

Higher Education Funding Council for England

Response to the Cabinet Office consultation document:

“Transformational Government”

Background

1. In November 2005, the Cabinet Office issued a consultation document called “Transformational Government: Enabled by Technology”.
2. It provides a “strategy on how to use technology to transform government services”.
3. It includes a number of themes including:
 - the importance of government agencies focussing on citizen/customer choice so that citizen’s and customers’ needs are met, rather than services being designed around the providers of services
 - public sector bodies being able to share processes, information and data for the benefit of citizens and customers
 - public servants having better technological tools so that give a better quality of service to citizens and customers
 - the transactional services provided by public bodies to be run as efficiently and effectively as possible, in order to free up resources for “front line” functions.
4. The consultation document suggests “three key transformations”:
 - services provided by IT must be designed around the citizen or business
 - government must move to a shared services culture
 - professionalism in terms of the planning, delivery, management skills and governance in IT enabled change.
5. Against this background, and the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review, the document goes on to suggest that particular attention should be paid to the following areas:
 - customer service centres
 - human resources, finance and other corporate services
 - common infrastructure

- data sharing
- information management
- information assurance
- identity management
- technology standards and architecture.

Discussion

6. There is much in the document that HEFCE would strongly support, specifically:

- common infrastructure
- data sharing
- information management
- technology standards and architecture
- effective use of IT for the benefit of the citizen.

7. Examples of activities we are already committed to/doing which demonstrate our support in these areas include:

Common infrastructure

8. HEFCE and the other UK funding bodies for higher and further education, fund the Joint Academic Network (JANET). The JANET network connects UK universities, FE Colleges, Research Councils, Specialist Colleges and Adult and Community Learning providers. It also provides connections between the Regional Broadband Consortia to facilitate the DfES initiative for a national schools' network. Over 16 million end-users are currently served by the JANET network.

Data sharing

9. The Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) funded by HEFCE and the other UK funding bodies for HE and FE, acts as an advocate for open access to data produced from publicly-funded research activities.

Information Management

10. HEFCE, via JISC, participates in a major initiative aimed at providing a common information environment to enable access to online content. Major providers of information including the British Library, Culture Online, the Department for Education & Skills, the Cabinet Office e-Government Unit, the UK e-Science Core Programme, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), English Heritage and The National Archives are

represented on the Common Information Environment Group. The key aim of the group is to ensure that the investment of some £2bn worth of online content estimated to have been created out of public funds is repaid by making as much of it as possible accessible by all citizens of the UK.

Technology standards and architecture

11. HEFCE participates in the tracking and development of key technology standards and architecture, in the areas of learning and teaching and research, via the Centre for Educational Technology Interoperability Standards (CETIS). CETIS represents the UK post-16 sector on international standards organizations, ensuring that the needs of colleges and universities are incorporated into the standards development process. We actively promote the importance of the UK sector at an international level, and seek to influence consortia to produce standards that support its e-Learning needs.

Effective use of IT for the benefit of citizens

12. For many years, we have promoted the use of IT for the benefit of citizens. Examples include:

- Universities and Colleges Admissions Service - the on line application process for those wishing to enter full time higher education, used by hundreds of thousands every year.
- Higher Education Statistics Agency - standardised data collection and sharing, covering information on students, staff and finances within higher education
- Higher Education Research and Opportunities - portal to provide an access route for those seeking information about higher education
- Procureweb - a portal used by universities to provide and access information on procurement.

13. There are some Issues that concern us in the consultation document, as described below:

Para 13

14. The consultation document claims that:

“...many of these systems are also old and custom built, use obsolete technologies, are relatively costly to maintain by modern standards...”

15. This para attempts to describe the current position of technology in the public sector. At best, this description is a gross oversimplification of the current position. Whilst there may be some examples of such systems in the public sector, we doubt whether any single sentence can do justice to the full range of systems currently in place. Drawing on our own experience, we can cite several examples of leading best practice in the use of technologies to assist front

end users and citizens, for example, the use of extranet data submissions from universities and colleges, and the development of Teaching Quality Information and Aimhigher websites for the benefit of the citizen.

16. We would recommend that over-simplistic generalisations of the sort currently set out in the consultation document are omitted from further government documents on this issue.

Para 14

17. In similar vein, we believe that the claim that:

“many systems and processes are still paper based and staff intensive”

does not do justice to the full range of arrangements in place, and such over-simplistic generalisations are omitted from further government documents on this issue.

Para 16

18. This para includes a claim that:

“The result is that the corporate services such as Human Resources and Finance are significantly behind the private sector in both effectiveness and efficiency”.

19. We are not convinced this is true and wonder what evidence you have to back this up? Our experience in HEFCE is that we routinely benchmark our corporate services against best in class norm groups (through the EFQM and databases held by International Survey Research) which tell us that in many respects, our performance is better than most employers (across both the public and private sectors).

Para 39

20. The consultation document seems to leap to a conclusion that:

“A shared services approach is needed to release efficiencies across the system.”

21. Our experience of shared services is that they can create more problems than solutions, eg in the early 1990s, the use of a central government payroll agency, (Chessington) which consistently us with provided poor quality and inflexible service; and the former MAC initiative in higher education, where the desire to develop commonality founded against the background of rapidly changing needs and technology. Whilst we would, however, concur that in certain circumstances, there may be advantage in shared services, we would advise that there are other approaches between public sector bodies and involving collaboration which can produce equal if not greater benefits.

22. What is critical is any such approach is the development of a sharing and partnership culture between public sector bodies, underpinned by strong, trusting relationships.

23. HEFCE is part of a “shared services” project involving the DfES, the QCA, TDA and LSC. We have recently widened the scope of the project to include collaboration with our respective communities (higher and further education providers) and extended the concept of sharing, to include assets, knowledge, best practice and skills.

24. We believe that such an approach is much more likely to produce real tangible benefits than one focussed more narrowly on “shared services”.