LIBRARY SERVICES PLATFORMS
What does it mean to share?

An Innovative Conversation by David Kay, Owen Stephens and Annette DeNoyer   **JANUARY 2014**

In November 2013, we spoke to library leaders at two Scottish universities using Innovative systems, each with an active interest in sharing library services platforms with partner institutions:

Alun Hughes, Director of Learning & Information Services at the University of the Highlands and Islands;

Anna Enos, Systems Librarian for the Rowan Partnership;

Mark Toole, Director of Information Services at the University of Stirling; and

Colin Sinclair, Library Content Manager at the University of Stirling

The University of Highlands and Islands (UHI) comprises 13 partner institutions spread over the mainland and islands in the north of Scotland. The partnership developed over two decades prior to being awarded university status in February 2011. In 2012, UHI entered a wider shared service by forming the Rowan consortium with the University of the West of Scotland (UWS) and Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) in order to create a single library services platform on Innovative systems, which launched in Spring 2013.

SRUC, Stirling, UHI and UWS are all members of the Scottish Confederation of University and Research Libraries (SCURL)[1], which include 17 Higher Education libraries and the National Library of Scotland. They have also played leading roles within the Scottish Further and Higher Education communities to envision and develop IT-enabled shared services more broadly.

This conversation is animated by the geographic and cultural potential for developing shared services in Scotland, not only for libraries and but also across the wider IT services landscape. However, these practical reflections from Stirling and UHI may interest any library considering the case for a shared 'library management system' or 'library service platform.'

SOME BACKGROUND

As emphasised in the Innovative White Paper, the idea of shared services is far from new to libraries when discussing resource sharing (inter-lending, last copy services) or shared infrastructure and cloud services support.

However, much less attention is given to sharing the core library management system (whether you refer to it as ILS, LMS or some other acronym). There may be a sense that the core library system contains all that remains local – not least of which is the print collection, user details, and financial transactions – and therefore represents the unlikely prospects and highest risks for sharing.

To some extent, such perspectives are being challenged recently by the re-envisioning of traditional management functions as parts of a unified library services platform. Nevertheless, the case for extending such sharing beyond a common technical platform (Software as a Service in a private cloud) is not widely established.

Scotlandis in a strong position in this respect. Following John McClelland's Review of ICT Infrastructure in the Public Sector in Scotland (June 2011), Scottish government policy endorses the principle of shared services across the public realm and regards universities as well placed to take a lead. In 2011, the HEIDS report[2] for the Scottish Funding Council set out a shared services roadmap for the university and college sector, identifying learning and library services as early opportunities. Meanwhile, the Scottish Confederation of University and Research Libraries (SCURL) has been successfully working to develop shared electronic collections across Scotland, initially with journals and now for books.

1 http://scurl.ac.uk

2 http://www.heids.ac.uk/reports/

Politics, economic opportunities, and collection development experience have coincided to suggest it is time to review how this emerging Scottish collection may be managed more effectively – encouraged by the sense that the current library systems in most institutions are in an 'end-of-life' phase.

Regardless of the particulars of the Scottish position, library managers face the same fundamental questions:

- **Where are effort and assets wastefully duplicated across libraries?**
- **Where are skills at a premium?**
- **What might be the unexpected outcomes or unintended consequences of sharing systems, data or effort?**
- **Which, if any, library functions are inappropriate for shared activity?**
- **Does scale, large or small, reduce the likely benefits of sharing?**
- **Might the overhead of governance outweigh the value of the outcomes?**

SERVICE PROPOSITIONS

As illustrated by the work of the London-based Bloomsbury group of libraries and the WHELF consortium in Wales[3], the adoption and development of a shared platform can cover a wide variety of options that range from working together on procurement to acquiring a common platform, from sharing data to jointly undertaking everyday library tasks.

We explore here the opportunities for sharing a library service platform, and especially the core management systems, in four respects:

- **The basis for partnership**
- **The extent of sharing**
- **The business case**
- **The management of risk**

The basis for partnership

Our conversations with four Scottish library leaders confirmed that existing partnership vehicles and effective collaborative track records are major assets in the evolution of shared services in Scotland.

Alun Hughes came to UHI with prior experiences of shared academic library services in Wales, which taught the importance of striking a crucial balance between trust and governance; his preference for Rowan is 'to establish a way of working that enables partners to consider opportunities on a case by case basis, to let the journey unfold naturally, rather than creating a weighty "just in case" governance mechanism.' The Scottish experience to date suggests that opportunity arises from the moment of stepping out on the

wire, not without a net but certainly avoiding debilitating levels of risk management.

The Rowan governance model is based on a Steering Group of library directors and an Operations Group led by the shared Systems Librarian. Alun recognizes that 'whilst individual director relationships provide essential glue, real collaboration on the ground is the key to sustainability based on tangible everyday practice and benefits.'

SCURL's interest in systems opportunities evolves from successful collaborations over content licensing and from the work of the Scottish Digital Library Consortium[4] in shared procurement of library systems, discovery services and institutional repositories. As Mark Toole points out, 'The partnership vehicle already exists in SCURL, and our existing electronic content deals raise the possibility of adopting shared workflows to support that content.'

Unlike Rowan, where Innovative was already in place as systems supplier, a shared Scotland-wide system for SCURL implies a major procurement exercise. This opportunity has been seized upon as a valuable platform for developing the shared vision and for identifying the initial target services and associated business use cases.

As Mark emphasizes, 'This process is a crucial opportunity to engage with the full range of stakeholders, leaders, and users at both national and institutional levels, something we started in the six-month Benefits of Sharing project'. [5]

Alun highlights the nature of the sharing ecosystem, that once shared services are embraced as feasible options, it is in the nature of partnership development that overlapping combinations of 'sharing-inclined' libraries will emerge to cover different objectives. For example, Alun reminds us, 'The Rowan partnership is both locally self-contained and yet also involved in and supportive of the Scotland-wide options being explored by SCURL.'

The extent of sharing

The Rowan Partnership shares a single instance of the Innovative Millennium system, including a common bibliographic database. This shared system opens up efficiencies ranging from managing the catalogue to optimizing resource discovery. Being a group of small libraries, the potential for sharing knowledge and working together to get more done are central to the proposition. As relationships develop, Anna predicts that 'further opportunities will open up in areas such as license and digitization management, subject network support, and information literacy promotion.'

The SCURL Library Services Platform task force is currently developing a vision document describing its aspirations. Whilst SCURL considers sharing systems on a much wider basis across Scotland, there is a close mapping of focus with Rowan. The Benefits of Sharing report emphasizes the value of a shared bibliographic database and of sharing technical development and support, concluding that 'from a systems perspective, sharing technical infrastructure and

3   http://lmsguidance.jiscinvolve.org/wp/methods-toolbox/shared-services-spectrum/

4   http://www.sdlc.ed.ac.uk/aboutus.html
5   http://libraryblogs.is.ed.ac.uk/benefitsofsharing/

support structures would offer benefits of economies of scale, with more efficient use of staffing and greater expertise than any single library could offer.'

The business case

The three Rowan partners represent 15 libraries with three library systems and 750,000 items. The core drivers were operational. Anna reflects that the key pain points included 'separate system costs, outdated working practices, cataloguing overlaps and inefficiencies, and developing the pool of knowledge and skills required by each library.' In this context, appointing a full-time library systems manager seeded the growth of Rowan.

As Alun emphasizes, filling a major skills and capacity gap beyond the reach of the individual partners has proved more significant than any direct cost savings, potentially laying the foundation for—rather than undercutting—downstream efficiency and effectiveness gains.

'Our approach has been to put the basics in place and to see how the journey progresses across a range of possibilities, which means being open to opportunity and momentum rather than tied to a rigid plan,' Alun states.

For SCURL, a strategic national vision has been crucial. E-resource licensing involving all Scottish universities and the National Library of Scotland has animated the ambitions for the Scottish Higher Education Digital Library (SHEDL). Looking forward, a realistic opportunity exists to build on that foundation to create a national collection that serves not only Higher Education but also Further Education, where sector consolidation should make such opportunities more realizable.

Beneath that national vision, the everyday management opportunities are just as practical as they are for Rowan, starting with the opportunity to rationalize the management and delivery of shared content. As Colin points out, 'We all know we are doing the same things with the same subscribed titles, so there is a strong practical case for adopting the same workflows, thus opening up the possibility of sharing the effort.'

The management of risk

Experience suggests that imagined and real risk can be somewhat different beasts. For example, understandable fears of job losses across the Rowan libraries are in contrast to the reality that the partnership has created a major new post. Indeed it may be argued more generally across UK academic libraries that sharing services is a means for already reduced teams to address key business goals for which they are locally under-resourced, such as management of e-resources.

However, very real risks exist. Alun reflects, 'The size of the grouping is crucial because successful change across traditional boundaries depends on individual buy-in and trust at both management and operational levels.'

Likewise, Mark recognizes that the SCURL opportunity may be most fully realized if institutions are able to opt in at their own pace, which will require skillful framing of the procurement process.

Balancing the interests and cultural differences between large and small libraries across differing mission groups is also high on the risk register for any Scotland-wide initiative. This concern will undoubtedly come to the forefront with the challenge of agreeing upon a workable model for a shared bibliographic database. However, the existing commitments to managing e-resource subscriptions offer crucial common ground.

Mark and Alun agree that the scale of any shared management system project represents the key risk and Colin emphasizes that 'an organic approach is most realistic, with early adopters paving the way for the addition of other partners to come on board more gradually.'

Successful implementation extends beyond the management of installation and data loads; the crucial step is to engineer what Mark calls 'the intersection between shared workflows and the enterprise' (ID management, student registry, financials). This requirement undeniably calls for new sunk investment in a multi-year project. At the scale of Rowan, this challenge was positively offset by the highly valued system manager role. For SCURL, the challenge is much larger and might best articulated on basis of achieving Scotland-wide benefits, recognizing especially the importance of the National Library in this equation, not least in respect of maximising the benefits of a shared bibliographic database.

Alun also reminds us that the flexibility of the system provider will be crucial – not just in terms of pricing (of course) but also in the variety of integration and sharing models supported by the software. The mandatory requirements, the operational starting points, and the granularity of sharing will differ from consortium to consortium, as we see clearly in comparing Rowan with SCURL. For complex consortia, the most attractive systems proposition will likely be one with APIs and openness so that the partners may shape it themselves.

INNOVATIVE RESPONSE

We spoke to Sarah Hickman-Auger (Senior Product Manager) about Innovative's vision for the potential demands on a shared library service platform.

I suspect the most significant driver is not what can be done by sharing hardware and software in the cloud. While that represents some economies and efficiencies, my observation is that the real game changer is the move to electronic collections.

—Sarah Hickman-Auger, Senior Product Manager, Innovative

The idea of sharing a management system is not new for public libraries or for groupings of universities and colleges. Over the years, both the Millennium system and Sierra have been implemented successfully by consortia with a variety of motivations and functional requirements.

However, Sarah Hickman-Auger observes that, as library supply chains and associated workflows become increasingly electronic, we are seeing interest in new modes of sharing that require systems vendors to work side by side with shared service partners to envision and deliver best-fit solutions. Sarah reflects that libraries and vendors alike are experiencing a step change in expectations of shared services.

'I suspect the most significant driver is not what can be done by sharing hardware and software in the cloud. While that represents some economies and efficiencies, my observation is that the real game changer is the move to electronic collections,' Sarah states. 'This shift is changing our understanding of what needs to be done locally and highlights the value in libraries not only adopting the same workflows but also undertaking elements of that work together.'

For most libraries, the electronic collection is not a significant differentiator that prevents them from working together to drive economies and efficiencies; indeed, for most, it presents the sorts of operational and business challenges that call for community effort.

Consequently, Sarah argues that systems vendors need to work with libraries and supply chain players, such as e-book aggregators, to ensure that complex workflows and large-scale data flows are more fully enabled by the library platform. For example, current approaches leave much room for improvement with taking on and then discarding the mass of titles in e-book PDA offers.

Indeed, a major reason for Innovative partnering with the likes of 3M, Dawson, EBSCO, and Overdrive is to develop seamless workflows and data flows. That is why dialogue with community services like KB+ is so important.

Furthermore, Sarah emphasizes the additional challenge that partnership agreements 'work in a consortium setting where the same services can be deployed to all, with options for configuration by each member institution. This is, of course, how knowledge bases work, but it needs to be applied to more complex workflows.'

The bottom line, Sarah observes, is that 'the unpredictable variety of shared service models within increasingly complex supply chains present considerable challenges to any developers – not just commercial vendors. The most cost effective way forward is for us to work hand in hand with libraries and their suppliers on real requirements rather than to design generic approaches that never quite fit the bill. Having good APIs that we use ourselves will offer a real payback.'

This statement leads to the critical point of governance and leadership. Leveraging best value from the publishing and re-purposing supply chain demands a combination of firmness and agility. In such a world, any consortial library service needs ongoing project change and relationship management of the highest quality in order to orchestrate the efforts of the actors – libraries, publishers, aggregators, and systems developers.

'For our part,' Sarah concludes, 'we must be technically and culturally flexible enough to play in the library ecosystem.'

Recommended Reading

The following resources offer an opportunity to find out more about shared library systems in the areas discussed here:

Key decisions involved around changing library platforms are introduced in the LMS Change toolbox

http://lmsguidance.jiscinvolve.org/wp/methods-toolbox/

The Benefits of Sharing report (2012) on the potential for shared library management in Scotland

http://libraryblogs.is.ed.ac.uk/benefitsofsharing/

The Welsh Shared Library Management System report (2012) sets out the considerations of the Welsh Higher Education Library Forum

http://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/sharedlms/

The experiences of the London–based Bloomsbury Consortium are covered in their blog

http://www.blms.ac.uk

You can find out more about Sierra, Innovative's library services platform, at

http://sierra.iii.com