Benchmarking points to way ahead

INVALUABLE information on trends and current concerns in audio visual and media services throughout the higher education sector has been updated and made available.

The SCHOMS Benchmarking Report for 2009/2010 has been published following a record number of respondents from sector managers.

The report provides a unique insight into the delivery of services including areas such as:

- organisational structure and funding
- teaching room technical services
- television and video services
- photography
- design

"The report provides management information that can be used to identify and encourage the adoption of best practice, define and develop performance indicators and conduct benchmarking studies, all important aspects of routine service evaluation and strategic and operational planning," said Toni Kelly, Chair of SCHOMS.

It also serves as a set of data and associated management tool, which can contribute to a range of planning activities, at departmental and institutional levels.

"At a time when many universities are facing almost unprecedented change, with increasing challenges to demonstrate efficiency and effectiveness, benchmarking data has never been so important," added Toni.

The 118-page report includes key findings and easy-to-use figures and graphs summarising and analysing responses. It incorporates a set of raw data in the form of a structured Excel workbook, enabling specific comparisons to be undertaken.

The full report is being published exclusively on the SCHOMS web site at www.schoms.ac.uk

Delivery of services: some report findings

Service overview

- In over 80% of institutions AV/Media Services was not managed independently, and was typically linked with IT/Computing Services and/or Information Services.
- Teaching room technical services and TV & video services were most commonly provided centrally by AV/Media Services, whilst most photographic and design services were provided either by another internal service or through outsourcing.
- There was a wide range in institutional funding allocations, with the highest reported as £4,200,000 and the lowest £8,600.

Teaching room technical services

- Over half of institutions indicated that response times to dealing with and solving faults were recorded. Less than one quarter had a formal Service Level Agreement with departments.
- In a small number of institutions (5%) departments were charged for the provision of services to central teaching rooms in support of core teaching.
- Just under half always applied charges in support of conferences; whilst in almost one fifth support was free.

TV and video services

- 56% of institutions held an ERA+ licence, and 22% had signed up to BoB National.
- Over two fifths reported that no charges were made for internal work and almost 15% did not charge for external work.
- Video conferencing in central teaching rooms was not available in two fifths of institutions, whilst in over one fifth it was used several times a week.

Newcastle 2011: the very place for blue sky thinking

SCHOMS members returned from the 2011 conference in Newcastle with a sweep of new ideas and developments to consider. There's a lookback at the highlights on the following pages. The 2012 conference will be held in Hull next 16-18 May

'Future of HE sits on your shoulders'

In his keynote presentation 'Learning in the Third Millennium', Professor Stephen Heppell had a series of challenging messages for Conference 2011. He said we had to stand up for a more responsive, flexible, varied and creative 'narrative of learning' - "if you can't do that, I don't know who can." Stephen Heppell is a Professor at Bournemouth University; Visiting Professor at both the University of Wales, Newport, and the University of Madrid; Chair in New Media Environments and is retained by the UK government in horizon scanning work.

" Building furniture like a kitchen chair puts a burden on lecturers to deliver and they're not going to able to do it. So we've got to design spaces that enable everybody to be part of making higher education survive. We're not going to do it building the old tables, the old chairs and the old spaces **"**

PROFESSIONALS in audio visual and media hold the key for an education sector facing dramatic change, according to Professor Stephen Heppell.

He told conference that there was a vital job to be done adding new technologies to learning.

"It won't come from teaching and learning but I do think it will come from you," he said. "You've coped with, seen, harnessed and been playful with new learning technologies. I hold out hope for the sector, but not for the sector without you.

"In my lifetime in HE we have gone from valuing ingenuity, creativity, imagination, fresh thinking, to - honestly - valuing conformity, standardisation and uniformity. I think fatally so."

Giving examples of projects that he has been involved with - building lab schools in Florida and schools in Michigan, the Caribbean, Australia and the Middle East - Professor Heppell said that the rest of the world was "going at

it like an express train" building both virtual and real learning environments and using "cool" technology.

"In the learning technology world, kids are producing the most extraordinary stuff with the tools we're giving them and the opportunity to display and exhibit we're giving them. I think it's time for the structures and strictures of the education system to move on as quickly as their ambition."

He said technology allowed us to take more risks and things would go wrong, but we needed learners to emerge able to meet those surprises.

"It needs to be at the heart of education. We need to astonish students, otherwise how are they going to astonish us? We're local to the world of the unexpected. I don't think anyone else in HE can do that."

Professor Heppell highlighted "exciting" new spaces that had been created for learning.

In west London, students who had

won £20,000 to makeover their learning space decided against spending it on technology. They took the view that, if they did, in three years' time they would just have a room full of old technology. Instead, they opted for a base in which all of their equipment from home – Android, Playstation, Nintendo DS – would work. "Bring your browser and you're off," said Professor Heppell. "It's got mood lighting which can flash disco-style when you play music, but it's a teaching space, not a social space. Every single white surface is a writing surface and they've got a Skype bar.

"If we're going to cope with a world in which everybody is coming after our money and nobody knows HE, we've got to think differently in a way that lets us value what really matters – collegiality, mutuality, scholarship, quality. We can still achieve that if we look at alternatives and some are given to us architecturally."

He illustrated examples of new developments in design:
● A 'Fast zone' in a college in Blackpool - offering fast food, fast network connection, fast printing
● Inflatable furniture and fittings
● 'Furniture for fidgeting' - chairs designed with round bottoms and heavy bases in the Netherlands. "If you don't fidget, you fall off them."

Professor Heppell revealed he had also become an advocate of 'learning with your shoes off'.

"It wins back the floor as seating - students will happily sit on the floor - and it's to do with family. We all take our shoes off at home, it's about belonging. In the end universities have got to offer membership. Where else have you got intellectual engagement in our community?"

He recommended the 'rule of three' in design - never more than three walls, always an open aspect, at least three points of focus and the capability to house three discrete learning activities at the same time.

And he emphasised the importance of height. "Because we work from plans all the time, we've forgotten to give the third dimension of height. Height gives space and authority."

Students wanting to read or work on a laptop would not choose a kitchen chair design for seating. They preferred to lie on a bed, or the floor or a bean bag. "Kitchen chairs are 'Dick Turpin - stand and deliver'. If you want to talk to the next person, how do you do it? It is not designed for collaboration.

"Building furniture like a kitchen chair puts a burden on lecturers to deliver and they're not going to able to do it. So we've got to design spaces that enable everybody to be part of making higher education survive. We're not going to do it building the old tables, the old chairs and the old spaces."

He said university life should be like a stage that could be dressed and lit and prepared for different acts and scenes, for movement from stage to stage, so the narrative of learning could be varied or marked.

"The blandness of space and technology we've got allows us to do something about that. Who knows more about that in your institution than you? You've got to stand up for this.

"We can change children's lifestyles with learning. We can mend conflict with learning. To do that we need to do it in a new way. We need to harness everything we know about design, about space, about virtual places, about real places.

"With all that, I think we can fix the whole thing. The future of HE sits on your shoulders. Start pushing the snowball off the cliff and start an avalanche. You've all been around long enough to know how bad it's got and know how good it could be."

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Speakers lined up as attention turns to Hull 2012

PLANNING is well underway for the 2012 conference to be hosted by Darcy O'Bree at the University of Hull next 16-18 May.

Representatives of HEFCE and the National Union of Students (NUS) have been invited to deliver the keynote speeches.

Andrew Smith, Head of Estates and Sustainable Development at HEFCE and Alex Bols, Assistant Director (Research) and Head of Higher Education for the NUS will talk on the theme of meeting student expectation.

Universities are experiencing huge changes to the way they operate and there are challenges ahead for those working within Higher Education. Student expectations about what they can reasonably (or unreasonably) receive during their time at university are likely to soar and universities will be striving to do more with less.

How we approach this will be the main focus of the conference.

A formal invitation to present a SCHOMS Short will be sent out to the membership in the new year.

Sponsored places at ISE exhibition

SCHOMS has secured up to 50 sponsored places at the prestigious Integrated Systems Europe (ISE) event in Amsterdam from 31 January to 2 February 2012.

ISE 2012 is the largest professional AV and systems integration trade show in Europe, bringing together manufacturers, distributors, integrators and technology managers from over 100 countries worldwide.

The sponsorship agreement was reached with ISE following the success of the scheme last year.

An exhibition report will appear in the May 2012 issue of Connections.

'Look for the meaning and purpose'

IN his presentation 'The Medium is not the Message', Professor Mike Neary warned against looking to technology as a means of answering the current uncertainty in education.

"If we think of media and the future as a merely technological issue, then we're going to have problems getting into the future," he said.

"It's about the meaning and purpose of education. We have to talk about the idea of 'university', what it is and what is for."

He compared the words of technological theorist Marshall McLuhan - "who was concerned with the way content was delivered rather than the content itself" - and labour theorist Guy Debord, who believed it was not technology driving us into the future but the way work was organised.

And Professor Neary expanded on the 'Student as Producer' project at the University of Lincoln, where he is Dean of Teaching and Learning.

The project has been described by Times Higher as "demonstrating that creative progressive solutions to the

commodification of academic life are possible.'

Professor Neary said: "The way to get out of crisis is to get everybody involved and turn them into the process.

"Across the whole university, we are re-engineering the relationship between research and teaching and reappraising the relationship between academics and students.

"We have replaced the teaching and learning strategy with an organising principle, reconnecting teaching and research so everybody gets something out of it.

"All teaching courses have to engage with the principles of Student as Producer. If we want to change anything, we have got to research it, because that's what academics do."

He said that it was important to academics to revisit what people had written, to categorise and to make an argument. The academic process was hard and challenging.

"If you want me to be a different person in the classroom by coming in and telling me 'this is a good idea', I'm just not going to respond."

In a footnote to his presentation, Professor Neary said that, like Stephen Heppell, he didn't like chairs. "Unlike Stephen," he added, "I want to intellectualise the chair.

"Academics know there's no perfect answer. We have to take responsibility for what we think the university is."

Creating right conditions for creativity

MORE detailed thinking is required about learning space, according to Dr Jos Boys, a Senior Research Fellow in Learning Spaces at Brighton University.

In her presentation 'Learning Spaces: where is the theory?', Dr Boys suggested that discussions so far had been simplistic.

"It means thinking about theory," she said. "Not about case studies, people want good examples but they need to know where and how ideas can be transferred. We don't know enough about what is similar or different about the whole being of subjects."

She said key questions included:

● What is it that is distinctive about teaching and learning in universities and colleges?

● What is it that matters about learning space?

Dr Boys - the author of *Towards Creative Learning Spaces* – gave an example of the need for more interest in 'unspoken interactions'.

"Many factors affect learning that don't get talked about, such as what

people bring to a subject or a space."

There was a problem with lack of research - "not that we just don't have post-occupancy studies, but we don't really know the right questions to ask and then we can't get at that data."

She highlighted a project at Brighton that asks new students to demonstrate their 'minimum conditions for creativity'.

The results included designs for a contemplation nest, a corridor chill-out area and swings.

She said the ideas illustrated the complex interrelationship between feeling safe and taking risks, reflecting the nature of learning in its early days.

"The students are asked to think about what they need, what they feel.

"It's about meaning, part of a shared meaning and understanding of your subject and relationship in the wider world."

MANUFACTURERS of hardware,software and Audio Visual integrators exhibited at SCHOMS in Newcastle - making it the largest AV/classroom technology trade exhibition with a single HE focus in the UK. The exhibition aimed to see into the future, compare offerings and influence developments from our perspective and many useful contacts were made and followed up.

Best practice on an international scale

MEMBERS shared stories of good and best practice and reported various SCHOMS Projects and Fellowships to conference. These included presentations on:

● Learning Technology Adoption Toolkit (SCHOMS funded project) - Oliver Ireson, Classroom Experience Assistant, The University of Birmingham

● Blurring the Boundaries between the Formal and Informal - how to strategically manage space as the demand for informal collaborative space increases - by Jim Sheach, the University of Edinburgh

● Visual Merchandising at University of the Arts, London - how a central London space was converted for visual merchandising students after consultation with the academic team - by James Rutherford

MARK McCallister (left) gave an insight into the work of the Consortium of College and University Media Centers (CCUMC) - an organisation of which he is president in the USA.

Mark is Associate Director in the Office of Academic Technology at the University of Florida. CCUMC provides leadership and a forum for information exchange in media and technology support for quality teaching and learning in higher education settings.

Your chance to shape the future with SCHOMS

MEMBERS are being offered the chance to promote excellence in the sector and contribute to SCHOMS' future direction - by taking up vacancies on the SCHOMS Executive Committee.

A formal call for nominations will go out in March 2012 - and be ratified at the AGM in May 2012 - but Chair of SCHOMS Toni Kelly and her fellow Executive Committee members are inviting initial expressions of interest now.

"This would provide a great opportunity to contribute expertise at a national level," said Toni.

"The 'Exec' focuses on a range of activities to support members in the development of excellent audio visual and related services."

She said that interest from members with experience in one or more of the following areas would be particularly welcomed:

● Overall service management, including staff and financial management

● Strategic and operational planning

● Management of AV and IT service integration

● Pedagogic and technical support for teaching and learning

● Learning space design

● Strategic usage of video

● Staff development

The group typically meets formally once or twice per year, with video conferences taking place every six weeks.

"The work is not over demanding, and members have said that it has been rewarding, enjoyable and that it contributes directly towards personal and career development, providing benefits to individuals and to the supporting institutions," Toni added.

If you would like to discuss the opportunity, call Toni on 0121 414 3667 or email a.kelly@bham.ac.uk

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Students bring fresh look to corridors

LOOK at this bright, creative and busy work space in the corridors between lecture theatres and classrooms at the University of Edinburgh.

It's hard to believe it used to be a scruffy neglected corner of broken chairs, tables and a vending machine.

The corridor was transformed as part of a student competition to identify spaces in need of improvement and come up with draft designs.

"Before, it was a horrible space where students just passed through," said Jim Sheach, Section Manager of Learning and Teaching Spaces Technology in the IT Infrastructure Division of Information Services.

"Now it has been transformed into somewhere students want to work and linger between lectures."

The winning design for the Crush Hall

" We decided the best approach was to see the campus through student eyes "

was submitted by engineering students Catherine Inglesfield and Evelyn Buchner Santos as part of the Pimp My School competition funded by the university and promoted by Edinburgh University Students' Association (EUSA).

"The energy, drive and enthusiasm of EUSA in the organisation and promotion of the competition were essential to its success," said Jim.

The competition was launched after the University's Joint Learning and Teaching Space Advisory Group sourced funding to upgrade learning and teaching spaces.

"We decided the best approach was to see the campus through student eyes," said Jim.

The students were allowed to submit the proposal in any way they wanted, with an explanation and a concept that could be taken forward by Estates & Buildings.

The challenge attracted 36 entries and the new-look £50,000 workspace was unveiled in September – 18 months after the winner was selected.

"It was always a very good idea to start with but the way our estates design team developed the coloured vertical panels looks great," said Jim.

"There is nothing better than listening to the students. It has been a really positive and good way to engage them.

"I would certainly recommend the process to other universities."