



PARTNERSHIPS: FINDING COMMON GROUND ACROSS THE SECTORS

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This paper identifies the factors influencing the establishment of partnerships and discusses some of the initiatives taking place, particularly in the FE and HE sectors in Staffordshire.

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Introduction

There are many contextual factors that influence partnerships and I will begin by summarising the key issues.

Firstly, libraries today are all hybrid. We all use electronic information in various ways and we all use the web for various purposes. These changes have come about relatively rapidly and will continue, particularly if the dreams of Tim Berners-Lee (the “inventor” of the web) and his colleagues are to be realised in the “semantic web” of the future.

We also have a government which sees the economy of the country as being or becoming a knowledge economy. The government also wishes to promote citizenship, IT skills and e-government in all forms. It has changed and is still changing education at all levels. The Learning and Skills Councils (LSC) have appeared, replacing the Further Education Funding Council, and as Brian Sanderson, the Chairman of LSC, has clearly indicated¹ the boundaries between post-16 education, private providers, further education and higher education “are expected” to be blurred. In the same article he also made clear that another expectation would be strong regional alliances.

Such alliances are influencing our own sector with the creation of Re:Source and the Single Regional Agencies. In my local region, we have for a number of years had The Libraries Partnership – West Midlands (TLP-WM) (<http://www.tlp-wm.org.uk>). This group is now likely to become the executive support arm of the new Single Regional Agency. The new Agency will be at least twice as big again with a number and range of government agencies involved.

Collaboration

In this context, what of partnership? On what should our

collaborations be based? There are a number of potential areas for collaboration, for instance: citizenship; widening participation; lifelong learning; literacy. Significantly these terms will be familiar to most LIS sectors, which was not the case three or so years ago – a clear signal of some of the political drivers pushing us all together.

Do we have any decent models of collaboration already? I have always taken the pragmatic view that to collaborate you must have some form of common agenda. Political drivers provide some of the impetus, but common purpose provides the meat on the bones. The most appropriate phrase I know is that composed for the Consortium of Academic Libraries in Manchester (CALIM) – mutual self interest. Our shared situation is interesting. We all, except for the very lucky few, have declining budgets. Our staff are a valuable, indeed essential, but costly resource. “More with less” is the practical driver for change whilst, of course, simultaneously preserving quality and providing greater access to resources and services. Naturally this must be over 24 hours, and for HE providers this is also likely to be overseas and in partnership with overseas providers!

Staffordshire University Regional Federation

Let us move on to a practical example. The Staffordshire University Regional Federation (SURF) comprises nine FE Colleges from Staffordshire and two FE Colleges from Shropshire. The significant feature of the Federation is that it is a strategic partnership to deliver post-16 education and represents a federation of equal partners. The University, while of course being the single largest institution in the Federation, does not take the dominant role – this is partly why it works well. SURF is organised via a management board (unfortunately called the SURF Board!) comprising the College Principals, chaired by the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) at Staffordshire University. Meetings are usually held on University premises and have been best described as “interesting”. However, the significant point here is that great progress has been made in actively working together on a number of initiatives. A formal agreement, signed by each institution, exists and both HEFCE and

the government regard and fund SURF as an “entity”. The choice of Colleges involved in the Federation was broadly based on the “old” franchising model, but again significantly the method of operation is now quite different and in many ways more challenging but more mutually beneficial than was the case previously. There are a number of advantages to the federation model. Firstly, economy of scale of the operations is valuable, particularly, for example, in some of the complex and top-heavy quality assurance processes currently required. Size and partnership also provide many ways of improving access to external funding and funding for new initiatives. There are also improvements overall in access to post-16 education, because in many ways we do not operate in quite such a competitive mode as previously. There are other foundations which have been very helpful, notably the CENTEXT ICT broadband network, created by the University with the aid of European funding. This is partly shared by the Federation and represents our local highway for communication. We also share what is now referred to as “traditional” as well as electronic learning of all kinds.

Staffordshire University Library and Learning Resources Service

SURF has created a number of cross federation groups including one for libraries. While it has taken time, we have made some progress, albeit in fairly obvious areas such as shared library data (with an appropriate confidentiality agreement), access to some resources, shared training and development and some sharing of staff expertise. We have the potential to share more through a new initiative launched in Staffordshire University Library and Learning Resources Service (SULLRS) in October 2001. This initiative, called Off Campus, has multiple targets. Initially it aims to support staff and students we do not see – whether they be in Beijing or Cannock Chase. We have naturally borrowed from all the existing models out there to create this service, including the Open University, as we saw little or no point in reinventing wheels unnecessarily. We developed the initiative to support those we did not see. But

we clearly recognised the potential for it to develop to support everyone in the Federation. The current limited trial is using a web-based portal to provide some support, advice and access. In the summer of 2002 we will have moved to incorporate a shared content management system (incidentally provided by the Esprit Soutron Software company under another partnership agreement with SULLRS). At this time we will probably also give the initiative a new name, as Off Campus will have served its initial purpose. When we have completed the initial implementation and trials we will also begin to explore real-time referencing, initially employing chat lines. The potential of this is fairly obvious for supporting out-of-hours access to information, but it also offers the potential for flexible employment options, which I believe will be a key for future development and growth.

Content management

Why is content management important in this partnership development? It provides a very useful approach to providing common access to specific content while allowing local reference points to retain and develop their own identity, their own "look and feel". It also helps to overcome some of the barriers inherent in multiple library management systems. Using content management, the Federation partners will contribute and maintain a central knowledge base using common standards and access with multiple input – hopefully ensuring entry is done once rather than twelve times! This is a simple expansion of the shared cataloguing ethos that has been with us for many years. However, in this case it is applied to a piece of content which could, for example, be a frequently asked question (FAQ), or a exemplar solution to a complex query or simply a piece of shared electronic information. For me this has real advantages in that we can concentrate on the exploitation of resources and the value this adds to the educational and learning processes of our core clients. However, I fully appreciate that I have simplified the complexities of initial organisation, mainly because I think they are a matter of time and development rather than real barriers to achieving common access to content. We do not have to reinvent the same key piece of

content several times but can share it. We have not created any artificial barriers or boundaries and also not reinvented any wheels – however, we have encouraged and facilitated local reference points managing that content in whatever way they feel is appropriate to their client base.

There are challenges inherent in this model of working and partnership – it is different in that we have deliberately seen boundaries as opportunities rather than end points. However, I believe it is different mainly from a librarian's perspective than any other. Users are happy to get information and support from wherever they can – the easier to use and access the better. It is also a model that means any college, any member of our Federation, of whatever size, can make a contribution to the whole. The scale of operation is not relevant, as all the contributions to the knowledge base are required locally. If others within the Federation benefit from them as well then this is the contribution to partnership that we all make.

Challenges

There are pitfalls of course. We have yet to buy much e-resource. Suppliers out there please help. We want to buy as a Federation, we do not mind the local differentiation in costs (HE pays three times more than FE, for example) but we wish to buy as a Federation. To date we have not been able to broker any of the key products we want. The type of Federation we represent will not be original in the future and it is in the best interests of suppliers to recognise this quickly and work with us. If the government and HEFCE can recognise us as a single entity then please do so as well – quickly!

We also have key challenges with ensuring systems integrity and interoperability. Content management systems have the potential to help, particularly in relation to overcoming barriers between library management systems, but cannot assist in such areas as virtual learning environments. However, Staffordshire is involved in active research on this issue which looks promising for the future. The ability to share chunks of learning and to use them to create or redevelop learning opportunities is the ultimate goal of this work.

Further potential

Does this model of partnership and resource sharing have any potential outside education? SULLRS has over the past two years signed a formal partnership agreement with Staffordshire Library and Information Service (SLIS) – the public library in Staffordshire. Our partnership agreement clearly outlines our intention to share resources and staffing across the county. At present we intend to use Lichfield public library as an exemplar site for this partnership, mainly because of the proximity to Staffordshire's Lichfield campus – interestingly also shared with Tamworth and Lichfield College. Very recently we reached an agreement with the cabinet of the County Council to create an integrated and innovative social and learning space in Lichfield Public Library which will become a one stop shop for learning. Naturally we have a vision for the centre! In fact it was this vision which sold the ideas to the County Council under the careful and expert navigation of the previous County Librarian, Margaret Keeling, and her successor Olivia Spencer. We have together recognised that we have lots of elements in common but also clearly seen where we are different. For example, as a public library service SLIS are committed to providing information and often provide answers to queries. As a University and educational institution SULLRS does not necessarily provide answers but is very likely to provide multiple routes to an answer which the student can subsequently explore on their own and as part of their educational process. Nevertheless we have a clear commitment to each other and this is beginning to bear fruit in the planning stages.

Of course we will be open to all, and the Off Campus service and content management will

play key roles in allowing shared but individualised content for all partners. In future we will also be providing shared staffing and a variety of learning environments to suit all kinds of learning style. We are fortunate that Staffordshire have also relocated other key services into the same space envelope, such as the careers service ("Connexions"). We regard this as an exciting and innovative opportunity and also as a potential model for the future across the UK.

So what are the barriers to partnership? We can and have found common agendas, and are beginning to find ways of undertaking those agendas in partnership. Human issues are often the biggest barrier – we are different because – we don't do it that way – we must be different because – are all phrases which have re-occurred more than once in this process. My question is always – why? As a profession we can sometimes stick our heads in the sand – we nearly missed the boat with the web and did not initially provide our desperately required skills in organising web-based knowledge and information. We are beginning to do so. Having said that, why are so many web administrators not librarians or have library skills and qualifications? Let us not miss the boat with partnership. Partnership allows each of us to concentrate on what we do best, what is unique to our particular part of the sector. So – share what you can and then assert your individuality over the parts that are unique to you. See boundaries as opportunities and take a few calculated risks.

Reference

1. Tysome, T. LSC: Let's blur boundaries. *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 5th April 2002.