

Managing IT networks: are you in or out?

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As universities continue to replace old legacy systems and improve their IT infrastructures, Julian Lee, Senior Network Administrator at CoSector - University of London, discusses why outsourcing key IT provisions comes with concrete benefits.

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Managed ICT can include any number of services, from student records and email systems, to business applications and Management Information Systems (MIS).

As the education sector continues to leverage technology to innovate teaching and learning, it is often faced with rising costs; whether that's purchasing new software and hardware, or employing specialist staff, this often leaves schools and universities unable to progress their digital transformation plans. However, by choosing to outsource the underlying infrastructure, and the human resources required to use it, these costs can be significantly reduced, and far easier to manage.

Some technologies have become so engrained into the education sector, that it would almost be impossible to complete even a simple task without it. For the higher education sector, Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) are established within the infrastructure of

every university building and used by every student.

For many institutions, outsourcing responsibility for key IT functions, such as hosting and managing its VLE, comes with concrete benefits. Flexibility being one. Educational institutions have the option to outsource one or more IT systems, depending on their size, budget and requirements. Large educational institutions may manage all of their systems in-house, whereas many smaller schools and colleges rely more heavily on outsourced management.

Ensuring best usage

To ensure best usage, it really comes down to knowing and understanding what your customer base wants. With students however, that can be a challenge because they don't always tell us what they need, or want!

We, as a sector, need to keep an eye on future technology, and universities need to know the capacity of their existing wireless network to take on the increasing number of customers. In a high student footfall area, such as a halls of residence, this could be anything from a smart speaker, to an Xbox, to a standard mobile phone, or high-end desk top, and they want these connected, now, and it has to work all the time.

As a network manager, it is not often possible to interact with or talk to our customers, other than when a ticket comes in to the helpdesk, or when we are onsite fixing something we already know about. The type of helpdesk tickets that come in at the start of term can indicate a trend, so we need to be very reactive and design a strategy to deal with that efficiently and effectively. A recent example of a trend has been the rise in so called 'smart speakers'.

What's available for universities?

We have seen in the last couple of years that an increasing number of universities are spending money on replacing old legacy systems with up-to-date cloud-based student record systems, lecture streaming and capture systems, in a bid to simplify and improve the experience users have with the VLE.

It is crucial that universities have strong relationships with their outsourcing partners and suppliers so that network infrastructures remain up to date, secure, robust and fit for purpose. Student needs and requirements are changing all the time, and new technologies are constantly emerging and thus changing the learning landscape. Universities are therefore tasked with staying in tune with that, so ensuring a strong, two-way and flexible relationship with their outsourcing partner is crucial.

What you choose comes down to your institution's requirements, budget, and any constraints therein. A small institution may function perfectly well on some of the free network management systems available on the market, or could even rely on a home-

brew system built and managed internally. Alternatively, they could deploy a class-leading product such as Solarwinds, which has many modules and is highly configurable, so it offers flexibility and elasticity.

Should you outsource?

Outsourcing is always results driven. Customers want to see what they will get for their money, and they, rightly so, want bang for their buck.

When considering outsourcing and looking for value for money alongside if it's fit for purpose, they should ask – does this technology meet our business requirements, is it going to help us achieve our goals, and how can this ultimately improve our services to our students, while supporting our staff?

Spend in HE has, in recent years, come under heavy scrutiny. But today, universities across the UK are seeing significant ROI in digital, thanks to their partnerships with industry vendors. When IT responsibilities are outsourced, in-house staff can focus on the more pressing day-to-day concerns of business.

So, the question of whether to employ outsourced or in-house ICT provision, largely comes down to each institution's own specific needs, and how you can ensure you keep your students and staff happy.