
Academic liaison librarians – where do we stand?

(A personal view)



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In their article 'Dangerous liaisons?', John Rodwell and Linden Fairbairn of the University of Sydney observe that 'this is a time of flux in the definition of what the faculty liaison librarian role can and should encompass'.¹ Developments in the external and internal environments of universities, their study finds, are driving the evolution of library liaison, creating fluidity in the role description. As one of the first two academic liaison librarians to be appointed at the University of St Andrews, in January 2007, I have experienced at first hand both the challenges and satisfactions of attempting to fulfil a role which is as yet a 'work in progress'. Keeping my eye on the moving goalposts of the university's strategic plans, I have had to focus sharply on the potential scope and capabilities of my own role, and to emphasise flexibility and adaptability as essential to my approach.

My initial job-description made daunting reading. Liaison with academic schools in the faculties of arts and divinity was, of course, my main purpose, but from this platform stemmed multiple other activities. I was expected to provide specialised subject support for designated subject areas, to deliver information literacy and research skills programmes, to work with colleagues in collection management to ensure that library resources are exploited to maximum effect, to provide specialist information assistance and interventions, to support the general enquiry service and to develop information resources and services. In addition my colleague and I would assume cross-library responsibility for official publications and reference services, find new ways of communicating with customers and promoting library resources, develop strategies and provide services relevant to the research and teaching

needs of the university and engage in a full range of staff-development activities, including presenting at conferences, writing articles and engaging in scholarly activities. My remaining energies I would reserve for 'any other duties appropriate to the role'.

What did all this mean in practice? The post's edgy relationship with subject librarianship was apparent from the start. Since the provision of 'specialised subject support' and 'specialist information assistance' was prominent in my job-description, I was clearly expected in part at least to fulfil this role. With only two of us in post, however, the entire universe of knowledge had to be divided between us – a task on which we embarked with a sense of tackling the near-impossible! I assumed responsibility for the seventeen departments in the faculties of arts and divinity, my colleague for the nine in the faculties of science and medicine. I learned quickly that I was required to know as much about resources for art historians as about the business information needs of economists and management students. In a precipitous learning curve, I absorbed as much subject knowledge as I could about the disparate areas I now covered, which included classics, English, film studies, history, international relations, modern languages, music, philosophy and social anthropology. Designated 'academic liaison librarians' in the exciting new 21st-century terminology, my colleague and I remained to the academic world at large simply 'subject librarians', and we were consistently welcomed as such by academic staff.

Even from the early weeks of our appointments, it was clear that we would have to work hard to define our purpose, and to persuade both our academic and our library colleagues that there was more to our liaison roles than that of subject librarian. While subject specialism was a useful jumping-off point for our activities, we had to stress the many other directions in which we planned to develop. The need to market ourselves and our new liaison product became quickly apparent.

With visibility crucial to the role, we created academic liaison web-pages explaining our mission and setting out our services.² We foregrounded our teaching, emphasising that we would now take this beyond the traditional 'database search techniques' classes and offer new sessions on setting up RSS feeds, creating subject-portals in PageFlakes, 'optimising Google', using bibliographic referencing services such as RefWorks and

Endnote and other aspects of information literacy training. The enthusiastic response to this newly extended programme in both the arts and the sciences has been gratifying, and has kept us particularly busy at the start of each semester. Responding to our job-description's requirement to 'find new ways of communicating with customers' we both made time to work on additional teaching projects. I developed an interactive online tutorial to run from the library's web-pages, providing self-help guidance for students and staff on how to satisfy a wide range of information needs, and my colleague worked on developing the potential of Second Life as an environment for information literacy tuition.³

Defining our role further was the fact that our activities were frequently outward-facing and took us beyond the library. We went out to speak to people, making the most of every opportunity to communicate with our schools and departments, and creating opportunities where none were forthcoming. We addressed school councils and lunchtime seminars, delivered 'staff update sessions' and organised common-room coffee visits. We spoke at staff and student induction days, networked at GRADSkills conferences and inveigled our way into the busy programme of orientation-week activities. We were presenters at an open forum of the teaching, learning and assessment committee, outlining the purpose of academic liaison and the value of information literacy teaching. Our theme was consistently, 'The library has much to offer. Tell us what you are doing, so that we can match its provision to your needs.' Often, too, our work developed in response to events in the larger academic community. If the year's enhancement theme required that information skills teaching should be offered during reading week, we created presentations to meet that demand. If the first-year experience was to be enriched by instruction on how to read electronic books, that need was likewise met.

Outward-facing, too, was my project of setting up our new 'friends of the library' group and organising a programme of lectures and activities to interest a mixed constituency of town and gown. This was liaison of a gentler sort, though with a fund-raising undertone, and facilitated useful conversations with a wide range of people who care about special collections and the library's contribution to scholarship.

Taking me further from the conventional librarianly role was my involvement with the university's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)

submission for 2008. Reporting to staff in the RAE office, for four months I led a team of library assistants who checked and made database entries for each of the publications submitted by the university's 500 or so academics. This intensive exercise offered me the opportunity to engage with the academic life of the university, discover the research specialisms of staff in all departments and show that the librarian's bibliographic skills are integral and necessary to the whole project.

While progress was made fairly quickly towards developing a convincing and visible presence for academic liaison in the wider context of the university, it proved rather more difficult, however, to establish our place within the library itself. This was a library that was not ideally prepared for our arrival. Service-based, and with no tradition of even subject librarians in its long, interesting and frequently cash-starved history, the University of St Andrews library lacked the natural launch-pad for the new academic liaison. A natural evolutionary stage had been bypassed, leaving both of us uncertain from the outset of our place in the structure. Our appointments increased the number of professional library staff from seven to nine and introduced a layer of senior staff which this institution had little previous experience of accommodating.

Of necessity, existing service departments were already doing parts of the 'inward-facing' elements of our jobs, and we had to work sensitively to reclaim these. Teaching about the use of electronic databases, for example, now became our responsibility, leaving electronic resources staff to continue with the demanding technical and financial aspects of the service. It was clear from our job-descriptions, too, that we were to engage at some level with collection management and to work with the collections team on this. Defining just how far I was to be involved with this became tricky for me, however. As I was not working with the collections on a daily basis, lacked the collections team's detailed knowledge of the stock and had no line-management connection with them, I found it difficult to make judgements on the various issues referred to me. I had a constant sense of being parachuted into situations about which I had little or no background information and of being airlifted out again after I had hazarded a hopeful guess at the solution. I was frustrated, too, to find that since arts and divinity book orders went directly from academic staff to acquisitions, I was largely unaware of what stock was being ordered, and I came quickly to miss the system with which I had been familiar in other libraries,

where book orders were sent to the subject librarians for initial processing. Though I was billed as 'the first point of contact between schools and the library', I found in practice that I often was not. Academics continued to go directly to the collections team about collections issues and to the acquisitions team with purchasing enquiries, bypassing me altogether.

Academic liaison felt, indeed, as though it had been simply 'grafted onto' a staff structure that had not changed to accommodate it. Although staff on all sides largely dealt with the situation with goodwill and good humour, it was clear to everyone that there was frequently a lack of clarity about who was responsible for what, and that duplication of effort and general confusion were at times the unintended and unfortunate consequences of the creation of these new posts.

Even more awkward was the question of our place within the management structure of the library. Appointed at senior assistant librarian level, and bringing fairly considerable management experience with us to the posts, we had assumed that our status would be apparent, and were surprised and frustrated to find that we were initially not part of a senior management team. With no staff responsible to us for almost our first two years, we found ourselves perceived by some to have no clear management role. We lacked, too, the necessary workforce to get various projects off the ground. Now, 23 months into the jobs, we are relieved to have been invited to participate in a newly re-formatted management team, and to have been allowed to appoint one assistant academic liaison librarian to provide support.

It has been salutary and helpful to read Rodwell and Fairbairn's round-up of developments in academic liaison and to have their reassurance that 'fluidity' is the norm as this area develops.⁴ A period of adjustment is inevitable and 'growing pains' are to be expected as academic liaison finds its place within the library profession. Even more helpful, however, has been their recognition of the fact that the proper place for it is nothing less than centre-stage. Academic liaison is set to expand, to be the service at the very heart of any academic library, liaison librarians themselves taking on a new, extended and intensified role. This emerging role Rodwell and Fairbairn see as characterised by 'a more outward-looking perspective and complexity, emphasizing stronger engagement and partnership with the faculty and direct engagement in the University's teaching and research

programs'.⁵ Their further proviso is useful, namely that 'If there is a real desire for the liaison librarians to operate at a higher level, then [the question of] how the library as a whole is organized, and how the librarians are marketed and the language used, needs to be raised.'⁶

My own experience of these last two interesting years supports this perception. Introducing academic liaison to any library alters it fundamentally. The focus of its activities changes. Its services need to be seen as radiating *from* academic liaison, and the team as central and crucial to its mission. Not a 'plug-in', academic liaison can only survive if it is integrated and at the heart of the library's ethos. Libraries proposing to introduce an academic liaison team must accept that alterations to existing structures may be the painful route to a desirable end.

Rodwell and Fairbairn are refreshingly forthright in identifying the skills and attributes they see as relevant to the new 'enhanced' liaison roles. Top of a list that includes communication, presentation, networking, negotiation and project management skills comes 'confidence'.⁷ My own experience confirms the wisdom and necessity of that choice of attribute. For the St Andrews academic liaison service to move ahead in future years, confidence must be the key. We need to have confidence in the product we provide – to know that we are offering high-quality information resources as well as high-quality teaching in how to use them. We need to be confident of the value of our own roles, to know that our interventions make a positive difference in the academic community. Perhaps most importantly, we need to be confident in our conversations with our own managers, and to increase our insistence that there is a more significant move towards integrating academic liaison into a re-organised staff structure. There is no future for a tiny team that operates only as an appendage to a service-library structure which declines to adjust to our presence.

Academic liaison librarians need to remain unfazed by the uncertainty of the library landscapes in which they operate and by the fluidity of their roles as they develop. They should be alert to the opportunities the situation offers, embrace change and be vocal and confident about defining their roles in ways they want. Above all, they must be able to stand up for themselves. 'Give me a place to stand and I shall move the world!', cried Archimedes on discovering the law of the lever. Academic liaison librarians, fighting for their

appropriate place in the modern library world,
will echo his cry.

REFERENCES

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- 2 University of St Andrews Library, academic liaison page, available at <http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/library/AcademicLiaison/> [accessed 7 November 2008]
- 3 University of St Andrews Library, LINKS tutorial, available at <http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/library/FindingInformation/links/> [accessed 7 November 2008]
- 4 See note 1 above
- 5 Rodwell and Fairbairn, 'Dangerous liaisons?', p 119
- 6 Ibid., p 120
- 7 Ibid., p 123