

What is Flexible Service Delivery?

Briefing paper

Version 2: March 2010

Introducing flexible service delivery

Flexible Service Delivery is about UK colleges and universities making efficiency savings and improving institutional agility through business process improvement, effective integration and sharing of their information systems. 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.

By unlocking data and 'service enabling' information systems – such as research management, virtual learning, finance, student records and timetabling – and optimising business processes, institutions can:

- Make efficiency savings by business process optimisation and sharing of data, systems and services within and across institutional boundaries
- Improve access and management of corporate and student information to support confident decision-making
- Become more agile and responsive to changing demands and priorities
- Improve the student experience by offering more flexible and seamless services

Why JISC believes flexible service delivery is important today

Alex Hawker, programme manager at JISC, says: "At a time when the further and higher education landscape is changing and when public sector expenditure is under increasing scrutiny there is a need to do more for less and to find cost effective ways of sharing information which is currently locked in their administrative and learning systems."

Demand to deliver more for less: institutions are seeking greater efficiencies due to significant budget cuts, whilst students' expectations for service provision continue to rise and they are seeking greater value for money.

Demand for flexible learning: which requires systems and processes that can continuously keep pace with changing requirements and priorities.

Streamlining service provision and saving money while avoiding unpopular cuts in essential services

There is an active flexible service delivery community with over 30 further and higher education institutions sharing knowledge and experience

Demand for better business intelligence and decision support:

for senior managers, the focus is on improved access to and exploitation of data across their corporate information systems. This enables them to measure performance, discover trends, provide insights and deliver findings for rapid, intelligent decision making. This also enables institutions to meet the changing requirements of government and funding bodies to report, document and monitor financial, demographic and educational information.

Shared Services on the UK higher education political agenda:

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 service agenda will only increase.

A changing and increasingly competitive environment:

institutions need to be responsive to changing priorities shaped by both internal and external drivers and need systems and processes that can keep pace with rapid change.

What problems could a flexible service delivery solution solve?

Disparate and overlapping products with long-term supplier lock-in

Most information systems used by colleges and universities are provided by a relatively small number of large companies. The generic and inflexible nature of supplier-led corporate information systems makes it difficult to achieve a perfect match for all institutions, where institutions typically choose to commission bespoke modules for certain processes even though similar functionality exists in their current business systems. For example, fee billing can be part of a student record systems or a finance system. Maintenance is often expensive in terms of ongoing support and licence costs. Long term supplier lock-in also means that service provision may lack the flexibility to keep pace with changing demands and priorities.

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Data and process integration issues

Due to the lack of open standards, data is often locked into a single system and is therefore not sharable or easily exploitable. The same data is often maintained across different systems making it very difficult to access information for decision-making. Bespoke software is typically used to join different applications and data sources together – the ‘spaghetti’ of integration – and so the cost of integrating disparate information systems is high. System users often face frustration and carry out ineffective and expensive practices around the manual manipulation of data between systems. Poor integration also introduces errors and inefficiencies associated with duplication of effort.

Supporting a flexible and cost effective approach to service delivery

To facilitate this initiative, JISC has launched the Flexible Service Delivery programme, which runs from July 2009 to May 2011. This change programme offers help and support to those involved in strategic and IT management in navigating through the steps needed to better integrate and share their information systems and optimise their business processes through flexible service delivery. It is also of interest to suppliers who wish to be responsive to the changing needs of the sector, and provide competitive, flexible and ‘best of breed’ modularised software packages as part of a mixed economy.

There is an active flexible service delivery community in further and higher education, involving over 30 institutions. Most of these are participating in the programme through the delivery of pathfinder and pilot projects.

Pathfinder projects

Pathfinder projects are leading the way by identifying and progressing through the stages that institutions will need to go through to support the organisational and process change needed to improve service delivery and flexibility and to reduce costs.

Pilot projects

The pilot projects are working with suppliers and are testing the practicalities of operating particular functions as shared services across institutional consortia.

Adopting flexible service delivery

The programme has defined four key building blocks in the process of adopting flexible service delivery:

Senior management buy-in

With the economic pressures the sector is under it is especially important to establish the business case for adoption that can be presented to senior institutional management. Like any kind of change process, investment in flexible service delivery must be guided by strategic priorities and demonstrate a measurable impact.

Supporting organisational change and improvement, and aligning ICT strategy and implementation with organisational strategy

Cost baselining and process modelling

Knowing how to assess the cost of running current systems, services and processes is essential. Only with this baseline information are institutions able to work out where cost savings and process improvements can be made with implementing any type of change involving ICT.

Service-enabling disparate legacy systems

To be able to address interoperability issues between two or more disparate systems within the broader context of a service-oriented approach and open standards development. It could involve the use of web service interfaces and Enterprise Service Bus (ESB) middleware to build an interoperability layer over existing major systems. These developments will allow for improved sharing of information and services across systems, both within and across institutional boundaries.

Opening up the market

Flexible service delivery has the potential to unlock the current market inertia of single supplier solutions, where:

- Existing information systems become broken down – or disaggregated – into distinct modules or units of functionality, using open standards, and choreographed to support defined processes. This approach is intended to enable existing applications to become open to combination and allow for re-use of common data and software in different ways at much lower costs. It enables institutions to select ‘best of breed’ at the modular level and phase the replacement of systems, spreading the capital costs over a number of years.
- Suppliers make available new software supplier models that support flexible and shared service arrangements so that institutions can choose to switch between supplier offerings to meet changing needs and priorities.

This briefing paper was written by Alex Hawker, Flexible Service Delivery programme manager.

Alternative formats of this briefing paper can be found at:
www.jisc.ac.uk/publications

Further Information

Flexible Service Delivery programme
www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/flexibleservicedelivery

Enterprise Architecture Information Portal
www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/flexible-service-delivery/ea

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