

## What is Flexible Service Delivery?

Flexible Service Delivery is about UK colleges and universities making efficiency savings and improving agility through business process improvement and effective integration and sharing of their information systems that support their essential administrative services. This change initiative is also about streamlining service provision and considering new modes of delivery, such as shared services, while avoiding unpopular cuts in essential services.

The investigation into shared services is also of interest politically as colleges and universities look to meet government targets. It is likely that the level of interest in the shared services agenda will only increase.

The need to talk to suppliers collectively was evident from the outset of the programme. Most systems used by colleges and universities, that could become either shared or disaggregated as flexible services, are provided by major suppliers and any change must involve these suppliers to be successful.

JISC is supporting an active community of over 30 UK colleges and universities to progress this initiative through its Flexible Service Delivery programme.

## What does the sector want from suppliers?

### A more granular and flexible market

The generic nature of supplier-led corporate information systems makes it difficult to achieve a perfect match for all institutions. For example, some institutions have chosen to commission bespoke modules for certain processes even though similar functionality exists in their current business systems. If suppliers disaggregate their systems into suites of interoperable modules, institutions may then be able to select 'best of breed' at a modular level, and choose to switch between supplier offerings to meet changing institutional needs and priorities.

Suppliers need to be able to offer more flexible, granular and interoperable products to institutions that are unable to commit to the current major system suites due to their reduced ICT budgets. This will also allow institutions to phase the replacement of business systems, spreading the capital cost over a number of years.

*'In these financially difficult and uncertain times, it will be important for institutions to maximise their investments in legacy systems, as the chances of multi-million pound replacement programmes are unlikely; systems will need to be replaced gradually, with a focus on smaller niche areas without having to replace the whole. All the while, student expectations continue to rise and it will be important that institutions remain competitive and are able to respond to demand.'*

**Chris Cobb, Pro-Vice Chancellor, Roehampton University, and Chair of the Flexible Service Delivery Programme Steering Group**

### Improved business processes and integration of data

The cost of integrating disparate information systems such as library management, virtual learning, finance, student records and timetabling is high. Often, these products have overlapping functionality, for example fee billing can be part of a student record system or a finance system. The programme seeks to reduce this burden and improve interoperability by encouraging the adoption of standards and increasing supplier interaction.

Unlocking data and 'service enabling' information systems will also allow senior managers to have improved access to information across their systems. This will support intelligent decision-making in an increasingly competitive, resource-restricted environment.

### Progress on the HEFCE Shared Service agenda

Institutions can explore the practicalities and achieve cost savings through operating or outsourcing certain activities and functions as a shared service, which are currently offered through duplicated and expensive systems.

## How suppliers can help

Suppliers can work in partnership with UK colleges and universities to undertake three broad types of pilot activity:

### Product modularisation and standards development

Where a consortium of UK colleges and universities work with a chosen supplier(s) on disaggregating their existing product suite and making certain functionalities available as interoperable web-based services and modules. So that the solutions are truly interoperable, the interfaces would need to be based on open standards. These can be combined with new software supply models to support flexible modes of service provision. One of the anticipated benefits of this activity is to enable existing applications to become open to combination and allow for re-use of common data and software in different ways at lower costs. This would deliver the flexibility to meet new business requirements without the need to acquire bespoke packages. This type of activity is likely to be of interest to suppliers that offer large-scale products and have an established market share.

### Interoperability and SOA implementation

Where an individual college or university addresses a particular interoperability issue between two or more disparate systems. This is to be done within the broader context of a service-oriented approach and open standards development. It could also involve the use of web service interfaces and Enterprise Service Bus (ESB) middleware to build an interoperability layer over existing major systems. The principle benefits are improved sharing of information across systems, internally within an institution, and potential shared service implementations.

## UCISA and Flexible Service Delivery

UCISA's role within the JISC Flexible Service Delivery programme is to provide a further link to the higher education IT community and commercial suppliers. Peter Tinson, UCISA Executive Secretary, notes that

*'By disaggregating their applications, suppliers open up opportunities to market discrete components of their systems beyond their existing customer base. They are aware of the economic pressures our sector is under, and see mutual benefits in developing modular and interoperable products and services for UK colleges and universities.'*



*'The Flexible Service Delivery programme is JISC's first attempt at engaging with suppliers on a more strategic level. It is anticipated that it will provide a template for similar programmes in other areas. Consistency in communication with suppliers is particularly important at a time when the further and higher education landscape is changing and when public sector expenditure is under increasing scrutiny.'*

**Dr John Wallace, JISC Industry Liaison Manager**

### Piloting Shared Services

Where a consortium of UK colleges and universities explore the practicalities of operating or outsourcing certain activities and functions as a shared service across institutions. Shared service developments will be around a given product, looking at offering core functionality or extensions to the standard functionality as generic shared services.

## JISC's work with industry

JISC wishes to work effectively with suppliers (commercial and not-for-profit) to provide UK colleges and universities with the best possible choice of systems that will meet and anticipate their current and future needs.

JISC believes that through its reputation for neutrality, together with its relationships with and understanding of the UK further and higher education sector, it can work as an honest broker between suppliers and institutions, helping them to communicate and collaborate more effectively. In all our dealings with suppliers we remain neutral consistent and transparent.

This briefing paper was written by Alex Hawker, Flexible Service Delivery programme manager, and Dr John Wallace, JISC Industry Liaison Manager.

Alternative formats of this briefing paper can be found at: [www.jisc.ac.uk/publications](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/publications)

## Further Information

Flexible Service Delivery Programme  
[www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/flexible-service-delivery](http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/flexible-service-delivery)

JISC's Industry Liaison Policy  
[www.jisc.ac.uk/aboutus/industry](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/aboutus/industry)