Putting the I and T into sustainable and integrated research support services

A ‘flipped’ session at the 2013 THETA Conference, presented by Peter Gale and Gabrielle Gardiner

Prior to attending the session, participants were asked to read the first chapter of Peter Hinssen’s book, The New Normal as well as watch a short video outlining the issues facing the Higher Education sector in supporting research. Peter Gale did a brief recap of the issues and then the room was broken into 7 groups. They were shown a video that encouraged them to think really broadly about the issues and to be creative in their solutions.

**Issue 1: Consolidated Infrastructure**

*The Goal: I know where stuff is and how to get to it. My data is automatically and securely backed up. I know when the stuff I need will arrive.*

The hardware is the easy stuff, it is all the soft stuff around it that starts to become difficult, like process and policy, setting up governance structures for decision making and developing strategies. Need an app store of infrastructure. Cost models, business models to make sure things are financially sustainable. Where we want to head is utility computing across disciplines. Building capability. Sandpits. Compliance with data security and publishing data and communication.

**Issue 2: Support Staff**

*The Goal: Support staff are well-trained, up to date and respond to my requests quickly*

Different levels of understanding across the University; may not know exactly what is happening so unify documentation that is being used. Getting research skills development framework to enable staff to engage and create a narrative with faculty staff about a way forward. Take an emergent planning approach to development rather than try and solve it from day one. See what already exists within the institution, where the strong points and connections are and think about how they can use that to model practice. Have a strategy across the institution.

**Issue 3: Seamless Online Stuff**

*The Goal: All the stuff I need in one place*

What is the stuff, who puts it there, how do you retrieve and by who can access it? Is it open, collaborative and shareable? Privacy and confidentiality issues when it comes to personal records... Does it have to be in one place or do you just have to be able to track it all from one place? Does it have to be seamless – does this make it harder to find? If things break down you won’t know where to go for help. The solution might be a kind of portal that is modular so that you can choose the bits you need.

**Issue 4: Collaboration**

*The Goal: Faculties collaborate, faculties and support staff collaborate, different support units collaborate. We all understand what the ‘other’ does and why.*

Red wine. Lots of social events with truth serum so that we quickly understand each other’s problems. A bit of job swapping. A few more interesting events. Show and tell. About just saying yes
and then asking what the real question is. Sheep dip for IT culture from ‘no, my brain hurts’ to ‘yes, let’s think about that’. Glass half full approach. Maybe there are researchers on the edge of the sheep dip prodding the IT people to give them the message. Becoming better leaders. Getting out there amongst the researchers. The research community is the sheep dip and we need to get out there amongst it.

**Issue 5: Training**

*The Goal: I know how to use the best tools available for my kind of research and infrastructure that was complex is easy!*

Set up some kind of website with information about all the different types of services needed by researchers for support. Develop a consultancy service, providing relevant advice for particular one on one or small group needs. Identify needs. Librarians might be the first point of contact to do needs assessment and referral to the relevant part of the Uni; identify training needs. Work with researchers to develop a relevant training program, whatever the need is.

**Issue 6: Engagement and Communication**

*The Goal: I know what I need to know and if I don’t know it, I know where to go to find out.*

It’s not what but who you need to know. Getting the relationships ingrained. Get out and actually see the researchers. Use the existing fabric of IT support that happens to be within faculties and institutes – don’t waste the relationships that are already there. Recognise a diverse range of skillsets. Support and develop skillsets. Aggregate at a central level so that everyone benefits. Zip tie and gaffer tape solution provided by IT needs to be modernised and diversified. Formal engagement does not always work – truth serum is required. Face to face is essential to begin with. Virtual research communities can only happen if you have some face to face relationship first.

**Issue 7: Ethics and Privacy**

*The Goal: There are clear policies and processes in place and everyone, regardless of their role at our institution, understands them and how to implement them.*

Identify a sponsor – most likely the DVC Research, and key stakeholders. Review existing policies and identify gaps. Scan what other universities have done and get ideas from elsewhere. Come up with a draft policy, test it on faculties, working through champions (ADRs), get buy in as well as good ideas. Refine. Finalise whatever the policies are going to be and develop an implementation plan. Important that the plan is interactive, so scenario based depending on the implementation. Look at compliance and how it can be built in so that people don’t have to think about it.