Andrew McCreath – Visit Report to Houston May 2006

Date of Visit: 30th April 2006 – 4th May 2006.

1 Background.

I visited Houston as part of a delegation to Houston to attend the OTC (Offshore Technology Conference) and also took the chance to visit local University IT Directors.

2 Visits to Universities.

2.1 Rice University.

Visited:

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Kamran Khan
Rice University
Vice Provost for Information Technology
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www.rice.edu

He has overall responsibility for IT. Came across as passionate, forward thinking and well engaged with the Academic mission of Rice. Rice is one of the top research Universities in the US.

They use SCT banner as their student records system. Not a lot of his emphasis was on the administrative role of IT. He seemed more concerned with supporting the research and teaching functions of the University and in particular “Virtual Learning Environments” (VLE) and “Community Learning Environments”. They use the term “course management system” as a rough equivalent to our term VLE.

He was passionate about Open Source and they have a strategy for linking together a complimentary suite of open source / community source products to form a coherent **CLE**.

SAKAI. IT centres around the SAKAI project. Rice are a contributing partner. (http://www.sakaiproject.org). This project is intended to

compete directly with WebCT/Blackboard. It is not open source, more "community source" which means that it has the explicit backing and funding from a collection of partners, including many heavyweight North American Universities. It shares characteristics of open source, however, in that it is free for use and indeed commercial exploitation. Started in January 2004, it is not at this stage fully mature but has significant momentum behind it.

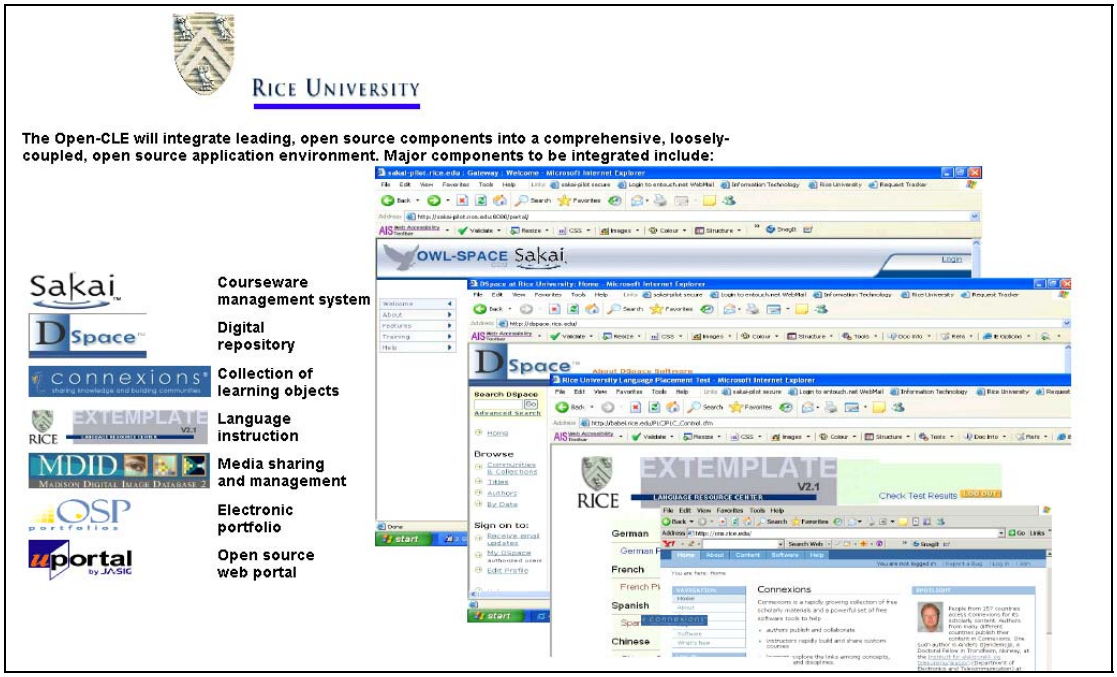
Connexions: (http://cnx.org) - Connexions is an initiative that started at Rice University is a rapidly growing collection of free scholarly materials and a set of free software tools to help authors publish and collaborate, instructors rapidly build and share custom courses; learners explore the links among concepts, courses, and disciplines. Beyond textbooks – makes this content dynamic and up to date. See also: http://creativecommons.org/education/connexions

Dspace. (http://www.dspace.org) Digital repository. Used by RGU.

MDID. (http://www.mdid.org) Developed at James Madison University, the Madison Digital Image Database (MDID) software brings the digital image library into the teaching and learning process. Since the first release in 2001 many institutions have implemented the MDID software with their own digital image collections. MDID2 users can share collections with each other, giving institutions instant access to previously unavailable image collections.

OSP. (http://www.osportfolio.org) An open source e-portfolio tool. Individual learners, teachers, and professionals create electronic portfolios to represent themselves using web-based software.

uPortal (http:/www.uportal.org) An open source set of software for creating and running portals.



A presentation of their CLE initiative can be found at the following URL (takes a long time to download):

http://ricetv.rice.edu/OpenCLE/Open_CLE.htm

Moving away from CLE, on the infrastructure side they have invested $22m in upgrading their Campus network. Khan was hired " to sort out a mess" a few years ago, and this is part of the solution. The network will be a mixed 10Gigabit/4Gigabit backbone.

They use Cyrus open source e-mail product, and support a limited number of e-mail clients across the University. As Cyrus supports open source protocols, many e-mail clients can be used, it's just that they support a few.

In terms of datacentre, they use storage area networks, but went for "Blue Arc" storage architecture which they found to be very cost effective and reliable. They foresee significant growth in storage demands and would like to treat this as a utility. Where Departments need more storage, he would like them to be able to request this online, in some sort of self service way, rather than requiring manual intervention by the IT Department.

They offer 1G storage for students, 2G – 3G for staff. Want to go to "no limits" on e-mail.

Disaster recovery – they do not have extensive provision. They have an externally hosted web site so that communication can be maintained in the event of an emergency, and they have an ability to bring up an "empty" e-mail system for their users so that historical e-mail is not available but they have an ability to communicate.

In terms of recharging, it's about 50:50. Their central services, web environment etc is funded by centrally, but they recharge specific costs (e.g. media services).

They allow students and staff to bring on their own laptops. Laptops are scanned automatically by "CISCO Clean Access" and only granted access to the network if they meet security criteria.

They have committee structures for IT, including security, and very much involve their Faculties in decisions around security, problem resolution, research capabilities, planned investment.

Their central IT Department runs main services, but each Faculty have technical leads who support all the equipment in labs. They don't provide support for students' own equipment, but standards and guidelines are on the web.

Business intelligence – they haven't looked at this.

Electronic document Management – they've just started looking. Companies like Documentum they regard as expensive. He mentioned a company called Filecontrol (Houston based, but with some UK Business).

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If they go ahead with document management, they would prefer an ASP approach.

He believed that the Higher Education sector was crying out for an outsourcer / ASP / Shared Service that really understood the sector and could provide a comprehensive tailored offering.

2.2 Texas Southern University.

Complete contrast to Rice University. State-funded, predominantly coloured (due to history) teaching University.

I met with:

Abner Terrell,
Assistant Vice President,
Office of Information Technology,

Texas Southern University,
3100 Cleburne Street,
Houston,
Texas 77004.
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He joined the University from the Private sector (SCT). In 1999 TSU decided to outsource their core IT systems. Originally to Collegis (formed from SCT) which was then bought by Sun Guard which in turn then bought Banner. Something like 68 Universities in USA have an outsourced IT facility according to Abner.

His main responsibility is the governance of the outsourced arrangements, policies and procedures etc.

Collegis have 27 staff on site.

Each Faculty have their own frontline IT staff whose main job it is to install and support local software.

They use Blackboard VLE.

Main drivers for outsourcing were (a) better access to critical skills (high demand in Houston against what they were able to pay) (b) resource flexibility and no HR issues about hiring/firing (c) strongest support for a critical service, including 24x7 availability (d) supplier can exploit economies of scale to utilise peaks and troughs in demand.

They have upgraded their Campus network, and installed IP phones throughout. The help desk can be several States away, but through the IP phone system users see no difference.

Service is delivered to key SLAs.

In terms of the SCT Banner product, they used to have over 300 customisations on top of the base product. They now have reduced this to 46 as part of a strategy of sticking with standard systems. Many of these 46 are required by state legislation (our HESA equivalent). Additional benefits are much lower cost and timescales for upgrades since only a small number of modifications have to be carried forward.

Disaster Recovery is very important for them, and they have arrangements through their outsourced supplier – though it doesn't appear to be a hot standby, more the ability to rebuild standard systems offsite from backup tapes. With hurricanes, they need backup facilities in another state – not just down the road!

Many of their students arrive on campus with little prior IT knowledge. Strategically, they have not bothered with wireless networks because none of their students can afford laptops. Leaving that aside, however, their overall IT setup was modern and up to date, based on Windows

server technology/storage area networks with standard Microsoft Exchange e-mail system etc.

They have a full time security officer – this is a State requirement for all state-funded institutions. This officer has to submit regular security reports and the Institution is required to implement a security policy based on standard guidelines. A lot of this emerged from 9/11.

2.3 University of Houston Clearlake.

Part of the University of Houston system (a federation of largely autonomous institutions but sharing some common central resources and systems – including for example a Peoplesoft system).

I met:

Michael Livingston
Director Infrastructure and Support Services
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Box 230
Houston, TX 77058
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livingston@uhcl.edu

Not the top guy, and a touch “techie” but useful information.

Clearlake is primarily focused on adult education. So, it’s quieter during the day and gets busy at night, being located on a busy commuter route. State Funded, with very spacious Campus – lots of open space, river, and wildlife (including alligators).

Their help desk offers a laptop lending scheme. Students drop off their matriculation card and exchange it for a University laptop. Many open areas with wireless access where they can use these. Laptops have a built in satellite GPS system – if they are pinched, then the next time they are connected to the internet the laptop notifies Dell where it is!

They allow people to access the network with their own laptops, but do not provide any support for personal laptops. They use LEAP authentication (CISCO protocol) which I gather had been problematic but they have now got to work well.

They buy desktops in major consignments, which means that they have large blocks of similar PC’s and less variation than other Universities. They do not deliver specialist coursework software using Novell or SMS, but they incorporate about 100 standard software applications into the standard build, which they then Ghost out. Separate PC’s are identified in each lab for the use of specialist software.

Their computing labs have many PC's set in cubicles for privacy. In one of their new buildings, they have included a large PC lab. PC's are arranged not in rows, but around the side of the room, around pillars etc, to leave significant space elsewhere in the lab. Idea for this was to allow laptop users to share the lab using wireless, but this hasn't taken off. Interestingly, they do not seem to have embraced the Learning Resource Centre concept by combining IT and Library.

They do all their own PC repairs – down to board level. In spite of the fact that they buy from Dell. Bizarre, but they claim it gives them cheaper warranty as the supplier just has to ship spare parts.

They use WebCT. They rely on the central Peoplesoft system for their student record support etc.

Disaster Recovery – they have no significant provision. Their Principal believes that in a disaster there will be other things to worry about other than IT.

Extract from an e-mail gives more detail on their technician support arrangements:

"Here is our link to our support software and hardware that we provide to the university. We are currently trying to get the university committees to help us revise the software list but I think you will get the ideal what the list does for support. We answer all questions regarding the recommended/supported software.

One thing that we did not discuss is the use of Computer Coordinators. We have personnel paid 100% by UCT to support PC's and related software. In addition, each of the schools provide 50% of a person's salary and we pay 50% of the person's salary. The idea of the split salary allows the schools to set the "what" for projects and service level agreements for their faculty and staff and we get to set the "how". This allows the schools control over time spent while we get to ensure consistency of hardware and software used. If a school wants to implement software on the PC's that is special to their school (not on the Supported Software list), the school understands that their resources will have to support it 100%. The Computer Coordinators are the folks that go to people's offices to deliver/pickup PC's, install custom software, provide troubleshooting assistance that the Support Center cannot provide remotely. Every school and major division has a Computer Coordinator; i.e. President, Provost, Finance and Administration, schools. In some cases a division may share a Computer Coordinator since the division cannot keep one person busy 100% of the time. Except for the school Computer Coordinators, UCT funds the positions 100%

SOFTWARE

http://prtl.uhcl.edu/portal/page?_pageid=285,1,285_190470&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTALP&OSS=/uct/tech/RECOMMENDED_SUPPORTED_SOFTWARE

HARDWARE

http://prtl.uhcl.edu/portal/page?_pageid=285,171309,285_171341&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTALP"

Andrew McCreath
18th May 2006.