Convergence of libraries with other academic services

Prof. Mel Collier, Catholic University of Leuven
8th Bielefeld Conference, 8th February 2006
Convergence

Library and academic computing services, with or without other services, are brought together for managerial purposes under a single executive director recruited from a professional information background.
Historical sketch

- UK Learning resource centres: Brighton and Plymouth mid 1970’s
- CIO – Chief information officer concept in USA c. 1980: Columbia, Carnegie Mellon etc.
- UK convergence with computing centres: Plymouth, Salford, Stirling, De Montfort 1987-1989
- British Journal of Academic Librarianship special issue: 1988
Convergence in Europe

For the book *Managing academic support services in universities: the convergence experience*, ed T. Hanson, Facet Publishing 2005, includes:

- UK case studies
- Reviews of state of affairs in USA, Australia, Europe
- Cases of non-convergence or de-convergence
UK experience

- UK 2001: about 66 converged services
- Notable radical new structures: Birmingham, Hertfordshire
- Some examples of non- or de-convergence
- Opportunities:
  - Integrated strategic planning
  - Facilitates cross-cutting development, e.g. e-learning
  - Standardized approaches, good practice
  - Economies of scale, resource sharing
US experience

- Despite early adoption, convergence not as widespread as in UK, no dominant model
- Advantages:
  - Integrated user services
  - Synergies, flexibility, reduction of competition
  - Staff development
- Disadvantages:
  - Different cultures
  - Organisation too complex
  - No savings
  - Goals can be achieved without convergence
Australian experience

- Proportionately quite widespread, but
- Some examples of de-convergence
- Notable radical models: Melbourne, Newcastle, Australian National University
- Advantages:
  - Broader knowledge base of staff
  - Improved collaboration, innovation
  - Strategic thinking, institutional goals
  - Flexible use of resources
Models of convergence

Many and varied but broadly:

- Common reporting lines to executive board member, with or without good co-operation
- Strategic co-ordination under a common director
- Service-level convergence, possibly with re-defined roles, jobs and titles
Europe – approach of the study

- Hypothesis that convergence is rare in Europe outside UK
- Email survey to find examples of convergence
- Analysis of responses
- Confirm or negate the hypothesis and suggest reasons or conditions
Results

- About 15 known examples of convergence in some form, existing or in development
- Finland, Germany, Iceland, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland
- Definite nil return from certain countries: Belgium, Italy, France, Hungary. There are probably others.
Advantages

- Customer focus, common approach to quality control
- Service flexibility and multi-skilling
- Integrated planning
- Better technical approach and investment
- Operational cost savings
Difficulties

- Implementation requires much time and effort; most staff positive, some not
- Fear of change, loss of identity
- Culture differences between professional groups
- Seen as a centralising tendency, reducing service quality or power of faculty
- Much staff development needed
Instigation

- Nearly always a top-down initiative from University President or Executive Board
- Occasionally a co-operative initiative from the service heads themselves – e.g. Kuopio

Reflects experience in UK
Evaluation and feedback

- One institution has systematic evaluation processes
- Others have planned programmes
- Some were still in process of convergence and it was too early
Analysis

- Convergence in Europe outside UK is still extremely rare
- Two significant concentrations of activity: Finland and Germany
- Finland is a cohesive professional environment with well established levels of co-operation at national level (e.g. FinElib)
- German Research Foundation initiative

In these respects both show similarities with the UK environment
Why is it not happening?

- Devolved power (and financial control) of faculties
- Humboldt ideals of the unity of research, teaching and academic freedom
- Conservative attitudes or rigid regulatory structures
- Lack of strong professional cadres
- Drives for efficiency seen in UK not (yet) dominant in Europe
Conclusions

- Convergence in Europe is so rare as to be a negligible feature in information services development in higher education.

- Conditions appear not to be conducive:
  - powerful de-centralized administrations
  - rigid statutory frameworks
  - level of professionalization?

- Will it happen later?
- Does it matter?