
Putting library staff back into libraries



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Recent events at Bangor University have, inevitably, led to speculation about the future of academic librarianship. The *Times higher* for 11 February 2005 led with the headline 'End of the story for librarians?'¹ and even those who believe the difficulties at Bangor are of limited general significance are concerned about the effect the precedent it creates may have on the perceptions of university senior managers. As I write, CILIP are acting on behalf of the staff, and our profession, at Bangor and we must all hope that they succeed.

The purpose of this article, however, is to argue that, far from being at a point where academic librarianship is set to decline, we may actually be at the beginning of a period of exceptional growth and renewal. In particular, I believe that we have the opportunity to create libraries in which the abundance and quality of support our readers receive from library staff is greater than it has ever been.

THE 1980s AND 1990s: TAKING STAFF OUT OF LIBRARIES

To appreciate the possibility we have before us, we need to consider how our libraries developed in the 1980s and 1990s, and the particular external pressures that led us to take the path we then did. Over this period universities suffered a precipitate decline in funding per student and a huge expansion in student numbers. Libraries responded by creating services that required fewer library staff members to cater for a given number of users. To do otherwise would have been entirely irresponsible: it would have led to impossibly heavy workloads on our staff and persistent service failure. Among the techniques we used to cope with the unprecedented level of demand upon us were:

- Using technology to improve efficiency (for example, sharing electronic catalogue records)

to reduce the need for original cataloguing at each institution)

- Using technology to enable readers to do things for themselves that previously had to be done by library staff (for example, renewing books via OPAC)
- Achieving economies of scale (for example by amalgamating small departmental libraries into larger units)

Among the inevitable consequences of this was a tendency for libraries to become more impersonal and anonymous places, with fewer interactions between library staff and readers. Sometimes this was simply because, as with issuing books for example, the process was speeded up, reducing the possibility of friendly exchange. Sometimes it took place through a deliberate reduction of service points, as when multiple help desks on different floors of a large library were replaced by a single enquiry desk at the library entrance.

The closure of departmental libraries illustrates particularly vividly both the gains and losses in the process I am describing. Small departmental libraries are hugely expensive to run; they require libraries to devote a disproportionate share of library funding to the particular narrow groups they serve; and the liberation of resources to which their closure leads can allow substantial improvements in the general library service which benefit all its users. For example, closing a departmental library may allow the parent library to open its main site for longer hours, which means both that general users benefit and the users of the former departmental library are able to access resources for longer hours.

However, something important is lost in this process, besides the convenience to departmental library users of having a library close to where they work and socialise. Because of their scale and intimacy, departmental libraries are particularly responsive to the needs of their departments. They maintain good contact with academic staff; they are able to track academic developments closely; and they come to know their students, to whom they provide friendly and knowledgeable support (friendly because they relate to them as individuals, and knowledgeable because they know both about the information resources the students use and the information needs that the syllabus dictates).

I am not arguing that we should maintain uneconomic departmental libraries, or indeed that we should reintroduce card issue systems in order

to allow library staff to spend more time with users! I do believe, however, that we should be conscious of what we have lost in developing the more streamlined and anonymous services we now have, and that we should be alert for opportunities to introduce services that allow us to regain the level of friendly support achieved by the best departmental libraries – albeit within the context of larger libraries whose efficiencies allow us to provide comprehensive services for long hours.

I also believe that our notion of ‘progress’ in the provision of library services needs to be adjusted to reflect the idea that the provision of easy and abundant access to library staff expertise and help is a crucial aspect of excellence in library provision. During the 1980s and 1990s we came to think of the most ‘progressive’ libraries as being those that made advances in information technology most rapidly available to their users, and those that achieved the most impressive efficiency gains by introducing systems that ran with minimum staff intervention. We were, of course, concerned with the *quality* of human support (this was after all the period that saw the rise of ‘customer care’) but only within the context of a declining *quantity* of such support. The competition between us was principally about technical innovation, breadth of information access, streamlining and efficiency, formal quality standards, convenience and hours of availability, introducing new services, and creating superior buildings. It was not about making the maximum amount of human support and expertise easily available to our users. Nor could it have been: the financial imperatives I described earlier meant that, inevitably, we had to reduce the amount of individual support our users received.

2005 ONWARDS: PUTTING STAFF BACK IN TO LIBRARIES?

But has anything changed to allow us to reorder our priorities and put more time into providing direct support to users? I believe it has.

Firstly, we are not engaged in as desperate a struggle to keep our heads above water as we were in the ‘80s and most of the ‘90s. We have still had to make efficiency gains over the last few years, because library spending per FTE student has continued to decline in real terms, but the gains we have had to make are not as great as in former years². For example, there has been an increase of 13% in the number of students per staff member between 1997/98 and 2002/3; but this compares with an increase of 19% in the single year between

1995/96 and 1996/97! (and it is worth reminding ourselves that, had the Conservatives won the 1997 election, they were projecting a 4% decline in spending on universities in the subsequent year).

Of course the fact that the screw is tightening less slowly than it once was calls for only modified rapture, but when we look at indices of activity in libraries over the last few years it becomes apparent that there may be more slack in the system than the headline figures allow for. The SCONUL statistics I have quoted above appear to demonstrate a workload increase of 13% between 1997/98 and 2002/03; but those additional students only, in general, generate additional workload if they visit our libraries, ask us questions or use our materials. When we look at the actual SCONUL indices of activity over the same period we see that, over SCONUL institutions as a whole

- Visits annually per FTE user declined from 73 to 56 (23% reduction)
- Enquiries declined from 10.1 per FTE student to 7.8 (23% reduction)
- There was a 40% decline in ILLs as a proportion of overall loans.
- Annual loans declined from 54 per FTE student to 52*

What these figures indicate, then, is that, in most libraries, a decline in some of the demands upon us could be used as an opportunity to release staff time to provide more one-to-one support to users (either face to face or using C&IT). We also, of course, have techniques at our disposal that can reduce workload further. Those libraries that have comprehensively redesigned their systems to encourage self-issue, for example have not found it difficult to increase the self-issue proportion to well above 70% of the total. Though our instinct tends to be to cash in such improvements as a

* The loans figure is almost certainly an underestimate of the extent to which the library workload connected with the issue, return and re-shelving of books has reduced, because the figure does not differentiate between 'first-time issues' and renewals. In both the libraries I have managed recently the proportion of renewals in the issue figure total has increased markedly, largely as a result of the facility to renew books via OPAC or the internet. While it may be legitimate to treat these as 'issues' for the purposes of the SCONUL statistics, an online renewal has almost no impact on workload. Figures based upon first time issues would, I believe, be a better workload indicator, and I would be surprised if they did not show a substantial decline across SCONUL libraries.

'saving' or an efficiency gain, there is no reason why we should not seek to channel the staff time saved into providing better direct support to users. The reports from member libraries in a previous *SCONUL Focus* contain an account by Sue White of how, at the University of Huddersfield, the savings in library assistant time resulting from the introduction of self-issue were used to create a new role of 'Library Guide'³. The Library Guides are library assistants who are available in the foyer area of the library to show readers how to use basic services and take them to the areas of the library or the specialist staff they need to make use of.

A second cause for optimism lies in the fact that the changes to university funding over the next few years will mean that, where we can demonstrate that we can introduce improvements to give our universities competitive advantage, we have a better opportunity to secure additional resources than we have had for many years. Although universities are being rightly cautious about the increase in income that will result from the introduction of 'variable' fees, most are projecting a significant increase in available funds. Although an 'opportunity' to secure additional funding is nothing like a guarantee – and libraries have had an undistinguished track record of securing their fair share of the additional funding that has come to higher education since 1997 – fortune favours the brave and the prepared. If we can present an exciting vision to our parent institutions of improved library staff support leading to better learning, improved student satisfaction and greater research competitiveness we may be more successful in getting our share of additional funding than our previous experience has led us to expect.

A further impetus towards providing better personal support to users may be provided by the changing nature of competition between our libraries. Although competition between university libraries is courteous, amiable and moderated by a strong leaven of cooperation, we do, nevertheless, compete. We try to differentiate ourselves from one another in what we do in order to increase the competitiveness of our parent institutions. One way in which we have traditionally competed with one another is, of course, in terms of the breadth of access to the stock we provide. This has, however, already become considerably less salient as a differentiator between libraries. There has been an astonishing convergence, for example, in the number of journal titles available to users in different types of institution. Though

differentiation through book stock is still significant, it will weaken significantly as a result of initiatives like the recently announced Google venture to digitise out-of-copyright materials at major research universities. How much competitive advantage will a university library's excellent holdings of nineteenth century monographs confer upon it, for example, once the Bodleian's collection of one to one and a half million such items is available online?

In recent decades, of course, much of our competition has been about technical innovation but, even here, there seems to be a certain cooling off. If one compares the *SCONUL Vision* for 2005, for example, with the *Vision* for 2010, technological 'big ideas' are less dominant as drivers of development in the latter document⁴. Though it is always risky to suggest that the motor of technological progress has stalled, specific technological changes have not been as central to the long term library plans I have seen recently as in similar documents from five or ten years ago. There are other areas where competition remains, but is muted compared to a decade ago: we still aspire to provide excellent buildings but the glory days of post-Follett funding are over; libraries are still vying with one another to extend opening hours, but there is nowhere to go after 24 hour opening.

If future competition between libraries is going to be less about stock provision, and less about technology, what is it going to be more about? The answer will, of course, be whatever we collectively determine it to be, but I would suggest that a plausible and desirable alternative would be a rivalry to make the maximum amount of friendly expertise available to every user of our libraries. This is certainly the most significant strand in the draft strategy produced by my own library, at Liverpool University, for the period 2005/09. Our aim is to maximise the proportion of staff time available to users. If our plans are fully funded we will provide:

- full reception services, rather than just the current 'security' desks at library entrances
- roving helpers at the entrance to the library
- roving help in computer areas
- subject-focused help desks in different areas and on different floors of our libraries, not merely in entrance areas
- larger faculty teams, allowing us to provide much more personalised support to both students and researchers
- increased one to one support to distance learning students.

Even if our plans are not fully funded, our main developmental priority will be to move nearer to the ideal of abundant, friendly and expert staff support set out in the plan.

IS DRAMATIC IMPROVEMENT IN THE AVAILABILITY OF SUPPORT TO USERS REALLY ACHIEVABLE OR DESIRABLE?

The vision I have set out here is of academic libraries where users find human help easily and plentifully available. As such, it runs counter to the strong instinct, hard-wired into our brains by the privations of the 80s and 90s, to encourage user self-sufficiency. One possible objection to this is that, regardless of its feasibility, it is not even desirable to increase help in this way, and that what is set out here mistakes quantity of help for quality. In extreme cases, of course, this criticism could be justified: a library providing friendly and focused help through a small number of expert staff would be better than one that provided abundant but misleading and dourly delivered assistance; but all things being equal, and with proper training and development, a library providing plentiful help will be better than one that dispenses help only frugally. In the real world quality of support is, inevitably, largely a function of quantity.

It might also be objected that encouraging self-sufficiency for library users is good, and the spoon-feeding that is more likely to occur if staff help is generously available is bad. This argument is hard to sustain if one subscribes to the prevailing modern view that library users are, or are at least strongly akin to, 'customers'. Customers prefer organisations from which they can obtain help instantly – where nothing is too much trouble – to those that ration help parsimoniously. Like Mae West, they think that too much of a good thing can be wonderful. Even if we take the view that it is an oversimplification to see library users purely as customers – because they need to achieve self-sufficiency in information searching whether they want them or not – it still seems to me more likely that students will acquire, or reinforce, these skills in organisations where one to one coaching and mentoring are easily available.

A further objection might be that the relative optimism of my analysis does not accord with reality – that the financial pressures we will face over the next decade may mean that the scope for the expansion of support I am advocating simply does not exist. Only time will tell of course, but I find it hard to believe that there is no scope for such an improvement if we have the will to

achieve it. In many libraries the staff that are easily available to readers for the provision of advice and assistance form a very small proportion of total staff numbers; it is not uncommon to find academic libraries employing hundreds of staff making only one or two people easily available to answer enquiries. It seems inconceivable that there is no scope for improvement in such situations.

A final objection might be that placing such emphasis on the expansion of staff support ignores the reality of the position academic libraries are now in – one in which we are no longer monopoly suppliers of information to our users and where, increasingly, our libraries are not even the main source of academic information for some groups of users. Those same statistics that I quote above to show that there may be scope for redeployment of staff time to user support also demonstrate clearly how the tide is going out for libraries as physical collections. Even our position as the principal suppliers of quality-validated electronic information within our respective institutions will eventually be eroded. But the one aspect of our operations that can escape ultimate extinction is our own ability to add value to the information world by our knowledge of what it contains and how it relates to the needs of our users. It makes eminently good sense to place our people and their expertise at the centre of our strategic thinking because, in the end, all that will survive of us is staff.

Notes

- 1 Tysome, Tony, 'Librarians under threat', *Times higher education supplement*, 11 February 2005, p.8.
- 2 All the statistical references in this article are to the *SCONUL library statistics: trend analysis to 2002/3* by Claire Creaser, available at www.sconul.ac.uk/pubs_stats/stats_internal/trends02-03.pdf
- 3 *SCONUL Focus*, (32) Summer / Autumn 2004, p.75
- 4 The *SCONUL Visions for 2005 and 2010* are both available at www.sconul.ac.uk/pubs_stats/