
'LIS – serious about research': focus groups with research staff at Swansea University



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In April 2007 the Research Information Network (RIN) and the Consortium of Research Libraries (CURL) published a report entitled *Researchers' use of academic libraries and their services*: 'the results provide a snapshot of researchers' and librarians' attitudes and perceptions in relation to the UK's academic libraries. It is a timely snapshot since there are forces which appear set to accelerate the pace of change, both in the researchers' expectations and in libraries' ability to meet those expectations.'¹

As a result of this report the subject librarian teams at Swansea University began to take steps to promote the services available to all staff at the university who are involved in research. To tie in with an earlier university marketing exercise, library and information services adopted the slogan 'Serious about research' to use in their promotional postcard 'LIS Serious about Research' to send out to all new members of staff. A poster promoting services to researchers was also designed and is displayed at postgraduate exhibition events as well as being used by subject librarians for drop-in sessions in schools and departments. We also created a dedicated research

portal from the LIS homepage. Although these actions taken by the subject teams were positive, one aspect that became apparent to us was the fact that we couldn't best serve the interests of our researchers or market the library and its services to them if we didn't know how they were working and what they wanted from us. What we really needed to do was ask them!

LIS runs its annual survey of customers for ten days during February each year.² This general satisfaction survey is completed by both staff and students and the results are used to help LIS prioritise further improvements to services. Since this survey gathers quantitative material to inform LIS development, it was felt that to consult directly with focus groups of research staff would be the best option, as this would gather some qualitative data. This would allow us to gauge research staff's current knowledge, attitudes and perceptions of the services and resources made available to them as well as views of how we might best develop those services and resources for the future to meet their research information needs.

The suggestion to run focus groups with the university research community was taken to the next subject services group meeting by the deputy subject librarians from the health team. The group agreed that this would be a very worthwhile project and volunteers were requested to form a working group to guide the project. The working group consisted of representatives from senior management, subject librarians and library assistants.

Conducting focus groups was something the members of the working group had very little experience of. At the first meeting, Chris Hall, e-learning support officer, was invited along to share his knowledge and experiences of running focus groups with the users of the university's e-learning platform, Blackboard. Chris highlighted the importance of obtaining a cross-section of researchers from the university community, to ensure representative results. He also talked about focus-group dynamics, ways to make participants feel relaxed and engaged and the neutral mediatory role of the facilitator, and he suggested offering incentives for attendance, such as hospitality. In addition to this, Katrina attended a focus-group workshop held in Cardiff in November 2007 that was organised by the visitor studies group, and she fed back many useful tips and directives from this course. We also tried to read widely from

the wide range of articles and other literature on conducting focus groups.

Over the next few months, and now armed with more knowledge than we had previously, we felt ourselves in a position to proceed and started to work out the practicalities of our focus groups. Initially we thought that we would run our first focus groups with postgraduates because we already had a good relationship with this group through our liaison with the postgraduate research office. The LIS postgraduate research programme runs during the first two terms of the academic year, offering information-skills sessions to postgraduates on a variety of tailored topics, such as effective database searching, finding conference papers and theses and many others. However, because we already had some knowledge of our postgraduate researchers we decided to run the first focus groups with research staff, primarily because this was uncharted territory; we had had little or no contact with this group and this was the opportunity to meet with them. We defined the aim of the focus group consultation to be:

'To ascertain the existing knowledge base of those staff involved in research of the support and services available from LIS and to collate their ideas and suggestions for possible future developments and opportunities to improve LIS provision.'

Deciding what we would ask our focus groups and how to structure those questions was the next challenge. LIS at Swansea University is a converged service, consisting of library, computing and careers. This gave us quite a large topic area to cover with our focus groups, but essentially we wanted to find out how the subject librarians could improve their role and support to research staff and this was what channelled our choice of topic area. We established six areas that we wanted to address and structured three or four questions for each area as a guide, to promote discussion. Structuring open questions that were not couched in library terms and that would invite response and interaction was quite challenging. The final topics were:

- Resources for research
- Space & environment
- Technology
- Librarians (specifically subject librarians)
- Website
- Training.

The focus groups were scheduled to be held at the end of June, to correspond with the end of term so that staff would be less busy and hopefully more inclined to attend. We decided to hold two focus groups on consecutive days, offering staff the opportunity to attend an afternoon or a morning event. To reach the broadest spread of staff involved in research on campus, the invitation to attend was sent out on the university's staff e-mail list. In response to this e-mail we had five bookings for the afternoon session and six for the morning consultation. In the event we had four attendees for the morning session and seven for the afternoon session from the schools of health science, human sciences, environment & society, physical sciences, arts, business & economics and the postgraduate research office. A confirmation e-mail was sent out the week before the consultations took place to those staff who had indicated they would attend. It verified the time and location and informed all participants that the sessions would be recorded but that any information gathered would be reported anonymously. The role of facilitator for both consultations was Steve Williams, deputy director of LIS, with two members of library staff also involved: one as scribe and the other as observer. The proceedings of each group were recorded by the scribe on a laptop, with the observer taking additional long-hand notes. Both groups were also recorded using a mini-disc-recording device borrowed from the university's media services department. Coffee and refreshments were provided for both groups and at the start of each consultation the participants were reminded that the session would be recorded in both note and audio formats.

RESULTS FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS

Any initial concerns we had about whether we had the right questions prepared or if the discussion would flow and develop naturally quickly dissipated. The attendees of the focus groups were very forthcoming and informative with their responses. For the facilitator and note-takers it was frustrating at times to hear participants make incorrect statements about library services without being able to comment, but then gratifying to hear corrections from other attendees on our behalf. The following are some of the key areas discussed and comments that we received.

We asked 'What would you like the library to provide?' The most popular response to this question was a reminder that the traditional resources are still as important as ever to our researchers. Many of them wanted to see a regular monthly

update on what new books and journals had been received by the library. As so many researchers are working independently, they felt that a key role for the library is bringing researchers together in a 'hub of good practice' to 'advertise our good practice to other departments and wider, to help share things' and bring researchers together. Focus-group participants discussed the need for researchers from all subject areas to 'get together' more, due to the increase in interdisciplinary research at Swansea University. They suggested that LIS could provide seminars about LIS services/collections/facilities with the aim of bringing multidisciplinary researchers together. The discussion on improving communication channels between researchers and LIS also produced the suggestion of holding a 'once a month ... research party' to bring LIS staff and researchers from all subject areas together. LIS has since made use of the space in the postgraduate study area to display posters produced for various research projects, to allow a wider multidisciplinary audience access to these research results.

On the subject of electronic resource provision most participants were happy with what they were able to access via LIS subscription; '80% of the journals I need are available'; 'good access to runs of periodicals and electronic databases of various sorts'. When the discussion moved on to departmental library budgets, one researcher commented that 'purchasing for research slides down in favour of providing resources for undergraduate teaching. Budget cuts mean it is harder and harder to get requests through for special material.' Another added, 'Ordering books for teaching is fine; the route for ordering items for research is less obvious.' To ensure clarity on this procedure for researchers, more detailed information about the purchasing process is being included on the staff and research sections of the LIS web site.

'Voyager', the library catalogue, attracted some criticism; our researchers felt that its interface was outdated, the search options were unintuitive and overly complicated and in one case it was said to be only ever used as a last port of call. Another respondent stated that we needed to 'upgrade Voyager ... standardise it, make it like Google'. The outdated interface of Voyager was something that LIS was of course aware of, and a major upgrade was already scheduled for August 2008. The upgrade has now taken place and the new Voyager interface is much simpler and clearer, in line with many of the web-based search engines that users are familiar with. Although the upgrade did not occur as a direct result of the

research focus groups, it is a positive development that we can feed back to the attendees and to which we can invite their responses. The development of Voyager, along with all our resources, will of course continue in order that we can provide a competitive and effective service for our researchers. Andrew Brown, manager of the information systems team, is exploring 'interfaces which will search and deliver across a much wider range of resources and be tailored to different customer groups. The Voyager database will form part of this search as other databases do, but it will take its place in a wider resource search which will fulfil more of our customers' needs.'

Our researchers thought that LIS training needs to be tailored to their particular areas of interest in order to have a more direct impact and encourage attendance: 'If you link workshops to someone's research, people would be more inclined to come.' They also indicated that training sessions should be kept brief, maybe 45 minutes to an hour, and lunchtimes were suggested. LIS has coordinated with the university's staff development unit to hold several LIS-related sessions in their timetable of 'Lunch & Learn' opportunities, which last one hour maximum and include a sandwich lunch!

Due to personal preference, our researchers do not use the library as a space in which to work; they work from their own offices on campus or from home. The increasing availability of electronic resources has enabled researchers to carry out work in their own preferred environment, although researchers in the humanities acknowledged that archives and back-runs of print resources were still essential. Many commented on the fact that on the occasions they visit the library they find it noisy and crowded, and that improvement needs to be made to the signage around the building. Others felt that since there had been a café facility included in one area of the library the noise levels had increased; on the other hand one respondent liked that there was now a coffee area and said he brings his new research staff over to the library for coffee and discussion in that environment.

Gratifyingly, only three out of the total of eleven participants did not know about the support offered by subject librarians and teams. The service was indeed appreciated by those who use it, one researcher stating that 'The subject librarian is like a "phone a friend"' and 'staff and students really benefit from the services subject teams provide'. However, the fact that even a small number of participants did not know their subject

librarian indicates that LIS still needs to promote the subject teams to researchers. Other comments received from the focus groups highlighted the need to market LIS more effectively. As a result LIS has established a marketing group which, as part of its remit, will look at how best to promote the support available to researchers. Some subject teams are also taking the library directly to researchers by holding 'drop-in' sessions in the foyer of their department buildings to promote their services and answer any questions researchers may have.

It has been interesting to us to see that the findings from our focus groups often corresponded to the results published by RIN in *Researchers'*

use of academic libraries and their services (see note 1). The experience of running focus groups with our research staff has been invaluable to us and we hope to continue with this method as a tool for consultation with our various user groups. In practical terms, the information gathered from the focus groups has enabled us to develop an action plan based upon the comments we received. It has helped us to more fully understand the significance that the library has to our research staff and how we can develop our role to meet their needs. Here is the action plan developed from the focus-group findings:

Area	Action
Web of Science	Series of WoS drop in sessions for research staff. Non-subject based. Promote vigorously. Attendees contacted by subject team after event to offer additional support.
Announce & promote training	Use research portal.
Research portal	Use to promote all areas that researchers can use including training, subject teams, events etc.
Promote LIS activities, resources etc. better to staff	LIS marketing group set up. This group to discuss and lead in this area.
SCONUL for research staff	Promote through web portal and other means. Mail/posters??
Research events/ research forum events	Follow to see what, if anything, happening with Swansea University research forum. Investigate possibility of running an event in LIC for research staff. Also look for other Swansea University events similar to poster session last year in which to exhibit/participate.
LIS involvement in staff development unit's academic training	Talk to SDU about possibilities: lunch and learn?
Book/journal purchasing and ILL – raise awareness of and of processes	Links on portal to page explaining what the process is and who makes choices – along with link to library reps list
Reference section – check what is happening here	Weeding/signs to promote online resources in relevant sections? Or promotion of online reference resources through a single web page
Online book ordering	Check with systems/book ordering staff. Possible use of Share-point forms and workflow if Voyager not user-friendly?
Issues with study areas	As part of possible LIC refurbishment
Demand for various types of support	Continue offering workshops, 1:1, e-mail and phone support. Move library@ e-mail to info desk – and create web page with FAQ and 'phone a friend' links to, e.g., IT support, subject teams, issue desk, ILL for queries. Find a way to log/analyse queries centrally
Voyager	Interface of the future – metalib etc. ...
New resources updates	Mail etc. to staff about latest journals/books in their subject area
New staff contact details	Get automatic alert for new staff by subject

REFERENCES

- 1 Research Information Network & Consortium of Research Libraries Research, *Researchers' use of academic libraries and their services*, London: RIN, 2007, p 9
- 2 See Swansea University Library & Information Services, 'General satisfaction survey 2008', available at <http://www.swansea.ac.uk/lis/aboutLis/reports/> [accessed 20 November 2008]