
Delivering academic support at the University of Sussex Library



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As part of a library re-structuring in October 2005, the University of Sussex library's senior management team took the opportunity to review existing subject support provision, with a view to addressing academic concerns over insufficient support for research and to providing more focussed and consistent high-quality support for learning and teaching. As a result of this review, the learning and teaching support and research liaison teams at the University of Sussex library were established.¹

As part of the changes, the deans of school and heads of department were asked to appoint an academic library representative from each department. These colleagues provide a point of contact with us for both research and learning and teaching liaison.

LEARNING AND TEACHING SUPPORT

Learning and teaching support (LATS) carries out several of the functions normally aligned with traditional subject librarians. We are tasked with ensuring that all students on taught courses, both undergraduate and postgraduate, have access to the material needed for their course of study and the skills to explore and exploit these resources – whether online or in print.

LATS fulfils these major outward facing functions in a variety of ways.

Information literacy

We offer a range of information literacy sessions, from large-scale induction sessions through to bespoke course-group sessions, planned in conjunction with lecturers and based on discussed learning objectives. We also offer a teaching programme that follows a cohort of students through all levels of study and that is embedded into a course curriculum.²

All sessions are generic and skills-based, allowing us to adapt these sessions for all subject areas.

Liaison

Working closely with library representatives, other academics and other library sections, we provide reading-list material in whatever format is most appropriate: book, eBook, digitised material.

We ensure that the book budget is managed efficiently and transparently and is spent by the end of each financial year. This is achieved through working in collaboration with other library teams and senior managers as well as library representatives, gathering information pertinent to identifying need and disseminating information on spend levels back to the departments regularly.

We work with library colleagues to implement new technologies that will aid the access to and retrieval of information and ensure that teaching collections are fit for purpose and meet the needs of students, through producing collection-development policies relating to purchasing ratios and stock withdrawal.

Enquiries

LATS has responsibility for managing all enquiries coming into the library. We offer an e-mail service and a paper referral service and handle queries coming in by phone or in person. We also provide face-to-face training sessions for library staff on service points and have developed a blog to support staff on the enquiry desk.

Clearly the functions for which LATS is responsible are not unique, but we have had to approach them in very different ways. We analyse each task and develop a generic service solution. To do this, and ensure that the services provided are consistent, systematic and of high quality, we have to be focussed and streamlined in our approach. Procedures are trimmed to allow for efficiency and workflows are reviewed regularly to ensure services remain fit for purpose. Working within this structure means that whilst operational activi-

ties are important it is the bigger picture that is always in our minds.

Adopting a holistic approach has been essential for managing the budget and collection development. It also ensures that services are consistent across all departments whilst recognising that different disciplines have different needs. Sometimes one size does not fit all and we resolve this by working closely with the subject specialists, that is the academic library representatives, other academics and colleagues – both internal and external.

We are a small team and these functions fill our working days. We would like to offer more, see more students and provide more e-learning tools and tutorials and we believe this is possible, but only with careful planning. With enthusiasm, commitment and support, this function-based structure works for us in this setting. Operating separately from research liaison frees both units to concentrate on the differing needs of our respective groups.

RESEARCH LIAISON

The research liaison team is a small section who operate as the library's point of contact for researchers (both staff and students), ensuring, as far as we can, that they are fully supported with the resources and skills to conduct their research.

In close collaboration with academics departments we:

- work with departments and research centres to identify research strengths and concentrations of research interests in order to build appropriate collections in support of these priorities
- work on developing core journal provision for Sussex³
- are proactive in trialling, evaluating and acquiring appropriate major online resources to support research
- continually expand our coverage of digitised back-files of journal collections as funds are available
- develop web pages to support a general publishing move towards online resources in collection areas such as official publications and European information.

We have recently begun to evaluate the library's print collection, in consultation with departments, in order to identify out-of-date stock for with-

drawal according to criteria appropriate to each particular academic discipline.

We are also responsible for delivering training and awareness sessions to support research activities across the university. Because feedback and research evidence suggested that postgraduate researchers were not benefiting from larger group sessions, many of the sessions we now offer are bookable and bespoke, 1-2-1 or for small groups. In addition we have established regular slots on our teaching and learning development unit's university-wide programmes and we attend many of the initial induction sessions for doctoral students to introduce our 1-2-1 support service.

These 1-2-1 sessions have been designed to:

- introduce DPhil students to the range of support offered by the library
- offer a general introduction to the library's resources, focussing largely on our electronic material – not only journal collections but also the most relevant abstracting and indexing databases in their field for which we have subscriptions
- identify key areas where students might need more support, either directly or online via the library website
- identify research interests and directions to inform collection development
- alert students to specific Sussex collections of particular relevance to their research, such as the archives and rare books held in special collections, official documents including parliamentary papers, statistics, newspapers, the European documentation centre and the microform collections
- inform students of resources in other libraries and archives (with advice about reciprocal access agreements).

This 1-2-1 approach gives us the flexibility to offer sessions at an appropriate level, when the post-graduates and academics actually require them. In addition these sessions provide us with valuable feedback which helps us develop and improve the support we offer.

Feedback to date hasn't indicated any issues around a lack of subject approach. Many databases and online resources now have similar functionality and are very supportive, in their infrastructure, of basic non-expert interrogation.

We are keenly aware that this customised, individual approach may not be amenable to being scaled

up. However, we feel that at this stage, while we are building new relationships (particularly with early-career researchers), this approach is right for us now. Evidence suggests that researchers learn mostly from each other and if we can reach a proportion of researchers we know they will cascade the information to others who don't attend.

The sessions are popular and demand is increasing so we are looking at ways of automating support. We are developing an online tutorial aimed at researchers (we have recently been allocated Roberts funding to support this work) and investigating funding for employing doctoral students to cascade training to their peers.

Our PGRs (research postgraduates) vary enormously in their information skills and we need to ensure we are making sense to them, without patronising them. A process of dialogue informs us in our training and advice. What might be good practice now might not be in two years and we are becoming very adaptable. As we are a small team we can change quickly.

As we have reiterated a number of times in this report, this structure works for us at the University of Sussex, at the moment. It mirrors the strategic management of the university, with our PVC (Pro-Vice-Chancellor) for research and the PVC for teaching and learning. We are able individually to concentrate on supporting the strategic direction in these areas. That said, we work very closely together on the inevitable crossover of tasks. We share a working space, and staff work across team boundaries in order to offer support when it is needed. We now have a developed and innovative support mechanism for researchers and a consistent fit-for-purpose service for taught students.

REFERENCES

- 1 For the current library staff structures see www.sussex.ac.uk/library/aboutus/structure0608.pdf
- 2 See www.sussex.ac.uk/library/information-for/teaching.php
- 3 See J. Harvell, 'Can we subscribe to this please? Realising a core journal collection for the University of Sussex', *Serials: the journal for the international serials community*, 21 (3), November 2008