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# How many books should we be loaning to our academic staff, researchers and students???

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I must say that in the 16 years I have worked as a librarian this is not really a question I had ever asked myself.

I do, however, go out and visit my academic colleagues quite a lot in order to try and see if there is any way I can make their lives easier in the pressurised world of higher education they face these days. I also attend meetings with students whenever I get the opportunity.

In both sets of contacts with my core customers I am always looking to see if there is any way we can improve the services or resources that the learning resources centre (LRC) makes available. This often requires me to look at the library bureaucracies that have built up over time and to ask myself why they are there, and if they could in fact be altered in order to make our customers' lives easier.

Over the years I have had the odd comment from students, especially final-year students, that they would like to be able to borrow more books than our current 10 standard plus 2 short-loan items limit (which has been the policy here since I arrived in 1990). I do not know who made this policy originally or on what it was based; like many of our systems, once it was put in place we just accepted it, worked to it and have defended it but without asking why.

On the same basis our academic staff members have been able to borrow up to 15 items on standard and one-week loan plus 2 short-loan items.

It came as something of a surprise to me that the issue of the total number of loans to staff came up several times early in 2006. This issue was not identified by my visits and chats with staff, however, but from some cross-departmental research I was doing for a University, College and Research Group (Wales) (C&R (Wales)) talk entitled 'Building an individual library service for each user'. (See <http://www.swan.ac.uk/lis/ucrwales/eng/pastevents.htm> for my PowerPoint presentation.)

In putting this talk together I e-mailed several of our academic staff members, across different faculties and with different lengths of service and at different levels of their profession, and asked them if they would draw up a list of the top ten problems they faced in their jobs, and especially in their interaction with the LRC and its services, resources and staff. I promised them anonymity and asked them to be as blunt as they could be.

I found the issues that arose from these lists to be fascinating, and of extreme interest to me. They shed a totally different light on the experiences of my academic colleagues and raised several issues that I thought I should definitely look into further once I had delivered my talk. (Some items from the lists can be found on the slides from my talk on the website above.)

One item that came up several times, and that was quite unexpected by me, was the matter of the total number of loans that members of staff were allowed. This was especially important in connection with preparation for the teaching of new courses.

In order to find out what other higher education institutions across Wales and the UK did, in March 2006 I put out a request on lis-link for colleagues in other higher education libraries to tell me how many items they allowed on loan to academic staff members, researchers and students.

Much to my surprise I had over fifty replies (by the far the most I have ever had to a query on any list). Colleagues included not only the total numbers of loans allowed but quite a lot of other details as well. LRC staff here at Glamorgan then kindly tabulated all the information and put it on an Excel spreadsheet. (This is still available; if anyone would like a copy please e-mail me at the address above and I will send you one.)

The general results were as follows.

- Limits on staff loans ranged from 8 to 50/ unlimited. More important, as far as I was concerned, was that two-thirds of the libraries loaned up to 20 items or more, and that was five items more than we did.
- Undergraduate limits ranged from 4 items to 30, with by far the majority being between 10 and 12 items. Here we were bang on the average.
- Limits for researchers ranged from 8 to 50 items. There was a much bigger spread in loan numbers here, so it was hard to say what the average was. This issue is more difficult for us at Glamorgan because we have more than one type of researcher. There are paid research staff, who are members of university staff and so have the same entitlement as other academic staff. Therefore any changes we made to academic staff total loans would also benefit them. However, PhD researchers, especially those on taught courses, are considered to be students and would therefore be limited to the normal student loan totals.

Having got this information, what was I to do with it to try and change our policy and bring us more into line with other higher education institutions?

I forwarded the information to information librarian colleagues at Glamorgan by e-mail and it was put as a discussion item on our information services meeting agenda. Once again to my surprise, there was not whole-hearted support for a change. Several colleagues felt that we had not had any widespread feedback from academic staff that a change was needed, and so they felt there was no need for one. Others felt that to increase loans to staff would have a negative effect on loans to students, especially because standard loan items are lent to staff for a whole term and not just for a month as for students. To be fair, different colleagues representing different subject areas had different approaches, based on their individual experiences, book budgets and the pressure on their loan stock.

In the end we decided to find out, if we could, what percentage of staff actually took out their full limit of 15 items at any one time. If we found that the majority of academic staff members always had out their full entitlement then we could expect staff loans to go up substantially,

since logically if they were allowed to borrow another 5 items and they were all mostly at their maximum limit already then the chances of their borrowing up to the new limit would be quite high. If, on the other hand, only a few staff were currently borrowing their full allocation then there was no reason to expect that pattern to change drastically.

Our technical services department did this research for us, using business objects software to interrogate our library system and extract the loans information.

What they found was that:

In 2005:

- 922 staff members borrowed 12,095 items (an average of 13.11 items per borrower for the year).
- The range of borrowing was between 1 and 118 items in the 12 months.
- Only 36 staff borrowed in excess of 50 items in the 12 months.
- The majority of staff – 886 individuals – borrowed between 1 and 50 items in the 12 months.

In 2004:

- 928 staff members borrowed 12,827 items (an average of 13.82 items per borrower for the year).
- The range of borrowing was between 1 and 153 items in the 12 months.
- Only 41 staff borrowed in excess of 50 items in the 12 months.
- The majority of staff – 887 individuals – borrowed between 1 and 50 items in the 12 months.

From this information it appeared unlikely that we would be swamped with a whole mass of extra staff borrowing, depriving students of loan items. When this information was fed back to colleagues there was a majority in favour of a proposal to increase the maximum number of loans for all university staff, including academics and staff researchers, to 20 items of standard and one-week loans, plus 2 short-loan items. The head

of information services then took this proposal to the senior management team, and from there it eventually went forward to the learning resources planning group.

I was pleased that the proposal was accepted and that the new loan limits for staff were adopted for the academic year 2006–2007.

I did try to increase the loan limits for student researchers and final-year undergraduates at the same time but this was more controversial, and it was felt that to combine the staff application with the student/ researcher one might doom both to failure. I hope to return to the issue of loans to student researchers and final-year students later in 2007 to see if we can effect a positive change in the total number of loans to these groups as well.

I have learnt a lot from this exercise:

- a) We should always listen to our customers, and asking them to describe the biggest problems they face in their jobs – especially where this involves the LRC – can be a good way of getting insights into how our systems, services and bureaucracies impinge on their lives.
- b) When we discover things that are a problem for our customers we should ask ourselves ‘Can our systems be changed or made more flexible in order to accommodate our customers?’, even if it is a minority of them who need the change. Sometimes the systems cannot be changed for technical or other good operational reasons, but my feeling is that this is often not the case and that we just do not ask the question.
- c) Having discovered a problem we should try and see if we can resolve it.
- d) Altering things that we have always done for years is not an easy process.
- e) Research using information from other institutions and from in-house systems can provide valuable information that can lead to getting a consensus for change.
- f) In the end you need the support of your senior management team if change is to be effected.
- g) Do not try to do too much in one go. Break down the problem into manageable change-chunks and try to get the changes brought in bit by bit over time.