

Weathering the Storm – Finding Solutions

Blog by Michelle Pauli

Word has got out! It's a packed room for Weathering the Storm, following yesterday's stimulating [Thunderbolts and Lightning](#), with over 50 people turning up and cramming in, rather than the expected 30. Everyone good-humouredly jostles for space and settles into groups in circles, each with their own flipchart.

It's going to be all about interaction and group work, says facilitator Catherine from [Meeting Magic](#), so laptops need to be put away. There is no revolt so clearly all the participants are already transfixed by the huge colourful posters that are wallpapering the room. These illustrate the 'thunderbolts' the smaller groups will be discussing over the session and coming up with solutions for. The solutions will be put to the bigger group and the best ones selected. The idea is to isolate the important issues affecting institutions and influence JISC resource decisions (where 'resource' is deliberately vague and means 'the whole shebang'). A few guidelines: keep it pertinent to JISC, when time is up it's up, the vote will go with the majority.

So, what are the issues? Each group will need to decide which two they want to work on, and then make a play for them. The issues (which emerged from yesterday's session) are:

- People - we need to invest in them. Reward and recognition. Retaining staff, rewarding researchers. Also about the students
- The three U's - useful, usable and used
- Getting and storing data - it's all about accessing the data: open data, open content, repositories
- Agile university - how do universities respond quickly and efficiently and in a cost-effective way in this time of change
- Shifting learning environments - we give students VLEs but when they get out of the university they never see a VLE again. What sort of learning environments should we give them? E-portfolios?
- Community university sector - it's all about collaboration and what we can do as a community and get together to work together

Groups made their bids for their preferred issues by a combination of cheering and leaping out of their seats. 'Community university sector' is the most popular. Least popular are 'shifting learning environment' and 'getting and storing data' but everyone plays nicely and all the issues get shared out because they are all deemed too important to be ignored.

The groups now have to get organised. Someone is nominated as 'recorder'. They have to be able to listen and they have to be able to write. The latter shouldn't be a problem but it's a lively session and the listening part could prove more tricky. We shall find out!

Each group has allotted times (in chunks of five minutes and 10 minutes) to unpack the solutions, find potential solutions, come up with recommended solutions and then pitch them.

The group nearest me has got off to a good start: "WHY did we choose this issue?" one member asks. Luckily, it gets the group going and they immediately start getting down to the issues. Five minutes in and all the groups are busily scribbling on the 'unpacking the issues' section of their flipcharts. Some fairly involved discussions are going on but one of the (many) valuable elements of the way this session is facilitated (and yesterday's sister session) is that timekeeping is strict and there's little tolerance for waffle.

While the groups discuss their respective issues, Meeting Magic's other facilitator, Katherine, is busy creating another one of their amazing 'graphic recordings'. She's preparing a representation of all the issues that will be used in the plenary at the end to record the solution the groups have devised.

There's ten minutes to go and all the groups are tackling their potential solutions. The 'community', 'agile' and 'learning' have come up with long lists but the 'data' and 'people' groups are taking a more...restrained approach. This may stand them in good stead, however, as the time approaches for the groups to whittle down their solutions to just two. The '3 Us' group, meanwhile, has taken a leaf out of the Meeting Magic book and is drawing their solution: a pair of nutcrackers to take to the monkey nut of their 'in a nutshell' problem.

Time is nearly up and all the flipcharts are completely covered in ideas, issues, solutions of varying degrees of seriousness (the nutcracker has been joined by a hammer). The timer is being prepared as the participants will shortly be given just two minutes to pitch their recommended solution.

First up, the 3Us with their solutions:

1. fast prototyping and staged funding: smaller things and quicker things - rather than years of funding, get three months then another three months and so on.
2. Intelligent monitoring and community engagement

Number one - fast prototyping and staged funding - swung it for the rest of the room.

Now the 'agile university' group. There's lots on their board. In a nutshell: universities need to be agile to meet their changing business needs and this means different things across the sector and this is a challenge. Their solutions?

1. joint programmes with professional associations
2. imaginative ways to incentivise and reward agility and innovation eg JISC Innovation Fellows - JIFs!

This last suggestion elicits lots of 'oohs' from the audience and clearly gets the vote.

Things now take a Monty Python turn as the 'Community university sector' group introduces the concept of The Pizza of Truth (prompting room-wide chants of All Hail the Pizza of Truth at every mention). It's a little difficult to grasp this group's 'in a nutshell' as laughter and mass chanting takes over but the essence is that institutions are all different and there is a complexity in the difference but we need to embrace that variety. A pizza may have the same bread base but can have a variety of different toppings. The solution is to provide funding for projects and events, getting people together. "The Pizza of Truth is greater than the individual slices"! declares David Kernohan and the group gets a final cheer.

It all calms down as the 'Shifting learning environment' group ask 'How relevant is the learning environment?' They propose two solutions: whatever the learning environment systems may be, we need to exploit the open sharing mechanisms through things like tagging, semantic web. Second, mandate OER, ideally globally. The second wins by a long shot.

Next up, the 'It's about people' group. In a nutshell, a university is a community of people and that is what defines them. There is a need for new skills: project management, change management, leadership. Get the best out of staff and they will get the best out of students. Solution: firstly, leadership, really put people at the centre. Secondly, liberate staff and empower them to develop themselves by minimising the daily grind. Number two wins.

Finally, the 'data' group. We're in a data-driven age but who stores which data when and how? There is a lifecycle of research and have to think how to best reward and recognise staff and researchers and incentivise so they can look after their data better for re-use. Solution: full-scale cultural change. This is broken down into two levels: national coordination and planning; also data planning at the conceptualisation stage of planning. Top down or bottom up or both? It has to both equally is the verdict in the room.

"Six powerful conversations!" enthuses Catherine as the session draws to a close. It's been an intense 80 minutes but the participants filing out for lunch seem energised rather exhausted by the process and are keen to follow up the discussion by sharing the outputs. Catherine promises to capture it all - digital images of all the Thunderbolts and Lightning will be posted on the cloud and 'magic' will be worked on the six Weathering the Storm issues, applying software to make them available as a presentation and as jpeg images. Outputs for yesterday's session are already available.