
It's all up for grabs: developing a new role for the academic liaison team at NTU

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BACKGROUND

In February 2005, libraries and learning resources (LLR) at Nottingham Trent University (NTU) carried out a series of workshops with academic staff and students to identify the values and irritants of its customers.¹ The workshops uncovered a clear demand for the development of a 'proactive partnership' between academic staff and the library and a desire for further development of information skills work with students. The results of the Customer Value Discovery research, combined with the reorganisation that was taking place within the university's schools and colleges – which in itself necessitated a realignment of the library's customer-facing organisational structure – encouraged LLR to undertake a major restructuring of the site-based information teams responsible for academic liaison.

The academic liaison team (ALT) was formed in January 2006, creating a team of liaison librarians aligned with lecturers, and with comparable value and professionalism. The primary focus

of the new team would be the development of proactive links and liaison with academic staff and, although the new structure established a named contact for all subject areas and introduced an academic liaison team manager (ALTM) for each of the four university colleges, this was to be embedded within a single team approach to support collaborative working with the academic community.

One of the central elements within the new structure was the introduction of university-wide remits for the ALTMs. This has ensured that ALT activities are aligned with NTU's strategic plan, research plan and institutional learning and teaching enhancement strategy (ILTES), and provides accountability at a senior level for the development of four key service areas: enquiry and reference services; information literacy; research support; and widening participation.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE ACADEMIC LIAISON TEAM

In an attempt to provide further detail to the high-level strategy of the new team, an 'ALT away day' was organised and an online survey of the expectations of academic staff at NTU was undertaken. At the away day, the team identified that time spent on non-value-added tasks (such as bibliographic checking and desk-bound enquiry support) was restricting our capacity to develop new ways of working with academic staff. The away day helped to crystallise the cultural shift within the team and our commitment to proactive liaison, while also recognising that new initiatives would require a different skills-set, with greater emphasis on pedagogic skills, advocacy and project management and increased engagement with emerging technologies, including Web 2.0.

Using information gathered from the away day and the academic staff survey, an ALT action plan was created that provided the team with a clear vision of its priorities and an acknowledgement of the new competencies of the liaison librarians. For example, it is now an expectation within the ALT that a liaison librarian will have acquired the postgraduate certificate in higher education (PGCHE) within three years of appointment – a move that has increased individuals' confidence and helped the team interact as equals with the academic community. The action plan was based around the ALTM remits and placed high emphasis on initiatives such as embedding information literacy within the curriculum, development of eLearning support and value-adding activity such as establishing library resources within the uni-

versity's new virtual learning environment (VLE), improving academic staff's information skills and providing proactive assistance in developing and keeping academics' reading lists up to date – all areas that are reflected in the higher-order LLR operational plan. To achieve the ALT action plan, there would be a much greater emphasis on project work, with members of the team becoming more involved and leading cross-site library groups.

ENQUIRY SUPPORT

Following a review of LLR's front-line enquiry services in 2007, liaison librarians no longer staff front-line information desks; however, higher-level subject-based enquiries are still referred to the ALTs, who are available on a rota basis. The ALT has assumed a new role in training information assistants in the customer-service skills of reference enquiry work, including how to recognise what users really need and identifying key resources to answer their questions.

The introduction of a referral system for complex subject enquiries has reduced the amount of time liaison librarians spend delivering one-to-one front-line services, enabling the ALT to develop a wider, more diverse range of student-support material and to concentrate on the creation of resources designed to meet multiple learning styles and programme-delivery routes, including the new VLE.

The ALT has focussed on trying to help students become more self-sufficient and, as part of this, has introduced new web-based guides (including subject and distance-learning advice), online FAQ lists, self-help information kiosks and podcast and online tours.

RESEARCH SUPPORT

The ALT continues to support the research needs of the university, and has recognised the importance of Gannon-Leary's observation that libraries have to be clear about the services and resources they provide to researchers and then market them proactively and professionally.² The ALT has worked closely with the NTU training and development unit and university research committees to embed an introduction to LLR within the induction programme of all new academic and research staff. This will include a generic school-based induction, covering tools such as RefWorks and Journals Citation Reports, and a package

of one-to-one and group updates on specialist resources for specific discipline areas.

ALT attendance at meetings of university research committees has helped to promote services and resources and raised our profile within the research community. For example, at the request of one of the associate deans for research, and with the expectation that citation analysis would form a major part of the research excellence framework, liaison librarians undertook a comparison of the citation volume and accuracy of the ISI and Scopus databases for papers submitted in the most recent research assessment exercise (RAE). Not only was this an opportunity to add value to NTU's research activity but it was recognition that the professional expertise of the ALT made it best placed to carry out this activity.

The ALT is eager to expand its support for research, and has been heavily involved in the development and advocacy of NTU's new institutional repository (IRep), playing a major part in its publicity, creating web pages and support material and undertaking demonstrations to key university committees and groups. Linked to the introduction of IRep, there is an increasing responsibility on ALT members to act as champions of open access publishing and scholarly communication within NTU, providing advice to the academic community on intellectual property and copyright issues.

WIDENING PARTICIPATION

The appointment of an ALTM with responsibility for cross-LLR service development in widening participation has provided the ALT with the opportunity to take the lead and review services for those groups that Customer Value Discovery research identified as experiencing the greatest barriers when accessing library services. The ALT has led projects to review existing services for international students on campus, distance learners and students with disabilities, benchmarking provision at other institutions, surveying customers and holding focus groups. As a result, the postal loan service has been extended to include placement students and distance learners as well as disabled students, new guides have been developed for particular groups, the LLR website has been revised and signage has been improved across all libraries.

The involvement of the ALT within the widening participation agenda of the university has had the positive effect of strengthening relationships with

groups outside of LLR such as student support services and the schools, colleges and community outreach services. There has been a significant increase in the work we undertake with prospective students and the ALT is now playing a direct role in the marketing of NTU. Liaison librarians organise specialist promotional/information literacy events for partner colleges and compact students, are present at all NTU open days and take part in orientation events held for mature students.

ELEARNING

NTU identified eLearning as an institutional priority in its strategic plan for 2004–2010 and the ALT is at the forefront of LLR's efforts to help the university realise its commitment. We are supported in this by the existence of the educational development unit (EDU), which was established in October 2005 and is situated within the LLR organisational structure alongside the ALT. The EDU concentrates on promoting the integration of eLearning technologies within the curriculum, providing support for academics in curriculum design and in their use of the VLE.

The ALT and EDU work in partnership to encourage academics to include eLearning as one of their methods of course delivery. ALT's involvement in the academic quality-assurance cycle means we are aware of new course provision at the earliest stages of curriculum design and can identify opportunities for the EDU to assist academics. Liaison librarians have been involved in the development of the university's first fully online degree, an MSc in biomedical science, facilitating student use of LLR services and resources.

The VLE presents new opportunities for the ALT as a learning space in terms of providing access to information resources and embedding information literacy training within the curriculum. We have also assumed responsibility for training all first-year students in the use of the VLE during induction. Liaison librarians provide front-line support for students in their use of eLearning and have an essential role to play in ensuring that the customer feedback received at course committees and training sessions is used to inform future VLE and eLearning developments.

INFORMATION LITERACY

In support of NTU's ILTES, LLR aims to enable students to develop relevant information literacy skills and to become independent learners;

academic and support staff to develop specific information literacy skills required to support their work; and NTU graduates to be information-literate. The ILTES states that 'information literacy skills need to be embedded in year one programmes and to be considered routinely in the planning of course provision' by 2010. The current developments of an online module and information literacy policy are important steps in meeting this objective. The ALT actively engages with academic staff across NTU at programme, college and institutional levels and liaison librarians are now members of schools' learning and teaching committees.

Increasingly, we are adopting a team-teaching approach to delivering information literacy, which allows the ALT to respond to the growth in student numbers and exposes us to innovative practice within the schools by making us aware of different pedagogic styles. The ALT continues to develop a portfolio of lectures, workshops and sessions linked to coursework and programme assessment criteria. The ALT is beginning to explore the potential of Web 2.0 within the context of information literacy, and we are working with the EDU to create eLearning objects that can be delivered through the VLE and accessed by students at their convenience. Tools such as the Camtasia Studio Screen recording software are being used by liaison librarians to record voiceovers for PowerPoint presentations, and one school has introduced a dissertation-preparation activity on the VLE discussion board, where students have the opportunity to play an 'ask the expert' card, with their liaison librarian being one of several experts within the course team.

Although the embedding of information literacy into the curriculum is a high priority for the ALT, we have introduced a number of new initiatives, including Podcast and virtual tours to support induction and a programme of events with online booking via the LLR web site. The events are open to all staff and students at the university and cover topics such as referencing, specific databases and the VLE. They have enabled us to better deploy the subject expertise within the team to our customers, exposing them to a wider range of information resources and reaching students who currently do not have information literacy provision within their curriculum.

QUALITY ASSURANCE AND THE USE OF MARKET INTELLIGENCE

The ALT still plays an active role in supporting internal reviews and accreditation visits, provid-

ing written reports, information packs, tours and so on, but the new team has tried to develop a more explicit role within the academic quality assurance cycle and processes, and to clarify our status within the validation, review and reporting process. ALT representation at this level formalises our relationships with academics, encourages a more equal partnership and ensures that our agenda is aligned to that of the schools. Rather than operating in isolation, the ALT has been able to establish meaningful partnerships with the university's quality and learning and teaching enhancement groups to develop university-wide policies and practices on issues that transcend LLR, such as plagiarism, copyright and accessibility compliance, reading lists, information literacy and eLearning. Attendance at school and course committees also provides another forum for eliciting customer feedback, which informs the development of new services and contributes to the culture of customer service excellence within LLR. The ALT represents all of LLR in the quality-assurance process so it has strengthened cross-service relationships.

ALT activity is driven by feedback gathered during Customer Value Research and the quality-assurance process, making us front-runners in the application of market intelligence within LLR. Increasingly, the ALT is leading Customer Value Research projects, such as LibQUAL+, and we have used a variety of approaches to obtain customer feedback, including surveys and focus groups. ALT-commissioned research is extremely important, as it allows us to disseminate findings to other teams within LLR, influence their operational activities and be a better advocate for our customers.

COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT AND MANAGEMENT

The introduction of a new library management system and a centralised ordering process within LLR has helped to reduce the time that liaison librarians spend on routine activity such as reading-list checking and book-ordering. There is now a much greater emphasis on the development of proactive partnerships between the ALT and the academic community in providing and developing high-quality information resources to support teaching, learning and research, and liaison librarians have been able to devote more time to value-added activity such as the provision of proactive assistance to academic staff in developing and keeping reading lists up to date (including current-awareness services for new resources). In addition to this, the ALT now

supplies guidance on copyright compliance and advises academic staff on digitisation procedures, offering alternative resources where necessary.

The ALT will continue to play an active role in the development and management of the collection, and is still heavily engaged in a five-year stock-management cycle and an annual journals review, all of which is underpinned by an information resources policy. The development of the e-resource collection is an increasingly important activity for the ALT, and as the links between the ALT, EDU and the academic community increase, our role within the collection-development process is likely to expand to include the management of learning resources as well as information resources.

CONCLUSION

There has been a considerable change in the focus and direction of the ALT following the redefinition of our role in January 2006. This has been reflected in the competencies required by the liaison librarians and, although subject knowledge and familiarity with a range of relevant information resources continue to be important, there is now a much greater emphasis on proactivity and the need for excellent interpersonal, negotiation, project management and, increasingly, pedagogic skills. Will we need to go further and develop the technical knowledge and skills of the learning technologists and educational developers to thrive? As McKnight points out,³ in the foreseeable future the answer is much more likely to be about liaison librarians working in tandem with such professionals within multi-skilled course development teams.

REFERENCES

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- 3 S. McKnight, 'The changing nature of academic libraries', in M. Beaudoin, ed., *Perspectives on higher education in the digital age*, Hauppauge NY: Nova Science Pub Inc, 2006, pp 63–76