
Taking a planned approach to evaluation

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The importance of adopting a coherent approach to library evaluation cannot be overstated. All too often, time and other resource constraints mean that libraries are forced to conduct evaluations on an ad hoc basis. This regularly results in a failure to make use of existing data; inability to learn from previous experiences; and duplication of effort. Rather than see evaluation as something which is carried out as a knee-jerk reaction to demands from senior management or external funders, libraries need to build a rational evaluation plan as an integral part of their planning cycle and which exploits the range of sources of evidence available to support decision making. This is the approach which has been undertaken during the last year by UCE Library Services.

Evidence base the research and evaluation unit which joined the library service in February 2004, has been working with Library Services to develop a wide-ranging ongoing evaluation plan that will be embedded into service development. In addition to carrying out externally funded projects, the staff of evidence base have worked with the library staff on a range of evaluation activities, including a survey to evaluate students' experience of the induction process; a survey of academic staff; and a survey of students in all faculties to try to identify why some students make limited use of the library.

The approach taken was to develop a plan that would:

- be ongoing and provide the context and framework within which specific evaluation activities can be placed

- support a rolling programme of evaluation that can be used year on year
- be flexible, in order to take into account external factors such as the university and library planning cycles and internal factors such as the changing evaluation needs of the service.

As a starting point, staff at evidence base developed a methodology for conducting an 'evidence audit' for the library service. The evidence audit was broad in scope focusing both on information collected and available within the library services and that produced and available externally. The evidence audit sought to elicit information in the following broad areas:

- what research and evaluation activities are already taking place in UCE Library Services
- what other research and evaluation activities are taking place outside the library that may provide useful sources of evaluation data for the library
- what types of data are required within the library and externally
- what are the critical points at which evaluation data could feed into the decision making process
- what are the key processes which generate a need for evaluation data
- who is using, or likely to require evaluation data
- who are currently the key producers and users of evaluation data.

A key stage of the planning process asked the library management group to list previous evaluation and research undertaken and other data collected. The aim of this exercise was to identify where existing data could be utilised to inform planning and where the gaps were. One section asked for details of any problems experienced in previous evaluation activities and what had worked well in the past. This would enable a knowledge bank of successes and challenges to evaluation to be developed over time, which any member of staff undertaking an evaluation activity could draw upon.

In order to make use of the data collected through the evidence audit to develop the evaluation plan, additional context –setting and forward– planning activities were undertaken. The library management group were tasked with identifying the key strategic and operational themes that were anticipated to be of importance to the library service and the university in the short and medium term.

This included analysis of the library strategic plan and other university documentation as well as reflection on the likely trends affecting the external environment. This included themes such as contributing to student progression and retention; widening participation; developing electronic services and staff development. They also reflected on the types of information which they were regularly asked to provide, for example, internal budget plans and SCOUNL returns, in order to identify key dates in the evaluation cycle. This information was recorded in a systematic way in the audit document, which was then used to develop the evaluation plan. Undertaking the audit also proved valuable as it allowed the library management group to reflect and take stock of the evaluation activities which had been already done, in addition to allowing evidence base to gauge the extent of previous and current evaluation activity.

The audit was then used as a basis to decide on a programme of evaluation activities, which would provide data relating to the themes identified. As one of the Library Services' main areas of development was student progression, it was decided to focus initially on carrying out surveys of academic staff and students to try to identify why some students were low or non-users of Library Services and what might encourage them to make better use of the services available. Of course, most libraries carry out regular student surveys, but these are often extremely general and although this can be useful to identify longitudinal trends, it does not allow issues of immediate concern to be investigated in depth. As UCE Library Services were specifically interested in reasons for low and non-use of services and whether this had a relationship to student retention, a survey was devised to ask students in detail about their current use and perceptions of library services, for example: which services they used; how often they visited or used the library from off-campus; their impressions of the faculty librarians; whether they used other libraries; and whether they had attended an induction session. In April 2004, this survey was piloted with two faculties. Faculty librarians were actively involved in supporting this exercise. They were asked to suggest ways in which the survey might be distributed in order to get the highest response rate, including from low and non-users of library services. It was decided that handing out surveys at the end of lectures and, if possible, collecting them in as students left, was most likely to achieve a high response rate. The faculty librarians worked closely with academic and admin-

istrative staff in their faculties to secure their support and try to reach the maximum number of first year students.

The survey was analysed and a report prepared which was initially shared with the library management group and later all relevant staff. This raised a number of interesting issues which the library management group is currently in the process of responding to. Responses and actions are being shared with staff of the faculties concerned. A paper will shortly be produced identifying areas for action arising from these surveys and the solutions planned. Actions will be included in the next revision of the library's development plan.

Learning from the experiences in the two pilot faculties, this survey, with slight revisions, was rolled out across all faculties in November 2004. The same process of considering the issues raised and identifying responses which can be built into the library operational plan will be carried out for these surveys.

To complement these student surveys, an online survey open to all academic staff at UCE was carried out. This asked staff about a number of topics, including: their impressions of the library; whether they encouraged their students to use the library; what use they made of library services and resources in their teaching; and what factors they believed prevented students from making greater use of library services. As with the student surveys, a report has been prepared and presented to the library management group who are currently considering the issues raised and deciding how they might best respond. The information from this survey has helped to inform a series of brown bag lunches organised by Library Services to which staff have been invited to share their views in more depth.

The final, and perhaps the most interesting, aspect of the evaluation plan for 2004 involved a survey of all first year undergraduates attending library introduction sessions. It was felt that as this was the only occasion when a significant proportion of students would have contact with library staff it was crucial that this session was as effective as possible and encouraged students to make use of library services in the future. Again, the faculty librarians were actively involved in this activity, handing out surveys at the end of each introduction session. When the results of this survey are analysed, they will be used to identify possible improvements to the current induction process.

Taking a long-term strategic approach to evaluation means that evaluation activities are not planned in isolation and single activities can be used to provide data against more than one of the strategic themes. In addition, the cohesive approach is enabling evidence base to develop a bank of staff and students who can be approached to provide evaluation data for other activities in the future. For example, the library introduction survey asked students to provide their contact details if they were prepared to take part in further evaluation activities in the future. As part of the structured evaluation plan, it is intended to contact students later in their course in order to evaluate the appropriateness of the information they received at induction with the benefit of hindsight. In addition, the library service plans to set up an evaluation user group who can be contacted in the future to take part in further evaluation activities such as focus groups and act as a test group for new initiatives.

The evaluation plan has been updated at regular intervals throughout the year as new activities have been carried out and now functions as an ongoing working dynamic document. Although most activities to date have focused on using surveys, evidence base staff will be working with the library service in the future to conduct evaluations using a number of different methods. UCE library service has, therefore, made huge steps forward over the course of the last year in terms of its approach to evaluation. There is now a coherent plan which, while flexible enough to allow for changes in institutional priorities, external demands and so forth, provides a framework and gives a clear focus to evaluation activities. Evaluation planning has now become an integral part of the library planning cycle.

For more information on the evaluation planning framework adopted at UCE, contact Pete. Dalton@uce.ac.uk.