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Roundtable: saving on ICT expenses – Mark Newton

From SaaS to scalability, how can universities keep a tight rein on their ICT expenses, while still offering students the best digital experience available? Steve Wright quizzes six experts

Mark Newton is managing director, CoSector, University of London

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Q. Let's look at the ICT landscape first. What developments and trends should universities be aware of over the coming few years, and how should they make sure they are responding to them?

Cloud is the most pertinent trend, and it's emerging as the most cost-effective way to manage infrastructure within higher education. It allows a university to eliminate that cost of running a data centre onsite, and it can be managed by a cloud provider reducing time and money spent being managed in-house.

Some institutions have sunk money into a data centre fairly recently, and having to write off that investment may not seem to be in their best interest, financially, in the short term. But if that's the case, it's worth balancing your budget and considering if the upfront cost will result in long-term gain.

We're also noticing a change in attitudes to learning environments. Every university has a virtual learning environment (VLE), but not all are running it in the most efficient way, or to its best potential. It's important to have a VLE provider who understands the HE sector and the needs of the students and staff. They can advise on the best upgrades and integrations out there to improve the learning experience for all and provide optimum value for money for students.

Q. How important – and how feasible – is it for universities to have a fully scalable ICT framework, capable of growing in capacity to suit demand either over time and/or for specific projects?

Scalability is very important, and it's entirely possible for universities to achieve with the technology that's out there.

I have found that a lot of HE IT departments are trying to operate scalability on an infrastructure they have built themselves. The world of cloud, Software as a Service (SaaS) and Platform as a Service (PaaS), have not yet been fully outsourced by these organisations. However, one of the major advantages of outsourcing that to a provider is that you can easily scale it up for growth.

Equally, you don't want to be tied in should your needs be reduced in a particular area. During the summer holidays, or a particularly quiet period, why should you be tied into IT capacity that you now don't need?

You want to be able to flex up and down, and one of the ways to do that is to use a pay-as-you-use supplier.

Q. Can you recommend some useful cost-saving solutions?

Cost saving shouldn't intrinsically come down to purchasing new technology: rather, it's about optimising your processes and then fitting technology solutions to streamline your best practice processes. This then filters down to all sectors of an organisation: HR, finance, IT, recruitment and registrations. There are all sorts of ways in which technology can support cost savings and efficiencies.

I don't think certain supposed cost-saving solutions, such as BYOD, always reap the benefits they promise. Yes, if staff and students bring their own devices, the university won't have to buy them one: however, having an infrastructure that is compatible with a whole range of devices may well cost you more.

Q. Are there ways in which ICT provision can be monetised (eg offering students different internet capacity/bandwidth at different tariffs)?

Fundamentally, when it comes to accessing the learning system, there has to be a basic level of ICT provision for students and it has to work as efficiently as possible, so I think it would be unwise to monetise standard services such as internet access. Having a decent ICT provision for students is just the cost of running your institution.

One way, though, in which universities could look at monetising their provision without affecting students is by outsourcing particular IT skills or offerings to other institutions. Say, for example, that your organisation has developed a brilliant in-house analytics system: you could then offer that system to another university or educational organisation.

Q. How should universities balance budgets while also future-proofing their ICT? Does more durable always mean more expensive?

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I find that approach a bit old-fashioned. Historically, it was thought that purchasing a more expensive system future-proofed your organisation. These days, universities want a more agile system, based on how you pass data between systems, rather than the physical interfaces or integrations between systems.

It's important to map your systems and your data and your data flows between those systems, and until you do that you won't fully understand the right solutions for your needs. This can be complicated, though, and it's important to seek help from your provider.

It's not about spending money, rather understanding how to evolve and keep updating. The danger is that you can embark on a big expensive project with all the latest equipment, but the systems it has to talk to develop and upgrade – and, within months, it needs updating again.

Q. What is the minimum that a university should be offering its students in terms of its ICT provision?

The very minimum universities should offer is great connectivity. Wherever you are on campus, remote connectivity from your living space, easy access to the systems, learning environments and being able to access those from multiple devices. Further to that, students now expect the ability to consume content within the learning system in a way that suits their learning style.

If you're not doing this at the very least, you are at some level not delivering the best learner journey for your students. It's always worth asking for feedback from your learning environment provider to see if you're meeting these requirements.

Q. Should ICT systems be updated on a piecemeal basis, or via more radical overhauls every few years?

Ideally, you should be planning and constantly evolving your system. You need to build that into your operational budget. This can often pose a challenge because the capital budget dictates
an 'is it broken, do you need to replace it?' approach, but there are some services that constantly need to be refreshed.

Somehow, it's building into your normal business an environment where you're continually upgrading, improving and developing your system. That becomes easier when you

move some of your key systems into the cloud, and you're not
tied to your existing data centre.

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