JISC InfoNET Strategy Pilots

Report from the University of Sheffield Student Services Department

1. The issue

a) The Student Services Department at the University of Sheffield was significantly restructured and enlarged in 2009-10, such that it now incorporates services covering the whole student 'journey' from recruitment and admissions, through registry services, to student support, and careers/employability. There are approaching 350 staff based in around 20 locations on campus and overseas. The new structure is an integration of three previously separate departments and there is thus an important need to establish a strategic framework for the work of the whole new team, given its 'reach' into all areas of the student experience, and the importance of our contribution across the institution.

b) One of the predecessor departments (also called the Student Services Department) had previously developed a strategic approach to its work, using the 'Strategy Map' concept originating from work by Kaplan & Norton at Harvard Business School. Information on the former strategy can be accessed at http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssd/magnificent8/index.html. This strategy no longer reflects the responsibilities of the new department and was in any event in its final year of roll-out during 2009, since it was originally linked to a University corporate strategy which is also in the course of being reviewed.

c) Starting in December 2009, we began the process to develop a new strategy for Student Services at the University of Sheffield, with a view to launch and implementation at the end of the summer 2010, timed for the start of the new academic year and the new student recruitment cycle. This timeline is in tandem with the review of the University's corporate strategy, as mentioned above. The work also takes account of a number of significant national changes and potential policy developments impacting on the direction of our work, including the aspirations of the former Labour government's HE Framework (as interpreted by the new coalition government), the Browne review of student funding, the DBIS postgraduate education review, recommendations arising from the National Student Forum, HEFCE's review of quality assurance arrangements for HE provision, and other issues.

2. Our approach

a) At the outset, we set out a timeline for the strategic review process, as set out in the left hand column below. A comment in the right hand column against each item indicates the extent to which the plan has been realised:

Project milestones (as set out in December 2009)	Progress report (Autumn 2010)
December 2009	
Preliminary horizon scanning.	Achieved.
Review of existing strategic documents to identify key concepts to retain.	Achieved.
January 2010	
Engagement with University Registrar on strategic directions/options.	Achieved.
February 2010	
Near final drafts of institutional strategy should be available.	In the event this material was available later than anticipated, and in two phases: a) Mission, Vision and Identity (March 2010) b) Draft strategic plan (July 2010)
April- May 2010	
Departmental staff engagement (bottom-up input) into the strategic development process.	Achieved.
April-June 2010	
Departmental senior management planning activities (including Away Day) – representing the key strategic development phase. This to include work on a mission statement.	Achieved.
July 2010	
'Testing' of emerging strategic themes with key stakeholders, including check-back with staff representatives.	Achieved.
September 2010	
Completion of strategy development phase; confirmation of monitoring arrangements.	Achieved.
October 2010	
Launch of revised strategy.	Achieved.
November 2010	
Meeting of departmental strategy group, which will be responsible for monitoring strategy implementation.	Will take place as planned.

b) As a starting point, senior managers in the department carried out some preliminary horizon scanning (using the PESTLE approach recommended at http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/infokits/strategy/environment-scanning/index_html). In particular we were aiming to answer the question "what factors may currently, or in the future, influence our business" (a variation of one of the key questions posed on the above page). Reference

was also made to the relevant section of the monitoring checklist to be found at http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/infokits/strategy/monitoring/monitoring-checklist

c) Alongside this, we went through a process (at senior management level) of re-examining our existing strategic and equivalent statements - including the strategy for the predecessor department referred to above – to identify those key themes and concepts which we wished to take forward into the development phase for the new strategy. While this preparatory stage may not be explicitly referenced in the Infokit, we considered it important for a number of reasons, including the need to be inclusive of previous experience and expertise, particularly in a period of change and restructuring, and because we considered that certain elements from previous strategic plans would continue to be fit for purpose. We characterised the exercise as 'find the gems'. The result was a list of around 20 elements, considerations and concerns, to bear in mind. These included matters such as:
   - Clarity of presentation
   - Staff and team engagement
   - Effective and straightforward monitoring systems
   - The importance of flexibility, given the turbulent national and HE environment
   - A plain-English mission statement
   - A need to ensure that the strategy incorporates a statement on values.

Helpfully, many of these points reinforce good practice suggestions included in the Infokit, eg on the characteristics of a good mission statement, and the importance of creative and active consultation. I think it is also helpful that they emerged through a discursive process, rather than merely being copied in from a website.

d) In considering values, we began with a pre-existing set of values from one of the predecessor departments, and decided to test these for continued relevance, rather than starting again. The material at http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/infokits/strategy/mission-vision-values/values and http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/infokits/strategy/monitoring/monitoring-checklist was very helpful in encouraging a straightforward approach and to avoid generalisations and 'motherhood and apple pie'. In practice we tested the values using a combination of an exercise we described as 'values in action', which was inspired by the 'Living the Values' guidance at http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/infokits/strategy/mission-vision-values/defining-values. This involved asking a selected group of staff teams to translate the existing list of values into practical examples in their working life, and within their experience of service delivery. Where this proved difficult we asked staff to suggest alternative words and/or to identify gaps in the existing list. Alongside this staff consultation exercise, I also convened a meeting with the president of our Students' Union, to get some student input as to whether the values were those he and his sabbatical team would expect to be espoused by a service department such as ours. Among the helpful feedback received, an interesting debate emerged around the concept of 'transparency' – some colleagues believing this to be an important concept; others feeling it was a meaningless management 'buzzword'; some feeling concerned that it contradicted their professional requirements around confidentiality; and the

student view that it suggested an inappropriate degree of openness which could lead to user concerns around trust. The final product is a very straightforward list of eight words, which we have presented in simple alphabetical order within the strategy.

e)   In relation to mission, the guidance on the characteristics of a good mission statement contained at http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/infokits/strategy/mission-vision-values/good-mission and the relevant section of the monitoring checklist http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/infokits/strategy/monitoring/monitoring-checklist were both very helpful in this phase of our work. On the basis of reflection at senior management level, followed by some small-scale 'reality-check' testing in a small number of staff teams (different from those chosen for 2 d) above), we identified a mission focussed around the concepts of **Promoting, Developing, Supporting.** The proposition is that these words reflect the scope of our activities over the student lifecycle from initial enquiry to final award (promoting the University; promoting educational aspiration; developing life and learning skills, developing employability, supporting students, etc).   We considered whether the three concepts were in a linear or circular relationship and toyed with a number of different layouts. On the final strategy document, the mission appears as follows, alongside an image which is intended to reflect the importance of teamworking, collaboration and partnerships (as expressed elsewhere in the strategy):

Promoting
Developing
Supporting
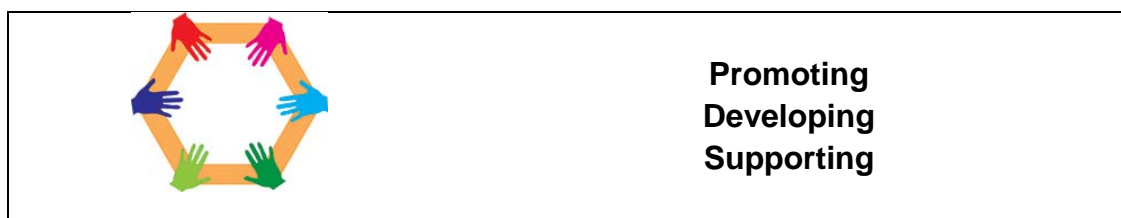
f)   As mentioned in an interim progress report, unexpectedly, part way through this process, a new planning cycle was introduced within all professional services departments by the University's new registrar who joined the institution in autumn 2009. The proposed cycle cut across my own timeline (set out in 2 a) above), which had been planned before the new planning arrangements were developed. I negotiated with the registrar that our own input into the planning process would be provisional, pending the completion of our strategic review. This had the potential to be problematic and/or to de-rail our activity. In reality there has been no difficulty. At the same time, the delayed production of the University strategic plan (also referred to in 2 a) above) has enabled me to cross-refer to the emerging corporate document at a point at which our own thinking was more mature, and the two processes have thus been mutually reinforcing. This experience perhaps speaks most to the helpfully pragmatic commentary on unexpected events set out in the infokit at http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/infokits/strategy/managing-strategic-activity/index_html .

g) Input from our own staff teams on the key future strategic themes was influenced by the guidance set out at http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/infokits/strategy/mission-vision-values/consultation.   However we made no use of the IT tools referred to, and relied instead on paper-based and face to face methods, backed up by update emails.   The principal opportunity for staff input was a whole department meeting in April 2010 with an open invitation to all staff. Around 100 attended, and those present were asked to reflect, in small 'buzz' groups, on two questions:

   - What are the key issues for the department in the next year?
   - Where should we focus to improve our services?

Responses were collected immediately - based on attendees' thoughts written on to a single page proforma. These were subsequently collated and formed part of the background material used in the senior management consultation event described in below.

h) The milestone event used to consolidate the strategy was an away day for the departmental senior management team, held in May 2010. This was a structured event, drawing on a range of background material, including the output from the PESTLE analysis referred to above, which was refreshed on the day. Attendees were also asked to complete a SWOT analysis on the department in advance of the day. Other background papers were pre-circulated, including information on relevant recent national policy documents/statements , and a summary of the outcomes of the work on mission and values, described in 2 d) and 2 e) above, and the staff consultation exercise referred to in 2 g) above. During the course of the day, six areas for priority focus emerged from the synthesis of background preparation and participant input. These were subsequently distilled into six strategic themes. In determining the appropriate format and structure for the strategy, examples contained in http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/infokits/strategy/pilot-outputs were considered. Ultimately we decided to continue to make use of the 'strategy map' format referred to in 2 b) above.

i) A further round of consultation and testing followed, once again drawing on the guidance set out at http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/infokits/strategy/mission-vision-values/consultation.   Around 20 separate stakeholder 'engagements' were used to validate the emergent strategic themes, and to ensure that the likely outcome would be understood by staff, and thus enable more effective implementation. Consultation discussions took place with senior institutional managers, faculty representatives, students' union staff and officers, staff teams, and a number of individuals/groups from outside the university. During the consultation phase, coincidentally a very relevant report was issued by the key professional association for student services staff in the USA, on the future direction for student affairs, which was also used to validate the future direction of travel set out in the draft strategy map.

j) The final version of the strategy map was approved by the departmental senior management team in August 2010. A formal launch event with staff has just taken place at the time of writing in October 2010. Between these

dates the strategy has been 'soft launched' in teams on an informal basis, principally by sharing the guiding strategic themes with teams, and encouraging colleagues to begin to use these as a reference point. Other communications, including a strategy website, were in place to support the launch event. Colourful desk coasters (setting out the departmental mission on one side and the six strategic themes on the other) have been distributed to every team. We have also set aside a small strategy 'seedcorn' budget which we will allocate across the department to fund start up activity associated with the strategy, such as team development events and specific items of expenditure.

k) Arrangements which we intend to put in place to monitor progress with implementation have been informed by section 3 of the monitoring checklist at http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/infokits/strategy/monitoring/monitoring-checklist , and the guidance on KPIs at http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/infokits/strategy/managing-strategic-activity/role-kpi. Monitoring will primarily be in the hands of an existing departmental (senior manager) strategy group which will meet five times a year. A strategy website has also been developed, to include project progress reports. A balanced set of KPIs is in development, including quantitative metrics and qualitative measures such as successful project delivery. A summary traffic light 'dashboard' will be used to capture this, mapped onto each of the six strategic themes. We will also ensure that other monitoring and evaluation activity (which takes place as a matter of routine within the department) is mutually supportive of the monitoring arrangements which will specifically surround the strategy. An example of this approach is our plan to ensure that a forthcoming 'Investors in People' internal review will explicitly use the strategy as part of its review context.

3. Success factors

The following success factors were identified at the outset of the process, to be used in assessing success. A short commentary is included against each, albeit in some cases more time will be required to make a full assessment.

Success factor	Comment
a) Senior management buy-in at institutional executive level (eg the relevant pro-vice-chancellors).	Feedback during the consultation and testing stage described above was very positive.
b) Active use of the strategy by the key senior managers (service heads) within the department, as 'champions'.	Early evidence suggests good take-up. Colleagues have already begun using the strategic themes to frame service developments in their own areas. Largely this has been unprompted.
c) Appropriate engagement by staff at	A 'post-it' exercise conducted with

all levels in the department.	c100 staff at all levels during July 2010 elicited a very wide range of practical examples of the ways in which the strategic themes might be relevant to current and planned work.
d) Change and development projects arising from the strategic direction.	An emergent list of projects has already been prepared.
e) Progress in effecting change and delivering project objectives.	To be evaluated in due course by the departmental strategy group. We also have plans to conduct a more holistic review of the strategy implementation process, possibly involving input from an external 'critical friend'. This would take place towards the end of 2011. At the start of 2011 we will be reviewed against the new Investors in People standard, and it is our intention to have that review focus on a subset of the strategic themes.
f) Continued fitness for purpose of the strategy in what is likely to be a turbulent context in the HE sector.	To be reviewed periodically by the departmental strategy group. We consider that the strategic themes are sufficiently flexible to enable adaptation as necessary.

4. Lessons learnt

a) <u>Don't reinvent the wheel</u>

As referred to in section 2 c) above, but perhaps not explicitly recommended in the infokit, it is unlikely that your strategic review is starting with an entirely blank canvas. Look at the material you already have which has a strategic flavour and don't be tempted to start entirely from scratch. Colleagues may be more likely to engage in the process if they feel that what has gone before is being used constructively. This recommendation is also relevant to the monitoring phase: there may be opportunities to capitalise on existing evaluation and monitoring activity to support strategy evaluation (see 2 k) above).

b) <u>Expect the unexpected</u>

Ensure that your timescale and your approach allows for flexibility. An unexpected additional process (see 2 f) above) and a further restructuring had the potential to de-rail this pilot. Discussions at an early stage with relevant senior managers ensured we were able to keep the process on track.

c) <u>Set realistic timescales</u>

The planned interface with the University's strategic plan did not happen at the time I had hoped, since the plan was not ready. There are inevitable dependencies within a process of strategic review and your timetable needs to be sufficiently flexible to allow for others not meeting deadlines which are important for your process.

d) <u>Be ruthless in summarising and synthesising</u>

The various environmental scanning exercises and consultation activities are likely to generate a large amount of material, references, comments, and opinions. Skill is needed to précis and re-present these. We did not use any of the suggested IT tools during this stage of the process, and it could be that these would have helped in the synthesising of material.

e) <u>Involve, Involve, Involve</u>

I am convinced that strategic work needs to be a shared endeavour and during this pilot we have learnt a great deal from the insights of colleagues (at all levels) and the views expressed by stakeholders during the consultation and testing stage. You will get a better result if you involve and consult effectively.

5. Recommendations to JISC Infonet

a) I would reiterate the point made in 4 a) above and suggest that this could be reflected in the infokit in some appropriate way.

b) Bearing in mind the points I have made in 2 g) above about us not making use of IT for consultation purposes, I wonder if there is more work which JISC might do to promote these tools and also to give practical examples of the ways in which they have worked effectively. In reflecting with my senior colleagues why we adopted a more person-centred and paper-based approach, it is clear that there are questions about the value of IT tools for this purpose, and a lack of experience.

6. Outputs

Appended to this report are:
  a) Student Services Strategy Map 2010
  b) Terms of reference for Student Services Strategy Group
  c) Draft strategy monitoring dashboard
  d) Further information on quantitative monitoring KPIs (metrics)
  e) Information on strategy website.

a)

The University of Sheffield

Student Services Department

Promoting
Developing
Supporting

VALUES *Accuracy, Courtesy, Efficiency, Fairness, Integrity, Sensitivity, Reflective learning, team working.*

Changing Contexts

- Student cultures
- Speed of IT development
- University strategies
- Economic challenges & competition

- Regulation & policy change
- Environmental imperatives
- Customer service
- Human resources issues

Strategic Themes

Supporting the student journey	Promoting excellence	Improving our systems
• Recruitment success • Transitions support • Internationalisation • Employability	• Service improvement • Professional engagement • User expectations & feedback • Equality, diversity & inclusion	• Process review • Enabling IT • Integrated systems
Working sustainably	Strengthening partnerships	Developing our teams
• Business growth • Service development • Estates & environment	• Faculty interface • Professional services collaboration • Influence and representation • External profiles	• Management development • Staff engagement • Health & wellbeing

b) Terms of reference for Student Services Strategy Group

Meets 5 times per year. Chaired by Head of Department

1. The core purpose of the Strategy Group is to direct and steer progress in respect of the Student Services departmental strategy.   (By extension this covers our work in respect of the University corporate plan/strategy).

2. The group will do this by:
- Horizon-scanning on the key relevant strategic issues
- Receiving reports on existing change/strategic projects
- Providing a forum for generation of new ideas/projects and mutual support in realising these
- Giving space for discussion on cross-cutting strategic priorities in Student Services
- Enabling an interface with the University Executive Board (through the involvement of the PVC, Learning and Teaching)
- Considering other University strategies and activities which impact on Student Services strategy
- Operating with an open, discursive, non-bureaucratic and non-operational style (bearing in mind the concentration on operational matters at monthly Section Heads' meetings).

3. The Group will also undertake a periodic review of the continued fitness for purpose of the departmental strategy.

c) Strategy Dashboard

The purpose of the dashboard is to provide an indication of progress with reference to the strategic themes within the Magnificent 8. The dashboard is a top-level/overall indicator, which aims to take account both of ongoing operational service delivery and of progress in developmental work and projects. Where a colour has changed since the last version of the dashboard, direction of travel is indicated by ^ (= movement towards green) or v (= movement towards red), and a note on rationale for change appears under the relevant indicator.

Strategic theme	Supporting the student journey	Promoting excellence	Improving our systems
Indicator	AG	G	A
Measures	• Delivery of projects • New processes/services • Recruitment and Careers KPIs	• Service Improvement team activity • Accreditation & awards • User feedback KPIs	• It development • New processes/services • Process KPIs
Rationale for change			
Strategic theme	Working sustainably	Strengthening partnerships	Developing our teams
Indicator	R	AG	G
Measures	• Income generation activity • Effective financial planning • Financial health KPIs	• Success of Recruitment Support team • Strategic Faculty liaison • Faculty participation KPIs	• Staff engagement activity • Management development programme • IiP outcome KPI
Rationale for change			

Public sector 'traffic light' definitions

Green – Good – on track, low risk
Amber/Green – Satisfactory – broadly on track

Amber – Mixed – some concerns, medium risk
Red – Problematic – serious concerns, high risk

d) Further information on quantitative KPIs (metrics)

Supporting the student journey	Recruitment and Careers KPIs which are already in existence.
Working sustainably	KPIs from financial outturn and forecasting information which is already in existence.
Promoting excellence	User evaluation measures already in existence (eg SSiD satisfaction rating, currently 94%)
Strengthening partnerships	Participation rates for Supporting the Supporters and Recruitment Matters (already routinely collated)
Improving our systems	Key turn-around time metrics, relating to specific core services (eg in Admissions or SSiD).
Developing our teams	Outcome of IiP review process (already collected).

e)

A Student Services strategy website has been created to support communications relating to the strategy within the department: http://www.shef.ac.uk/ssd/student-services-strategy. From this site, colleagues can view the strategy map; click through to look at summary information on supporting projects and progress; and view the overall monitoring 'dashboard' (see 6 c) above).

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