin.ac.uk/scholarly-journals-risk)

London in which the social contribution of universities in London can be measured. This perhaps reflects a recession-driven demand for more accountability, where social and cultural impacts will need to be proved and measured in order for universities to justify funding. However, the recession could be affecting universities' ability to provide social and academic contribution in ways which have not yet been fully assessed.

This project was required to contribute to an evidence base of the potentially very varied ways that the recession is impacting library and information services at universities.

Objectives of the research

The main focus of this research, as the title suggests, was to assess the impact of the economic downturn on university library and IT services. In more detail, the objectives of this research were to:

- explore what impacts the current economic downturn is having or expected to have on funding streams to library and IT services within HEIs;
- determine, as far as possible, how this is affecting these services at all levels;
- examine current impacts, medium-term and longer-term impacts; and
- discover instances where institutions have managed to avoid, mitigate or plan for any impacts with a view to disseminating examples and best practice to other institutions dealing with these issues.

Approach

Qualitative research is essential if you are seeking to understand why particular views are held rather than how many people hold a view – it can uncover valuable information that could be missed in the scanning of percentages from quantitative surveys and has implications for consequent action planning.

For the purposes of this research, a qualitative approach allowed us to explore how the economic downturn is affecting each individual institution and library and IT departments in particular. The interviews began with a discussion of how their departments currently work and moved onto an investigation of each institution's point of view of the recession and what each is doing to mitigate for change due to the inevitable change in their budget.

This helped us ascertain how seriously the downturn has already affected departments and how it has been dealt with so far. We were also able to explore the anticipated impact of the recession on services in the next few years and what each institution is doing to cushion their departments, students and staff from the inevitable changes.

Over the course of six weeks we undertook 40 in-depth interviews, 45 minutes in length with library, IT and converged service staff in 36 Higher Education Institutions across the United Kingdom. Four interviews were conducted face-to-face, and the

remaining were conducted via the telephone. In three institutions representatives from both the library and ICT departments were interviewed in order to get a sense of how the system worked 'on the ground'. Institutions were chosen in order to roughly match the profile of institution types in each country. The following table shows how many interviews were conducted with each type of institution in each country.

	England	Scotland	Wales	N. Ireland	Total
1994 group	6				6
GuildHE	6				6
Million+	5	1			6
Russell Group	6	3			9
Unclassified	10	1	1	1	13
	33	5	1	1	40

The following table shows how many interviews were conducted with each audience and in which type of institution.

	Library	ICT	Converged	Total
1994 group	3	3		6
GuildHE	3	1	2	6
Million+	2	1	3	6
Russell Group	5	4		9
Unclassified	6	3	4	13
	19	12	9	40

All interviews were conducted with Head Librarians or equivalent and Directors of ICT Services or equivalent. In institutions where the two services are converged a Director of Information Services or equivalent was interviewed.

A discussion guide was designed in conjunction with JISC, SCONUL and UCISA and is appended.

Library and IT services have been treated as separate in this research in order to focus on specific ways in which these departments are planning for the impact of the recession. The reality of their relationship, however, is inter-dependence. The same issues were discussed with both of these audiences, as well as those working within a converged service, and while some of their concerns were very specific, either to the department type or the institution itself, there were many common concerns and solutions.

Library Services

Library Services

In this research we aimed to include a wide selection of university libraries – old and new, campus and city, small and large, traditional research libraries and those with a specialised focus. While each institution and each library is unique with respect to its collection and the way it caters to student and staff needs, there are concerns and issues that cut across all of them.

One thing is clear: most librarians we spoke to are not yet feeling the ‘pinch’ of the recession on their services. There is a clear sense that the library occupies a protected place as the ‘beating heart’ of the institution and most feel the impact of the recession has currently been contained to small, easily managed budget cuts – for now. At the same time, however, there is a sense of vulnerability and a growing concern that libraries may be seen as an easy target for savings and efficiencies whenever required by the institution (given their book funds are typically the largest concentration of uncommitted funds within the University budget) while they struggle to meet ever changing student and academic staff service demands.

Libraries have changed dramatically over the past five years, adapting as the student body increases, becomes more technologically adept, and looks for personalised services from the institutions they attend. While the fundamental function of a library has remained unchanged, the ways in which services are delivered have evolved as the use of online resources has become more sophisticated.

Naturally, the relationship between university library and IT services varies across institutions and is often dependant upon the effort individuals put into developing and maintaining an informal relationship. With the right individual personalities involved, the library and IT services complement one another, but if relationships are strained there can be difficulties. It is important to note here that in difficult economic times, library and IT services need to pull together even more-so than before.

‘It’s a tension because everything we do has to have an IT component. So it’s a delicate balancing act between working out how to work together effectively, how not to spend money unnecessarily but to still deliver what our customers need.’

Librarian, Unclassified, University (post 92)

‘It’s not without its tensions but we meet with them regularly and we try to make them understand our needs and our demands, we try to get them to see that we’re not just a simple user department in the way that, say, academic departments are, that we are a service provider and we need their support.’

Librarian, Unclassified, University (post 92)

The current library context

Any budgetary spending decisions occur in the context in which libraries are delivering services to both students and staff (whether in an economic recession or not). The current role of libraries as specialised social learning spaces combined with a more private sector view of students as ‘customers’ relates directly to the attitudes of those put in a position to make efficiency savings, and to what they consider reasonable to cut and what is now ‘untouchable’. Below, we discuss briefly significant

trends in the business of libraries and the environment the economic recession will eventually be impacting.

The library environment

The face of university library services has changed dramatically in recent years. There has been a marked shift from the traditional role of cataloguing and collections or content management to a service that delivers a wide range of information management tools across a very broad spectrum of formats. This new function has created the need for library staff to take on new roles: from interactive teaching roles - showing users how information can be used, integrated and correlated in the most appropriate manner; to a role that increasingly focuses them on the business of understanding user/customer needs.

This is somewhat compounded by the way in which university libraries are currently being used by students and staff. Many librarians have seen a shift in the way that students use the space from individual study to group study, collaborative work, and as a more general learning space. The challenge comes in managing this new library environment. Libraries are no longer repositories, they have become social, interactive learning spaces as a result of changing student use.

'A lot of nonsense is talked about people no longer needing to use physical libraries, but what that shows is if you build the correct kind of learning space then the students will actually flock to it. So we are seeing that student visits have gone up by something like 50% since we opened [the new] building.'

Librarian, Russell Group, University (pre 92)

Academic staff, on the other hand, are using the physical library much less than in the past. Many libraries have seen themselves become partners in supporting academic staff in their research and ensuring the appropriate resources are available. While libraries focus on providing physical facilities for students, they tend to support academic staff and researchers with electronic resources and online journal subscriptions.

Social learning spaces

Modern university libraries place a huge emphasis on the importance of shared learning spaces for their students. With the emergence of more group project work this can be fundamental in the academic progress of undergraduate students in particular. Learning spaces within the library context are performing an increasingly vital function. Changing the physical space of the library so it works better for students has consequently increased their use of the library space (but not necessarily the library resources). So with the shift of resources online, evidence suggests students are now spending more time within library buildings than they have in the past; the library has become a social study space.

In fact, much capital spend across a number of institutions has been concentrated on developing spaces for social learning within libraries. While much of this expense has been paid for out of one-off capital allocations, in a number of cases, this expenditure has been taken from the previous year's budget and is continuing until completion, in spite of the economic downturn. This can be seen as testament to how important 'social learning spaces' have become.

'There's a huge impetus in UK academic libraries to develop spaces that suit the learning needs of 21st century students. The library was transformed really into a social learning space... and has been exceedingly popular. It provides facilities for group learning, group study and a whole range of different types of furniture and arrangements that the students can sort out themselves for flexible methods of learning, and our usage and occupancy figures have increased considerably.'

Librarian, 1994 Group, University (pre 92)

Developing social learning spaces is now seen as a way of distinguishing one library from another in the increasingly competitive market place in which HEIs exist. Libraries we spoke to are very aware of the influence the services they offer can have on a potential student's decision to join the university. This appears to have influenced priorities for spend in recent years and is not an area they feel they are able to cut back on during the downturn if plans are not yet complete as it is key to service delivery. This, naturally, means cuts to other areas, discussed later in this chapter.

The shift from hard-copy to e-based materials

The move from hard-copy to e-based materials has been a second significant trend mentioned by every librarian we spoke to. The focus is now very much on the acquisition and presentation of electronic information alongside, and supplementary to, conventional print services.

This shift of emphasis towards the digital has challenged library resources due to the exponential growth of the material. It has also placed demands on the library staff as they are forced to become more skilled at budget management, ICT deployment, and negotiation with suppliers around licences.

This can be almost exclusively attributed to the move to online formats across society as a whole and the new demands that have been created as a result. Libraries have been forced to respond to these new demands and approaches with some rapidity, as pointed out by one of our interviewees:

'There's a trend, because of the digital consumer approach that we've all got, we all use Google, book our holidays and do our shopping and we haven't got the patience really to faff around with library catalogues.'

Librarian, 1994 Group, University (pre 92)

Libraries have been particularly responsive to this change. The move to e-based materials is still taking place and over the past few years been growing and developing. All libraries we spoke to have increased, or are in the process of increasing, their e-based collections.

Thus more and more library resources are now found in electronic formats with the consequent implications for libraries and their users. While services are more flexible because electronic resources can be accessed at the convenience of students and academic staff, the library building no longer has to be open in order to access those resources making it difficult to make the case for leaving the library open or increasing opening hours to accommodate student study demands. So despite more students using libraries as 'social learning spaces', this remote access helps them to

be flexible in their learning styles i.e. working throughout the night when most campus libraries are closed. It also has implications for expenditure, discussed elsewhere in this report.

The move to e-based materials has affected other aspects of the library service as well. For example, photocopying no longer has the same level of demand, since most materials are now available to students whenever they want them, wherever they are, in an online format.

'The electronic versus physical book expenditure has changed over the years and we're working hard actually to make certain that there's a very even balance. But we're seeing trends that reflect life as a student and the digital native does not, to a large degree, photocopy material in a way that someone of my age would have done.'

Converged service, Unclassified, University (post 92)

As mentioned previously, academic staff are happy engaging with materials in their own time within their own space. And despite initial scepticism, the provision of electronic materials has allowed them the freedom to do this, since most journals are available online via the library network.

'It's been hugely beneficial, although there were some academic staff who were reluctant because there's quite a big cultural issue here: "I don't want to look at a screen - that's dreadful. No, I want to go into the library and find things on the shelves." There are very few who say that now, I think everybody has eventually seen how easy it is, how beneficial it is.'

Librarian, Unclassified, University (post 92)

'We have had a specific strategy of moving to electronic provision so we spend a lot of money on electronic journals and we can let them have access to them in their offices [academic staff].'

Librarian, Unclassified, University (pre 92)

Even though some universities are further along in the move to electronic resources than others, there has been a universal shift towards e-based library materials. However, hard copy materials still have a place in the library service and are by no means obsolete.

'Customer' focus

University library services have very consciously begun to shape their service offerings around the needs and wants of its user, or 'customer', base even more than before. This responsive attitude to user groups has led to a number of changes within university library systems and practices. Not only do libraries need to respond to demand, they must also stay a few steps ahead of the game in trying to pre-empt future demands of user groupings.

'Libraries have to be very driven, they have to be driven by their user needs but they also have to be able to interpret those user needs and actually get two or three steps ahead so they're investing in things that users will find useful.'

Librarian, Russell Group, University (pre 92)

For example, it is now common practice for libraries to be open 24 hours a day around exam time and a minority of libraries are open 24 hours throughout the academic year. Emphasising the customer focus of university libraries, most participants we consulted explained that the change in opening hours is a direct response to a call from the student body.

'They want extended opening hours, the library here is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for the 5 week period that leads up to exams...we open in the other terms from 8.30 in the morning till 11 o'clock at night, Monday to Thursday and also extended hours over the weekend...but the students still say, "we want more".'

Librarian, 1994 Group, University (pre 92)

Another way in which this user-led approach plays out can be seen by the number of consultation libraries now engage in with their student and staff body. The majority of librarians we interviewed use some form of data collection and feedback processes from library users. This varies from informal chats between users and staff, to full research projects. The case study below provides a good example of the ways in which libraries have become more 'customer' focused and what that actually looks like in practice.

Best practice: student focus

This librarian talked in depth about the move to a more customer / student focused service which has been recognised by the receipt of 'customer service excellence accreditation' as explained below.

'We've just received our customer service excellence accreditation, so a major change is the way we respond to customer expectation and customer needs. It revolves around getting feedback from customers about what they want, what their expectations are, what their perceptions about performance are and then furthering our action operational plans according to removing irritation and adding value to our customer experience.

So in the last five years it's been a very conscious effort to try and understand what our customers expect and what annoys them about what we currently do as well as what they value about what we currently do. What that has seen is a greater emphasis on online things, a deliberate effort to break down barriers, multiple places to look, so we have a lot of records of books and things like that included in the catalogue...

We have realigned our staffing structure so that we only have one information desk that provides support for students in basic use of the library, basic use of IT and basic use of the online learning environment.'

Unclassified, University, (post 92)

Staff skill-set

Library staff are acutely aware of the changing nature of student and staff demands on modern day university libraries. Not only do they have to know how to respond to the demands of students and academics, they also need to predict what those demands may be in the future, ensuring they are trained in advance.

[My role is focused on] *finding ways to enable students and researchers to use the increasing range of resources more effectively, to manage information, to understand the information environment, and to provide consultancy and teaching services around those issues.*

Librarian, Russell Group, University (pre 92)

‘Librarians are much more inclined to take a risk on trying out new technology, trying out new services, and being prepared to be quite focused and businesslike about the things that don’t work.’

Converged service, Million +, University (post 92)

The skill-set needed today has changed in a number of ways from the traditional model. From a user perspective the library is often thought of as a generic entity that is simply part of the university. Students do not usually think of it as being made up of different departments and service areas. In order to accommodate this perception, library staff must be flexible and able to respond to requests for help on a wide variety of topics – it may involve referring that user to another staff member, another department, or learning the skills required to deal with the query themselves. This means that there must be staff who are skilled enough in a number of areas in order to respond to user demand. Libraries are beginning to recognise the significance of this and have responded by ensuring staff skill sets are as high as possible. Indeed, some have taken a new approach and begun to evaluate their structure and set-up.

‘We offer a triage service... if our frontline staff... customer services staff can’t answer the question then a librarian or an educational developer or an IT staff member will come and assist with the particular problem. It’s meant a change to the structure and trying to break down organisational silos because from a customer perspective they don’t see us as cataloguing or acquisitions or lending services it’s just the library.’

Librarian, Unclassified, University (post 92)

This implies that library staff must be multi-skilled experts: expert in library knowledge, information management, and online solutions. All universities we spoke to are beginning to take this into consideration and improving staff skills is seen as vitally important in the overall service that is provided.

Indeed, much expenditure goes towards training library staff to a high standard in a number of specialist areas. When asked about this expenditure, most participants were clear that staff training was a vital part of their overall offering and it is not an area they would be comfortable reducing, but admit that they may have to consider doing so in future.

‘Areas where we’ve always prioritised are around staff training and development and it’s an area where I would be reluctant to see funding being cut.’

Converged service, Unclassified, University (post 92)

The move to a user-led approach is being translated in numerous ways by different institutions. In some institutions, student services are coming together to offer a more united offering. One participant described this very clearly:

'We're converged but not necessarily in the traditional sense... What tends to happen in universities is the convergence is principally between IT services and libraries whereas... we [also] have elements of teaching and learning support... elements you might see more readily in student services in terms of support for students with [learning difficulties] and in terms of media support again that may well fit in a completely separate unit but it is actually a part of learning services remit.'

Librarian, GuildHE, College of Higher Education

These sentiments, emerged as a common theme throughout interviews conducted in the course of the research. Whether services are converged or separate there is a movement towards amalgamating student services within universities which makes the relationship between the library and IT departments especially important.

Best practice: the modern library

Below, a librarian describes what he sees as a 'modern library' meeting the needs of a student body and staff, and what makes a 'good library'.

'We aim to meet the library and information and learning needs of our students and staff through providing four things: one is learning spaces, spaces where people can learn; two is the information resources, our collection of books and journals; thirdly, providing the digital library and electronic services, both electronic information resources and eServices; and fourthly, providing supportive staff.

So I think a good library has these four lethal ingredients, and when you put together space, collections, electronic services and expert staff, you're beginning to deliver something special and relevant to the needs of our learning, teaching and research communities in the university.'

Million+, University (post 92)

Anticipated impacts of the recession

Despite the fact that many libraries have not yet felt a direct impact of the recession on their budgets, they are anticipating institution wide decreases as well as other 'pinch points' in the next few years.

The eventual inevitable reduction in library budgets as a result of the economic downturn is expected to have a number of different effects on services at all levels. These are anticipated to differ in severity depending primarily on the size and type of university.

From library staffing levels, to contract negotiations with suppliers and publishers, to purchasing content, currency fluctuations, and shared or outsourced services, all libraries are anticipating change and attempting to plan for it.

Essentially, libraries are facing the following challenges in response to the economic recession:

1. an inevitable decline of services provided by libraries caused by either small cuts across the range of services or the loss of entire services perceived to be of less value to users;
2. pressure to achieve savings by cutting opening hours despite the fact that users demand more access to resources and increased access to library space;
3. decrease in the availability of hard-copy books and journals exacerbated by a fall in purchasing power and budget cuts, and the resultant impacts on user experience;
4. difficulties resulting from being locked into existing journal publisher deals (the standard model for digital materials) whose value for money is decreasing in light of currency fluctuations;
5. pressure to increase self-service – seen as a positive in terms of efficiency savings after an initial investment;
6. staff retention and difficulties recruiting new staff with the necessary skills to reflect the changing library service offerings and evolving needs of its users in the face of potential recruitment freezes or cuts to training budgets; and
7. Pay reductions and staff pensions in a budgetary environment that may eventually require staff cuts.

Current budgeting situation

There are two very different models for funding/managing funding of libraries - centralized and departmental. Essentially, the former allows for a large budget for books and periodicals – resources which are managed by the university library with committees set up to advise, but leaving the librarians with the final say in what they purchase. The latter means a more dispersed budget, with individual departments paying for the books, periodicals stocked by the library – clearly there are things that every department will want a subscription to (e.g. Nature), but an issue arises when a department wants the library to subscribe to a specialist or very expensive book, periodical, or online service which is primarily of interest to a limited number of people.

In the libraries we spoke to most were funded in the former way – centralised, receiving an annual budget, making independent budgetary decisions and spending their budgets on what they feel is important. They have control over staffing, book acquisitions, journal subscriptions, and the physical library space. Most submit an annual budget plan but very few librarians had received confirmation of their 2009/2010 budgets at the time of this research. In spite of the current economic climate, most held relatively positive expectations for the level of funding for next year.

'We have a short term planning document which sets the corporate objectives over four years. It, and the university strategic plan, will be revised during the course of the next financial year and my hope is that our capital allocation will be broadly in line with the planned capital spend that is within that four year document.'

Converged service, Unclassified, University (pre 92)

Perhaps surprisingly, a number of participants we spoke to felt that the recession provided an excellent opportunity to review current practice and streamline their services as a result of reduced budgets. They highlighted that universities are notoriously inefficient when it comes to making savings and can be prone to staying 'tied in' to deals for many years without making changes.

'It's an opportunity for us to look at what we do well, where we have maximum benefit and add true value to activities both that are delivered by this department and also that this department contributes to the faculties and to other departments in the university.'

Converged service, Unclassified, University (pre 92)

With respect to planning for their budgets for the upcoming year, many had been instructed to make a 5% efficiency savings on last year – none had received any guidance with respect to priority for cuts. Many described this as an institutional cushion to protect the university from more severe cuts expected for the 2010/2011 budget. For many, this was unlikely to pose a significant challenge for the 2009/2010 budget year given that they have always been expected to justify their spend and be as efficient as possible.

'We're always challenged to deliver efficiency savings and value for money. And we are also required, on an annual basis, to identify where we've found efficiency savings, and we've done that over the last several years.'

Librarian, Russell Group, University (pre 92)

Despite this temporary reprieve from the effects of the recession, however, every library we spoke to expressed concerns about their budgets for 2010/2011. Most have not received any formal institutional notice of this although some have taken part in workshops/meetings meant to reassure.

'Our finance director has held a number of workshops for staff, for senior managers and the like in the university to brief them on the situation and the way that it's affecting the university. She was at great pains to say nobody should be panicking because we're not in a crisis situation but there are concerns, there are problems.'

Librarian, Unclassified, University (post 92)

Best practice: already careful before economic downturn

A number of librarians explained that they have always had to be frugal with their expenditure and that the current downturn is not yet pressuring librarians into making new budgetary decisions about cuts.

'I've had year on year cuts every year I've been here...what we're facing now actually is nothing new for us. We had difficulties with our HEFCE audit but we're through that now, but [the audit difficulties] resulted in claw backs, which resulted in budget cuts. I'm quite expecting 09/10 to be difficult; I'm expecting 10/11 to be more difficult, but it's within a context of never having much fat on the bones anyway. I know I'm going to cope with it because I've been doing it for the last seven years, I'm not coming from a position of plenty to a position of poverty.'

Million+, University (post 92)

Types of cuts

Library staff are feeling the effects of the downturn through the pressure they are facing to tighten services with reduced budgets and possible implications for staffing. Participants are very aware of this looming threat and it is largely expected to get worse over the next few years.

For some libraries, the recession is a real threat which will begin to take its toll on services in the next academic year. Library staff at these institutions have, on the whole, already had to look at their budgets for next year and thought hard about how to rationalise spend to senior management within the university. This has put pressure on library staff to find savings in expectation of difficult times and is causing them to think very hard about what they want their service to look like in the next five years. In most cases, the staff member in charge of library services must, after consultation with their staff, present a proposed budget to senior management for consideration.

There appear to be two routes librarians are taking with regard to their approach to possible budget reductions. The first route sees librarians looking to reduce spend on a number of services but only by a little:

'I've looked closely at every budget line so I think it's always possible to do a bit of belt tightening so you can knock 2 or 3 or 4 or 5% off consumables budgets or furniture budgets or things like that so that's something we do very strictly. We're also looking at... planning administration... the processes in acquiring books and in procurement etc, working with our finance department as well to make every efficiency we can in that respect.'

Librarian, 1994 Group, University (pre 92)

These relatively small reductions to a range of areas are rationalised by library staff as sensible since they mean that no one service will be completely cut. Therefore, overall offerings will mostly remain intact. However, some library staff feel this could be a dangerous strategy since it could devalue the overall offering. These participants prefer to keep some services at their current level and look at other areas to cut completely instead. In other words some librarians are concentrating on cutting specific, less-used areas of the service in order to minimise the overall negative impact on the library as a whole as explained below:

'It wouldn't be my intention to salami slice across the whole of the range of activities but rather to be more surgical and to identify an activity from which the benefits are not great and to terminate that activity in its entirety rather than make everything suffer a cutback.'

Converged service, Unclassified, University (pre 92)

Opening hours

Libraries are reluctant to cut their opening hours despite acknowledging that this may happen as a consequence of staffing cuts. As discussed in the previous section, it is widely recognised that opening times are of major importance to the student body who are demanding access to the resource at most hours of the day and night. Although seen as somewhat of a last resort for many, cutting library opening hours is an option being taken into consideration by some libraries, in attempts to reduce spend.

'I hope we don't have to make radical changes to the opening hours, that would be really difficult for the student body but we will try and ensure we've got the best possible opening times that meet their need.'

Librarian, 1994 Group, University (pre 92)

In most cases students are the largest user group of library services and the potential impact of recession-induced cuts could adversely affect their time at university. With the emphasis on social learning combined with the tutorials now offered by library staff on all aspects of information management, the library is often at the heart of their learning. Cuts to library staff, opening hours or resources could be felt by students unless libraries come up with ways to continue to deliver expected services within constrained budgets. The sense among many institutions is that those that do not remain competitive in their library offerings could struggle to attract a student body of an adequate size which could, in turn, decrease their budget further.

Book purchases

The effect of the recession on libraries with regard to students is not yet clear and will likely differ between institutions. Across the board, however, we have been told that book numbers and availability may decrease which could impact students in a number of ways – course aids in terms of obtaining books on specific reading lists, for example.

'The book fund is the only other area [I could make cuts], the only other place I've got to go. And I don't think it's acceptable to penalise undergraduates at the cost of research because research is the biggest beneficiary of the journals.'

Librarian, 1994 Group, University (pre 92)

Journal subscriptions

When discussing the possibility of future cuts to services, online journal subscriptions are often mentioned as an area which could be explored in terms of cutbacks. It is felt that some electronic resources are not used enough to justify the continuation of subscriptions and with feedback from academics may be a good area to explore in terms of reduction in service.

'We will look at levels of usage [of Electronic resources and electronic journals] and, in consultation with the academics, identify those that might not have heavy use...So in terms of our strategy within the library, we have an annual consultation with our academic colleagues around periodicals and electronic resources that we take and we would be having to ask them to consider cuts on the titles that they take.'

Librarian, 1994 Group, University (pre 92)

This could have serious consequences for some academic staff who rely on access to online information for both research and teaching purposes. For example, some subscriptions may only be used occasionally, but provide a wealth of important knowledge on those occasions.

Contracts with suppliers / journal publishers

According to many libraries we spoke with, existing contracts with suppliers will eventually place pressure on budgets and, as a consequence, services. Journal publishers are seen as acting only in their own self-interest, increasing costs every year which caused anger in stable financial times and is creating problems for libraries now looking to make savings in order to protect their collections for harder financial times ahead.

'Well it's certainly putting a spotlight on open access publishing and the role of the publisher and the predatory pricing one might say. The inflation in prices for information resources is fairly obnoxious and it has been for years, this is the first time I've seen across the globe everybody trying to get publishers to realise that they just can't keep asking for 8% or 10% increase every year, year-on-year, and expect us to maintain all the subscriptions.'

Librarian, Unclassified, University (post 92)

Often, contracts were agreed some time ago and will not be up for renegotiation for another year or two. In cases like this, budget reductions were not something libraries had considered and renegotiation of prices with 'predatory' publishers is at the forefront of many librarians' minds as an area of potential savings. If this is not achieved, some libraries will not be able to avoid severe cuts to book acquisitions and subscriptions:

'I think the biggest worry has been around the inflationary costs of information resources and the need to negotiate the next round of licence deals with a realistic expectation around what those prices might be. Because if they keep it to the order of, somewhere between 5% and 15% increase in price we can't expect anything but very severe cuts.'

Librarian, Unclassified, University (post 92)

Currency fluctuations

In a closely related issue, currency fluctuations and the affect this is having and expected to have on library services in the future, is one of the biggest areas of concern for university library services. Many subscriptions come from suppliers based abroad, so as sterling drops in value so does a library's capacity to continue to purchase those same subscriptions. This change in the value of the pound has been extreme and taken place in a very short space of time:

'We also buy in most of our e-journal services in Euros or in Dollars and the wide fluctuation of Sterling throughout this financial year has meant that we are on a £1 million spend on e-journals. We're £166,000 over budget whereas last year we were £50,000 under budget because the pound was strong... It's a serious challenge and one of the risks that I delivered to the corporate level because it's quite significant on a relatively small budget.'

Converged service, Unclassified, University (post 92)

This has meant that libraries have had to try to estimate what their current overspend will be as a result of currency fluctuations and take this into consideration when planning their spend for next year. This is the way some libraries are approaching the

situation and one of the only approaches highlighted to us in terms of a 'strategy' to deal with the fluctuations.

'Within our material budget and with the Euro and dollar fluctuations, we've highlighted what we expect is going to be the overspend in those areas.'

Librarian, Unclassified, University (pre 92)

The majority of library staff we interviewed do not seem to be aware of any institution-wide strategy to mitigate the effects of currency fluctuations. Some participants did talk about finance departments having a role to play here.

'Certainly the finance department has been preparing analysis for the senior management team which I'm not part of, but the finance department is certainly modelling what they expect the impact to be in the short term.'

Librarian, Million+, University (post 92)

'I think the next stage is to say, well what are we going to do about it? So you begin, so you can build a scenario which says, actually this area of activity isn't affected at all, this area is affected far more. Library for example, we should put some more money into this area and we might well take some money from this area, or they could say, well we simply don't have enough money to pay for this any more so we'll have to buy less of it.'

Librarian, Russell Group, University (pre 92)

Some smaller libraries acknowledged the fact that they have less spend in foreign currency than their larger counterparts and so are not impacted in quite the same way. In some cases, there have actually been positive outcomes for institutions with a drop in the value of the pound. For example, some institutions are seeing an increase in the number of foreign students studying in the UK which has led to an increase in overall intake. And one institutions, who had received an EC grant, also benefited:

'It's not as major an impact because our budget and our spend is quite small. Where it did have an impact in fact was where we were getting money from Europe, we actually got a bit more.'

Librarian, GuildHE, College of Higher Education

'In the university as a whole, we do have a high proportion of international students, and there has been some impact on them obviously because of their coming in here and the impact of their spending ability is different, and their fee paying ability is different.'

Librarian, Million+, University (post 92)

In the main however, currency fluctuations are having, and are expected to continue to have a negative impact on most university library services. It is a major area of concern for libraries up and down the country.

Library staffing

The economic downturn has some serious potential impacts for library staff across universities as well. The potential cuts on staffing could have serious consequences not only for students and the staff themselves, but for institutions as a whole. As the trend towards libraries and library staff as an interactive teaching service grows, universities are conscious of the adverse effect reductions in library services may have on their placing in an ever increasingly competitive market place.

Pay reductions and pensions

Participants across a range of institutions are also concerned about pay reductions and a change in pension policies for staff. A number of universities have recently increased staff pay due to the aforementioned increase in skills now needed to provide a standard library service. To reduce pay now would be seen by many as an unfortunate back-track.

For staff who have served at the university for a long time, the potential change to existing pension schemes is particularly worrying since they may not receive what they have been expecting and paying into for a long period of time.

'The only real economic effect we have, that I have seen is that we have been told that there is a dispute with say the unions over pay awards.'

Librarian, GuildHE, College of Higher Education

'There are a couple of worrying things on the horizon, and that's sustainability of current pension arrangements, both in terms of the employer's contribution and the final salary pension scheme, and not necessarily for that year, but are things like that sustainable over the next five to ten years?'

Librarian, Million+, University (post 92)

Academic staff

For academic staff, it is hard to know the exact impact of the credit crunch in relation to library services. However, as mentioned previously, the primary way academic staff and researchers use the library services is via electronic resources, which they mostly access in their own environment for research and teaching purposes.

Despite the fact that students tend to be more active users of the library space, when it comes to journal subscriptions and book purchases, some librarians feel it more important to engage academics (those most likely to make long-term use of library resources for their own research and for classes) in an ongoing discussion about library acquisitions:

'I don't know if students necessarily perceive a difference in the service because they're only here for three years, and the library gets a very good result in surveys, but academics it's increasingly hard to engage them with discussions about it.'

Librarian, Million+, University (post 92)

Solutions

Self-service

Even before the economic downturn, there had been a move towards automation and self-service within university libraries. In light of the recession, self-service is an option that is being frequently highlighted as a possible area of expansion in future. Self-service can cut costs by reducing the need for so many staff, or freeing up staff time to concentrate on other more interactive areas.

'Well I think most libraries will probably, have already done or be in the process of doing what we're doing here, which is putting far greater emphasis on automation, so we're between 80% and 90% self-service. I think we'll see the introduction, well we will be, hopefully will be introducing things like [Radio Frequency Identification] tagging, which will allow automation to go further.'

Librarian, Unclassified, University (pre 92)

'We are going to have to make one or two staff savings, that's incumbent upon us. We've already identified one to two FTE information assistant posts that we can release because there's been a move towards self-service here. 95% of our loan transactions are self-service so all these individual transactions at the counter are not so time consuming.'

Librarian, 1994 Group, University (pre 92)

Consortia

A number of consortia bodies made up of various libraries across the country were discussed during interviews. These groups are being looked to by many library staff for a means of approaching suppliers with a view to more realistic pricing strategies during these hard times.

'There are various consortia within Scotland that we play quite a leading role in, from a project called SHEDL, Scottish Higher Education Digital Library. So that again is negotiation with publishers at beyond institutional level and we're very keen on that.'

Librarian, Russell Group, University, (pre 92)

'I've been involved with the JISC books project for textbooks and the need to come up with alternative business models or at least evidence of what different models might mean for both publishers and libraries. So there needs to be research done and shared about different options. But we need different models coming out of the publishers.'

Librarian, Unclassified, University (post 92)

As the above, somewhat optimistic verbatims portray, it is hoped that approaching publishers as a larger body made up of multiple libraries will force publishers to listen to library staff. Librarians still feel that once suppliers have been approached in this way, they may be in a better standing to receive what they consider to be more

'reasonable' deals. Whether this is realistic or not remains to be seen, yet it is what many librarians say they are hoping for.

Best practice: the use of consortia

Many librarians mentioned their membership of consortia and the ways they feel this could help them with renegotiating subscriptions. The example below refers to the sharing of electronic subscriptions.

'Libraries are involved up and down the country in a whole range of consortia, obviously we get the best possible consortia deals through JISC and...through the London Universities' Purchasing Consortium. But another example is a number of colleges within the University of London have been looking very closely at the electronic subscriptions and resources that we acquire, together with those at Senate House, and actually involved a third party consultant to help us in this to see whether we could make that money stretch further and if there are other ways in which, you could possibly have one person or one institution co-ordinating the electronic resources across these various institutions rather than having bits of people in each of them. So we're looking closely at collaboration along those lines.'

1994 Group, University (pre 92)

Renegotiating contracts and planning subscriptions

Negotiating with suppliers about pricing structures is seen as an area of reducing cost increases and libraries are looking closely at journal subscriptions and book purchases. A number of participants made the point that some subscriptions within universities were signed many years ago and in recent times have not gone through any kind of re-evaluation. What this means is that university libraries are potentially spending money on journals or books that no one is currently using. Simply by tightening up procedures on subscriptions and book purchases is seen as one of the easiest ways to save money.

'This year we've been through all of our subscriptions, electronic and print, we've put them all onto a spreadsheet and in each case we've tried to show why we take them. And very soon, within the next week or so we're going to make that information available to all academic staff. We're trying to be transparent as to how we spend our money and why we're buying these resources... there must be things we took out subscriptions for ten years ago and nobody uses now.'

Librarian, Unclassified, University (pre 92)

'We're saying this is a list of materials across the whole of the academic spectrum which we think are underused, and we are asking you for the collective good to cancel these, against no particular value other than the fact that you won't have to deal with a much wider and more damaging cut.'

Librarian, Russell Group, University (pre 92)

The other issue raised is that often libraries signed up to 'bundle' subscriptions with renewal dates agreed in advance. This is clearly another issue which will force libraries to make cuts elsewhere and is an area many libraries are currently reviewing and which will be examined and planned in much greater detail in the future.

'The other factor in this is dealing with...bundle subscriptions, so we acquire a whole range of journals or resources in a particular package with renewal dates that are agreed in advance, sometimes you have to agree a package over a couple of years with particular renewal dates and obviously this is done scientifically and strategically. But it may be, it's going to be necessary for us to look carefully at all of these and try and forecast what is affordable within the budget that we do have.'

Librarian, 1994 Group, University (pre 92)

Essentially, what this means is that much tighter planning and organisation around book purchases and subscriptions will be required. This is recognised across university libraries and is an area which a majority of our participants referred to when talking about simple ways of saving money in a recession.

Shared services and outsourced services

There are two major avenues for shared services that library staff mention when asked about their potential use: firstly, internal sharing within the institution, secondly, sharing with external bodies such as other universities nearby.

One example of internal sharing came out of an examination of services already in existence at the university and the best way to organise those in order for them to be mutually beneficial, as opposed to serving one purpose alone. This library took the view that instead of employing an external security service to guard the library alone, it could make use of the existing university security, simply by moving their base to the library premises.

'At the moment we employ a security service to maintain our 24 hour resource rooms and to provide additional security after five. Well we have invited the university's security office to relocate to the library building so that there would be a 24 hour presence provided by people who already exist but don't exist in my building. And if they are there and if they're visible I won't have to employ a separate service for instance.'

Librarian, Unclassified, University (post 92)

As when looking at consortia to approach publishers in order to renegotiate subscription deals, some library staff mention their membership of groups, initiatives or consortiums when asked about the use of shared services. Below is a prime example of shared services in which libraries agreed to reduce some of their hard copy journals – if users at the university need to get hold of the journal, there are copies available in a different institution, which will then be sent on to them:

'There's the UK Research Reserve which is HEFCE funded and British Library led initiative where you can release space in libraries by removing hard copy journals from the shelves on the understanding that at least three libraries retain a hard copy and the British Library will be the key one, and they provide a 24 hour guaranteed document delivery

service on an article... if we've given some of our unique material to them they would guarantee to give our academics or our users [access to that material], so that would release space and the costs of space across a whole range of UK academic libraries.'

Librarian, 1994 Group, University (pre 92)

The above is seen as one viable option for future use of shared services. However, in some institutions staff are dubious of shared services between universities because of the market competition that exists in the HE sector. Even if they themselves are happy to consider the possibility of sharing resources between institutions they feel others may be reluctant.

'When it comes to the information resources budget you either have the subscriptions or you don't. We can't. You can't rely, well you can't piggyback on another university, I can't send my students over to the University of XXX and expect them to be greeted and served.'

Librarian, Unclassified, University (post 92)

For those libraries already making use of shared services, the outlook is mainly positive. When asked for examples of 'good practice', shared services were highlighted by a number of participants as a positive potential way forward – if everyone is in a similar position during the economic downturn, it makes sense to pull together to maintain a high level of service in all their libraries.

Best Practice: shared collection of e-books

Where some shared services are already in place they appear to work well and come recommended to other university libraries.

'We have a scheme whereby we have a shared collection of eBooks across XXX. And there's a now certain collection of some hundreds of eBooks, to which all students who are in XXX universities have access. So we've built that up collaboratively. We're looking now to extend that into other eBook suppliers and the initial one that we did. And we're also looking at the possibility of thinking about e-Journals in that context.'

Unclassified, University, (pre 92)

Library staff

Staffing is a major area of consideration for libraries in terms of cutting costs and making efficiencies to weather the recession. At this point cutting positions is action that most universities are successfully trying hard to avoid as library staff are seen to have a vital role to play within service delivery in the modern library. However, it is certainly being taken into consideration and voluntary redundancies are being encouraged in a number of institutions while others are encouraging early retirement.

'It looks as if the major area that the reductions will have to be made will be in staff costs.'

Librarian, Unclassified, University (post 92)

'There's definitely a kind of holding down of staffing expenditure, so we're running light on staffing because of the voluntary severance scheme and we're not able to increase that.'

Librarian, Million+, University (post 92)

'There are always people who have come to the end of their working time and they feel that they may wish to go... so there are a few of those sorts of conversations.'

Librarian, 1994 Group, University (pre 92)

Indeed, these are clearly worrying times for library staff who, although reluctant to make redundancies, are facing the real prospect of having to do so in the future. For some, it will also become much harder to recruit new staff, even in order to replace any individuals who may leave:

'I think it's going to be mandatory that we take a very serious look at staffing, and there'll almost certainly be... not an outright ban but there will be obstacles placed in the way of replacing staff who leave.'

Librarian, Unclassified, University (pre 92)

'When it comes to staffing there are no new posts per se and it may well be that any vacant posts are scrutinised more carefully both in terms of the remit of that role and the absolute necessity to recruit to it at a particular level.'

Librarian, Unclassified, University (post 92)

'I don't think there'll be any prospect of any new staffing positions, whereas over the last 12 months we have actually... had an increase in the staffing over the last 12 months, and now that will certainly be static.'

Librarian, Unclassified, University (pre 92)

As the above verbatims suggests, this cut back in the area of staff is at loggerheads with what has been happening within university libraries in recent years. More staff with a wider variety of skills have been employed at university libraries, but now these positions are facing scrutiny. When cuts are eventually made to the staffing budget, and they are expected by many, every position will be reviewed in detail.

Some of the measures being taken to lessen the effects of impending staff budgetary cuts are schemes such as using students at the university to take on what would typically be a staff role, such as re-shelving books. Rather than employ a permanent library staff member, some institutions are looking to their student body to help out instead. Another common action is to simply not replace staff if they leave. Taking into consideration the increased emphasis on library staff's fundamental roles in the service (as already discussed) this is an easy action to take if faced with a choice between that and redundancies, however it is an action that could also be detrimental to service offerings.

Best Practice: outsourcing security / concierge service for library

One money-saving idea that also maintains a high level of service and 24 hour library access is to employ 'concierge staff' to provide a security & portering presence as described below

'One of the things I suppose with Information Commons is that we've designed that to be a very efficient building in terms of staffing, so that some of the opening hours for example are supported by having what we call concierge staff who provide a portering and security presence, and we can run with a relatively small number of those and provide 24/7 opening at relatively low marginal cost.'

Russell Group, university (pre-92)

Monitoring satisfaction and impacts on students

The majority of libraries we spoke to have a 'system' or 'tools' by which they monitor satisfaction with library services – from informal discussions with students and academic staff, to contact, with the student union, looking at results from the National Student Survey, and internal surveys and ad hoc research using focus groups with library users.

'We have lots of surveys on the library service, both the National Student Survey and the International Graduate Barometer. There's a Postgraduate Researcher's Survey, they will have a question in there about the library, and also obviously through our own channels with the student union.'

Librarian, 1994 Group, University (pre 92)

None of the libraries we spoke to have formalised systems in place to monitor the impact of the recession-led cuts on library services specifically, however, but believe that the current level of monitoring would provide an indication of dissatisfaction. On an institutional level, however, participants often refer to research taking place monitoring impacts of the recession. Library staff are often unsure of exact details, but have an idea that any analysis would be coming from internal finance departments, or internal academic researchers.

'At the gross level I know our finance department is watching our financial position vis a vis other universities' financial positions and at a gross level we know that the university is in a better shape than some of our colleagues.'

Librarian, Unclassified, University (post 92)

'There certainly have been analyses looking in to several years forward. I haven't seen them but I know that they've been done because it's as a result of those analysis that we're being told that we want to make cuts now, so that we're prepared when the time comes and we're not in too much trouble further down the road.'

Librarian, Unclassified, University (post 92)

In the main, there is some level of analysis going on at an institution-wide level in most cases. The tool mentioned almost universally was the National Student Survey. However, analysis of the impact of the recession is more advanced in some institutions than others and where it is, appears to depend on whether academics are running specific projects, or there has been a firm direction coming from senior management.

At the library level, there are some definite moves being made to a more interactive service (as already discussed) and in most cases this involves a high level of consultation with user groups. As mentioned earlier this can involve informal feedback or more formal research processes such as questionnaires or organising focus groups. Overall, there do not appear to be many universities undertaking formal research with their users, but there is a trend of collecting feedback.

IT Services

IT Services

The current IT services context

The fundamental role of university IT services has not changed dramatically in recent years as they continue to provide IT services just as they have always done. There has, however, been a significant expansion in their coverage – ICT is now an essential part of the delivery of learning and teaching, assessment, research and administration. This is in contrast to its role twenty years ago when it was part of the supporting infrastructure of the operation of the university, and of academic interest in a few specialist areas. Although some of the services which the IT department provide may have changed, many see this as the nature of the department's function. That is, to continually seek to improve the learning environment and upgrade the infrastructure to meet increasing demands and supporting overall university strategies.

As we saw with libraries, IT departmental attitudes to budgetary spending decisions occur in the service delivery context. The ways in which university IT services are currently being used by students and staff is directly related to how IT departments are responding to the change in demands from its student body and staff. Generally, we find an increasing focus on enhancing the student learning experience by offering a variety of resources to complement their studies, and a higher level of spending on upgrades to infrastructure to support this.

The IT environment

As with the library services, students are using IT services extensively and in an increasingly sophisticated way. Alongside more traditional functions such as using workstations and desktop PCs for basic word processing and email, students are coming to depend on these facilities for learning (using applications such as virtual learning environments) and to access academic software. To meet these increasing demands, more workstations are being installed and more dedicated IT suites are being built, which in turn also increases the demands being placed on the IT infrastructure.

There has also been a shift to mobile computing in the last few years. Institutions have introduced wireless networks for staff, students and visitors using personal laptops and university laptops are made available for student use on campus.

Students are not only using IT services for academic purposes, but for playing games, browsing the Internet, social networking (Facebook), downloading music and videos, personal email, and making telephone calls (Skype) in some cases. Many institutions have gone as far as to extend their networks to include university accommodation so students can use the IT services for everything they do while attending university.

'...all our networks extend out into everywhere they live, well out into all university accommodation. So students are using our services for everything they do at university.'

Converged service, Unclassified, University (pre 92)

Infrastructure

Many institutions have realised that IT services are fundamental to the entire institution and consequently have granted large sums of money to upgrade the basic infrastructure.

Extra demand for IT services is placing an increasing pressure on the IT infrastructure of institutions and it is has become necessary for IT departments to invest in their networks, systems, software and hardware to meet the high standards expected by students and staff. Over the past five years or so, institutions have been making significant investments in robust systems and infrastructure, improving everything from HR systems and wireless networks, to the basics of improving desktops for staff and students. Although the scale of IT-related services has increased, most of this spending has been aided by the fact that technology has generally become cheaper over the past few years.

'The demand for IT services...has been a long-term trend, and obviously places pressure on our capacity. That, and the fact that people increasingly expect our services to be available all the time, places pressures on the resilience and robustness of our systems and services.'

Converged service, Unclassified, University (pre 92)

'Our spending is basically providing the key infrastructure to support it [mobile computing]. It has to develop to be able to support it, so technology gets cheaper but you need more of it so spending stays flat.'

ICT, Russell Group, University (pre 92)

Best Practice: investing less in infrastructure

'[In relation to] PC renewals and network renewals, we've had five good years to invest so we can afford to invest less in the infrastructure for the next few years to tide us over, probably for 18 months or so.'

Russell Group, University (pre 92)

Anticipated impacts of the recession

Like libraries, IT services have not yet felt a direct impact of the recession on their budgets, but they are anticipating decreases in the next year or two. IT services are facing the following challenges in response to the economic recession:

1. Increased scrutiny on existing budgets/reporting in an environment of increasing service demands;
2. Staff redundancies more likely than in the library environment given difficulty in driving down non-staff costs;
3. Recruitment freeze and staff restructuring will be needed to help if staff redundancies not possible;

4. More renegotiating/reviewing of existing contracts due primarily to fluctuations in currency rates causing difficulties in purchasing new hardware; and
5. Increased competition or bidding for funding from internal revenue streams on a case-by-case basis (time consuming, etc).

Current budgeting situation

The budget situation for IT departments is very much like that of libraries in that they have traditionally been in a position of relative power with respect to spending. As a central department and the front line for delivery of effective, efficient services, they have rarely sustained cuts in their budgets and many have actually seen an increase in funding in the past few years as universities keep pace with technological advances and student demands. Many are anticipating a re-think of funding more generally over the next few years and believe that they will be under increased scrutiny with respect to what they spend their budgets on – although this is not seen as a negative.

'So I think there's a lot more questioning of things that had automatic sign off in the past. We are now being questioned over and over again, so there's no automatic 'yeses'. I think that's a positive. I think in the private sector a lot more of that [questioning] went on, has always gone on, and historically, in the public sector, I don't think it has, and possibly that's a positive, that's a positive change in the public sector and especially in the HE sector.'

ICT, Million+, University (post 92)

For those who have already been asked to make efficiencies, most do not see it as a direct result of the recession on their university – most describe it as a way to 'shore up our defences' in advance of harsher cuts in the next few years.

'We are being asked to deliver a bigger surplus as an organisation to, in some ways, I guess, to shore up our defences in case there are further cuts in the public sector. And I think most people view that there will inevitably be further cuts going forward.'

ICT, Million+, University (post 92)

As seen with library services, the eventual reduction in budgets (in most cases) as a result of the economic downturn is expected to have a number of different impacts on IT services at all levels. These impacts will differ in severity between institutions depending on the size and type of university we are referring to.

There are a few IT departments that have already implemented change, not necessarily in anticipation of an economic downturn, but for cost savings in terms of efficiency and as part of a wider university strategy. Many anticipated that these investments and the savings garnered from them will provide the universities with a comfortable cushion to help them through the current difficulties.

That being said, all IT departments have areas of concern – from funding streams, to staffing cuts, to increased demands on services, and currency fluctuations.

Funding streams

Many IT departments are concerned about financial planning. There is much uncertainty over the future of public spending and teaching grants that may be available through various organisations in future. This uncertainty is making it difficult for IT departments to plan for precarious financial times.

'So what the next Government's approach to the funding of research is very hard to predict...'

Converged service, Unclassified, University (pre 92)

'We've just had a letter indicating that they've [Higher Education Funding Council] got to make savings of, I think it's just under 200 million and that's going to translate into reductions in our teaching grants.'

Converged service, Unclassified, University (pre 92)

In those institutions that have already made cost savings, or imposed high levels of target savings, internal funding streams are being made available to allow departments to make cases for capital investment projects. However, it should be stressed that individual departments must be able to put forward a strong business case before funding is granted. One respondent feels that even if his budget is reduced by 10%, a successful application to this internal funding stream will enable him offset the reduction.

'Well I will have to find that cut but as I say it may be offset by being able to obtain/encapsulate this capital investment money.'

ICT, 1994 Group, University (pre 92)

Increased demand on services

Unlike with library services, the increased demand on services provided by the IT department is not seen as a concern in the short-term. The general feeling is that existing services will continue as they are and any reduction in funding will have to be offset by cuts in staff costs. However, if the recession were to continue in the long-term, then it is understood to be inevitable that cuts will need to be made to existing services.

In many institutions, there has been increased investment in IT infrastructure and systems in the past few years. This has been crucial in order to ensure that IT departments have been able to react to the change in how services are used by students as well as changes in technology.

'So the actual level of cash spend has been going up, not down.'

ICT, Russell Group (pre 92)

For those who haven't already increased spending, it is an area they highlighted as a priority, and are currently, or planning to increase spending on this.

'I've been granted several millions of pounds to do that upgrade over the next two years and I expect to be granted some further money to improve the disaster recovery position in the short-term.'

Converged service, Unclassified, University (pre 92)

One respondent felt that senior managers are now realising that IT services are an integral part of the successful functioning of universities and investment is a necessary thing. For this reason he had submitted a long-term spending plan which was accepted. He feels this has kept him away from the issues of having an annual budget approved.

'The funding has been put on a longer term basis, so we're not subject to the whims of an annual budgeting cycle as we were five years ago.'

ICT, Russell Group (pre 92)

Staffing

Almost all the IT departments we spoke to have been increasingly cautious about expanding the size of their payroll, as this represents a majority of their costs.

'It's (the financial downturn) perhaps increased our caution about expanding the size of our payroll...60% odd is payroll.'

Converged service, Unclassified, University (pre 92)

Before contemplating making cuts to the existing service most IT departments are, or are planning to, look at ways in which they can decrease their staffing costs. There is a feeling that in order to maintain existing services, and keep systems and networks running at an acceptable standard, it would be very difficult to drive down non-staff costs. IT departments are left with little alternative but to cut payroll which is why many institutions will have to look at redundancies.

'If universities are in a difficult situation they've got very little alternative but to cut payroll which is why universities in the country are looking at redundancies.'

Converged service, Unclassified, University (pre 92)

Currency fluctuations

Currency fluctuations have had a varying impact on IT departments although, unlike with library services, the effect on IT services is less clear-cut.

While the cost of technology has generally decreased over the past few years, prices have risen for certain services and equipment such as network switches and PC hardware. This is not exclusive to equipment and services purchased from abroad (US or Europe), but also applies to those who have suppliers based in the UK or who are invoiced in Sterling, as these suppliers often purchase their products from outside the UK. This means that any price rises due to the fluctuations in currency are being passed onto the IT departments who are forced into a position of negotiating for the best possible deal when purchasing.

'We've seen hardware costs go up by anything between 15% and 25%.'

ICT, Russell Group (pre 92)

'We just try and drive a harder bargain that's all.'

ICT, Million+, University (post 92)

Despite this, however, there is an appreciation that IT departments have been able to benefit from a strong pound over the past few years as they upgraded their university's hardware and software. Now that it is weak, it is seen as something which must be 'taken on the chin'.

'But basically we have to roll with it, there's not a lot we can do and the university will definitely take the attitude, well there are certain periods when the exchange rate's been in our favour.'

Converged service, Unclassified, University (pre 92)

'And remember, over the last sort of four or five years, it had actually climbed up from about \$1.50, \$1.60.'

ICT, Russell Group, University (pre 92)

For most IT departments, the general sense is that there is not much that can be done about currency fluctuations and any strategies to deal with them are left in the hands of the chief financial operator.

Solutions

IT staff

In order to mitigate for decreased budgets and before resorting to redundancies, IT departments are putting a freeze on all recruitment and are not covering posts when they become vacant unless there is an absolute necessity.

'We have frozen all recruitment; we're relying on natural wastage.'

ICT, Russell Group (pre 92)

'...there are plenty (of universities) that are not filling posts.'

Converged service, Unclassified, University (pre 92)

Another method being used to reduce staffing costs is looking at efficiencies, and identifying services that can be combined and reduce the number of staff needed.

'75% of our budget goes on staff, so if we can save on staff, if we can make things easier on the staff that's what we have to be concentrating on.'

ICT, Russell Group, University (pre 92)

'Well that is causing us as we restructure to look at the skills mix and what we need, and we are taking the opportunity, to be honest, to make sure we have the right structure and skills for the next long haul rather than just a short term tactical outcome.'

ICT, Russell Group, University (pre 92)

What is clear is that over the next few years there will be huge burdens on the payroll of the majority of IT departments and many are looking to restructure in order to manage through difficult financial times.

Development and maintenance

For most IT departments, if cuts are still required after making savings in the area of staffing costs, then they will need to look at planned future projects rather than targeting any existing operations. Many feel that maintaining existing services is crucial to keeping students and staff happy, as well as ensuring a good platform to work from when they eventually do come out of financial difficulties.

'If I've got to make some cuts it was likely to be in the areas of development rather than any maintaining existing operations.'

ICT, 1994 Group, University (pre 92)

Where additional cuts to non-staffing costs are necessary, rather than make cuts to entire services, many institutions are planning to assess the areas of upgrades and maintenance. This could be in the form of reducing the upgrading and maintenance cycle of items like network devices, PCs or software, for example. There is an acknowledgment, however, that this would result in less quality for the end user and the customers (students, staff) having to wait longer for improvements and installations of new technologies.

'This means there will be a reduction on the upgrading of and maintaining of things like network devices, PCs. For example, PCs we used to have on a four year replacement cycle, they're all going to a five year replacement cycle.'

ICT, Russell Group, University (pre 92)

Renegotiating contracts

Like libraries, some IT departments are looking to renegotiate existing contracts as a means of making efficiencies.

'We have a serviced, managed agreement for our networking, we're looking at renegotiating that. We're looking at renegotiating some of our telecommunications contracts in terms of a provision of service of fixed and mobile telephony and maintenance of our fixed and mobile telephony.'

ICT, Million+, University (post 92)

Prioritising services

One participant felt that it would not be sensible to make cuts to existing services, as this reduced quality would be difficult to explain and justify to the users creating an increased demand and reason for complaints. He feels it would be easier to justify (to users) if services were stopped entirely.

'There is no such thing as reduced quality because it just creates demand and complaints.'

ICT, Russell Group University (pre 92)

Overall, in the short term there will be a need to prioritise when looking at funding IT services and projects, as there is a feeling that there is always, and will continue to be, more demand than there is capacity to deliver.

'Do priority A over item B, because there's always more demand than there is a capacity to deliver.'

ICT, Russell Group, University (pre 92)

Best practice: centralisation

'The centralised single unit model (where the management of the services are centralised)... provides a much more robust platform for any organisation to work on. The HE sector is ten years behind industry in that regard. So, the benefits of scale, the purchasing power of putting it all together, and the cutting out of waste, how many people do we need to work on a desktop build? There's no point... in having 20 schools doing 20 different desktop builds, so this could saddle off a lot of waste, provide common systems, better admin and a clear common goal and direction...it's something I would advise every group to look at.'

Russell Group, University (pre 92)

Shared services and outsourced services

Unlike library services, IT departments are more inclined and are more likely to be open to sharing services due to their current participation in consortia and university-wide committees. Although they feel more inclined to share services, this strategy is not a direct response to the current economic downturn or as a way of saving. Again, this appears to be a reasonable extension of what they are already doing.

'Shared services on the IT side are less well developed in the sector but we do work (together) regionally in providing the network services. We work closely with [JANET] in the centre, (that's the JISC and the Research Council's funded body) and we act as a consortium there. But...we're in early days with things like shared data centres and stuff like that and this university is part of a HEFCE study for developing a model. We've been given money by HEFCE to develop that model over the next six months.'

Converged service, Unclassified, University (pre 92)

'I think there are opportunities [through sharing services], and this region's pretty good. NorMAN is a metropolitan area network, [which looks] at consolidating and finding common staff development, common seams, common procurement... I think there might be efficiencies [possibilities] there, particularly if we're all tightening down.'

Converged service, Million+, University (post 92)

Many IT departments are already making use of these existing networks, and in contrast to library services, there is little mention of sharing services within the institutions but are more focused on sharing with external bodies such as other universities in the area, participating in framework agreements and working with other national bodies.

“..we make full use of [JANET], which is a funded shared service. We obviously participate in UCAS, we participate in all sorts of framework agreements coming through from our purchasing consultant, which is a southern universities’ purchasing consortium. We use management consultancy services from SUMS, who are a management consultancy service who are wholly owned by a bit of the sector, and we’re one of the members, and so on. So we do quite a lot of things.”

ICT, 1994 Group, University (pre 92)

Best practice: working with other universities

This is an example of building on existing collaboration around network provision to move into new shared services, in this case data centres.

‘In North Yorkshire we have a very strong collaborative mechanism, we have a company called YHMAN Ltd, which stands for Yorkshire and Humber Metropolitan Area Network which is owned by eight universities in the area...one of the things we’re exploring at the moment is building on this to deliver other kinds of services, so one of the things we are looking at very strongly at the moment is the potential for sharing data centre space...if you take our eight universities, we all have at least two data centres, computer rooms with all our equipment in and these are very expensive to build and to run, at some point we’ll all run out of space. Plus we have got disaster recovery considerations, most of us, even if we’ve got two data centres they tend to be on the same campus, so from a disaster recovery point of view that doesn’t make a lot of sense because if we lose power supply or some sort of disaster throughout the campus we will lose everything. So both from a capacity point of view and from a disaster recovery point of view, universities, and this is true throughout the sector, are looking for new capacity in terms of data centres. Now it turns out that it’s actually cheaper to do this collaboratively than it is to build new capacity yourself independently on your own campus or somewhere else, and far cheaper than using a third party commercial data centre supplier of which there are quite a lot.’

Unclassified, University (pre 92)

Once a certain level of confidence is achieved with collaboration in relation to sharing services, institutions can develop and build on many other aspects of its service delivery, as most institutions do the same thing in IT terms (basic infrastructure, delivering applications, emails, etc.), and in many cases the same technology is also used, to there is a lot of scope for the development of shared services in the years to come.

Many IT departments also already outsource certain services, but there doesn’t appear to be a great feeling of urgency to look at outsourcing further in reaction to the economic downturn. Some feel that strategies need to be put in place and efficiencies need to be made as a matter of good business and should be part of any long-term business strategy.

‘I’m very familiar with what’s involved [with outsourced services] and what the benefits and the pitfalls might be, my perception is it’s not a silver bullet and generally if you’ve got a mess you’ve got to sort it out before you outsource anyway.’

ICT, Russell Group, University (pre 92)

'We are looking at outsourcing of services....but that's part of one's normal strategy going forward.'

ICT, Russell Group, University (pre 92)

One particularly strong example of an outsourced service that has made a direct, immediate impact is the out-of-hours maintenance of a helpdesk service:

Best practice: outsourced out-of-hours helpdesk

'We've outsourced the out-of-hours helpdesk and that's worked really well. And if I can give you an example, [for the] out of hours helpdesk we're paying £15,000 a year, [however] if myself and the director of library services were to provide that service [internally], it would cost us in excess of £100,000, therefore that's an additional service we've provided at much better value for money for the university.'

Million+, University (post 92)

Although there is currently no feeling of urgency, many do feel that there will be increased pressure to outsource services as a way of making efficiencies during the recession. Easy service targets could include student emails outsourced to commercial partners and some universities have already gone down this route.

'I think there's going to be increased attention paid to [outsourcing] in difficult economic times.'

Converged service, Unclassified, University (pre 92)

Green agenda

Many of the institutions are also aware of the green agenda which has been heavily discussed in the past few years, and this could have a potential impact in the near future. As there is more pressure to make services more economic, this is potentially an avenue which institutions are looking to pursue.

'...people are getting much more concerned about power consumption, there's going to become more pressure to make things economic. We're already seeing pressures towards things like home working, video conferencing is finally starting to take off.'

ICT, Russell Group, University (pre 92)

Some universities have gone as far as to have included this in their future investment strategies, and this potentially may save money in the long run and offset rising costs elsewhere.

'It's one of a number of major themes within our current IT investment strategy so we're looking at all sorts of measures which range from, at the high end, increasing in [server] virtualisation which saves costs, through to basic things like encouraging our PC suppliers or our hardware suppliers to make one visit rather than three visits, be more careful about the disposal of the equipment and as well as packaging.'

We're [also] doing stuff like automatic power down of all the computers on the network if no one's been logged into them for half an hour. You'd probably find in most universities [green computing] is quite a big theme at the moment.'

ICT, Russell Group, University (pre 92)

'The university is wholly committed to a sustainable policy. Our server infrastructure is at the moment being virtualised to reduce the number of physical servers by essentially two thirds. We also have very recently deployed software across our PC fleet which will basically automatically shut them down if they're not being used. We've also looked very closely at our recycling and waste disposal policy and made that as green as we can.'

ICT, Unclassified, University (pre 92)

Monitoring satisfaction and impacts on students

Many, but not all, of those we spoke to were aware of some institutional analysis carried out by their institutions looking into the impact of the current economic downturn. Most of this analysis is in relation to projections of funding and financial forecasts, and at least one respondent was aware of modelling which was carried out by the central finance office looking at various different financial scenarios. There were examples given whereby an institution has carried out analysis on the effects of the recession directly relating to the IT department.

'The university has done work on obviously projections about what, and the various scenarios about what the financial impact on the university might, the sort of announcements that HEFCE have made.'

Converged service, Unclassified, University (pre 92)

'We had a senior management study period into the impact of the recession. We have also partners with...the Regional Development Agency.'

Converged service, Unclassified, University (pre 92)

As with the library services, most IT departments have a 'system' of ongoing analysis in place. Most participants we spoke to referred to various 'tools' they use generally to gauge service usage and user experience throughout the academic year. This included monitoring use of systems and PCs.

'We monitor the numbers coming in, we monitor the use of our systems...'

ICT, Russell Group, University (pre 92)

In addition to this, many IT departments expressed an interest in doing something in the form of 'activity-based costing' or 'zero-based budgeting to see if they can isolate areas which are costing too much and where money can be saved. Zero-based budgeting here refers to the identification of a task or tasks and then finding resources to complete the task independent of current resourcing.

Best practice: Activity-based costing

'We've been doing a bit of work around activity-based costing that we think will be helpful when it comes to saying, if you spend this much on something, this is what you deliver for it, because in the IT area, in most organisations it is seen as a kind of black hole, and when we present things to senior management, no one really understands what on earth you are talking about.'

This approach makes the benefits of specific activities very clear and is a useful tool when planning for budgets. When prioritisation of service/activities is required, this will enable the decision makers to set clear plans and distinguish which activities are most cost effective.

'I'm quite interested in trying to translate costs of actual services...so at the moment I don't know exactly what it costs to run an email service in this university and I doubt that many of my peers in other universities do either because it's all mixed up in all sorts of things in the infrastructure....it is a fundamental problem I think that we don't know what services themselves cost, we know what all the hard bits, boxes, software and hardware cost at an individual level, but we are not very good at understanding what services cost.'

Unclassified, University (pre 92)

Many also indicated that resource planning and resource control tools would be useful as a way of making the IT department as efficient as possible. However, what is clear is that most feel that this is all business as usual and not something which is directly related to the economic downturn.