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# The changing nature of subject liaison at St Mary's University College, Twickenham



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There has been much interest recently in the changing relationship of current and future student populations with university library services, as a result of the huge technological advances made in IT in the past decade. The generation of 'digital natives' now entering the higher education system have significantly different experience and expectations from those who have come before.<sup>1</sup> This is already evident in the student population at St Mary's University College, Twickenham, where staff are observing students arriving with a high level of technological familiarity but with less confidence in finding and evaluating information. Such changes have a considerable impact on the nature of subject liaison locally and this article discusses some of the ways in which the nature of the 'subject librarian' role is shifting to maintain relevancy in the current environment.

## OUR CHANGING USER POPULATION

Many of the changes being experienced at St Mary's are common to the sector as a whole, and are the result of broader social changes. The permeation of technology, and especially informa-

tion technology, into everyday life has proceeded rapidly in the last decade and a half. This is especially true in the case of online communication, as most students now entering university have grown up with broadband internet access as a fundamental part of their lives. As was uncovered by the 'Google Generation' study,<sup>2</sup> this does not necessarily mean that they have become expert at retrieving and evaluating online information. In fact, they show a tendency to rely heavily on search engines, often lacking the patience for searching multiple library databases.<sup>3</sup> There is a general perception that academic libraries need to continue to adapt their services to match this new reality of information-searching behaviour. The user experience of online library tools in many cases still lags behind the current generation of Web 2.0-enabled commercial services, and this seems to be discouraging students from viewing libraries and other institutional online services as their first port of call for information.

## BACKGROUND TO OUR SERVICES

These issues are already impacting on services at St Mary's University College. St Mary's is a small teaching-oriented higher education institution, with just under four thousand students. It specialises in several distinct areas, including education/teacher training, sport and exercise science and performing arts, and has a growing number of part-time and distance learner students. The university college has also broadened its intake in recent years by providing foundation degrees and short courses. An increasing number of students are therefore arriving at St Mary's with non-traditional qualifications, often lacking knowledge of the academic conventions surrounding degree-level study and of the standard of research expected.

Library and IT services are provided by the integrated information services and systems department within a single learning resources centre (LRC). Although a number of undergraduate students do reside on campus, this group is a minority overall and student services have to reflect the fact that most of our users live some distance away.

## DECLINE OF TRADITIONAL SUBJECT LIAISON ACTIVITIES?

The subject liaison position within the LRC is perhaps most immediately affected by the changes in the student population and the wider information landscape. The long-established role of the subject librarian in stock selection is fairly limited

at St Mary's, as purchasing for the teaching-oriented collection is heavily reading-list-driven and formal control over the resource budgets lies within the academic departments. Traditional areas of expertise such as costing new resources, placing orders and general budget management are of course still core to the role. Some cooperative stock selection also takes place, in dialogue with academic staff. However there is no longer a dedicated enquiry-desk service staffed by subject liaison staff due to low usage and limited staffing resources; enquiries are all funnelled through a general information desk and roving service (on which all staff are timetabled) and then passed to the relevant subject specialist if they demand a detailed response. This type of service model demands new skills of our Information assistants who, since the advent of self-service, have been dealing with more information-retrieval enquiries than traditional library-counter transactions, taking on some of the work previously carried out by subject staff.

#### **INFORMATION SKILLS TRAINING**

All this means that the boundaries of subject liaison work have had to shift in order to maintain a relevant and valued service to support teaching and learning. The general trend has long been away from a passive 'guardian of information' stance and towards more proactive engagement with teaching staff to develop information literacy skills in students. We have not yet reached the level of establishing compulsory information literacy training as a credit-earning element in degree courses, as is the case elsewhere. However, we have made considerable progress in this area in recent years.

This is reflected in the style of training sessions given by subject liaison staff. Although we still deliver induction sessions at the beginning of the academic year for new students, these are no longer the only contact most students have with subject liaison staff. The ineffectiveness of information literacy sessions that are positioned at the wrong point in the academic year is well known. Moreover our experiments with drop-in skills sessions have so far been unsuccessful, with students seemingly failing to see the relevance of such sessions to their work, preferring on-demand assistance while in the LRC building.

We therefore encourage teaching staff to integrate sessions at the most suitable time in the teaching cycle (for example, when the first major assignment is set or during 'research methods' modules).

We can then make sure that the session is carefully tailored to the topic the students are covering, ensuring that the training has an immediate benefit to their studies. We have had mixed success with this, as this level of integration is dependent on collaboration with academic staff who operate within tight schedules, which sometimes makes them reluctant to give up scarce teaching time for information literacy training. The importance of maintaining constructive relationships with academic staff is demonstrated here, as obtaining slots in the teaching timetable tends to be contingent on building the trust of staff and demonstrating the value of our services over time.

#### **FIRST LINE OF SUPPORT**

Given that we work within an integrated service in a small institution, subject liaison staff are now increasingly serving as the department's main external representatives in all library, information and IT matters. Although we operate a full IT helpdesk service for routine requests and enquiries, our team often acts as the first port of call for staff wishing to discuss IT policies and technical issues affecting their work. We can offer advice for simple or frequently encountered issues immediately, while more technical enquiries or issues that require specific actions are transferred into the IT helpdesk call system. This 'first line of support' role of course necessitates technical knowledge and skills that go beyond traditional subject liaison. We are also moving towards a more promotional stance; the subject liaison team is being used to promote new initiatives and services in the department, thereby capitalising on the relationships that have already been built with academic staff in other contexts. This includes promoting our own services, particularly those related to information skills training.

#### **BLENDED LEARNING**

This promotional role has been particularly significant in the context of developing e-learning within St Mary's, and in building awareness of the benefits of the 'blended learning' approach in enhancing the student experience. However, the subject liaison team's involvement here goes beyond simple promotion; we now have an important role in supporting the Blackboard virtual learning environment, including day-to-day training of both staff and students in using the system to best effect. This goes far beyond the traditional role of the librarian in the VLE.

The same approach is also being extended to new e-learning services as they emerge, including the PebblePAD personal learning system and our recently launched podcasting and wiki services. This supports the work of staff in our newly created blended learning unit, who are now able to devote more time to more in-depth training, development and technical support. This re-focused role for the subject liaison team has resulted in a change of job title from 'subject librarian' to 'learning advisor', in an attempt to reflect the broadened nature of the post.

#### **FACILITATING PEER-ASSISTED LEARNING**

The subject liaison team has recently become involved with the introduction of peer-assisted learning (PAL) within the St Mary's LRC. PAL has grown out of peer mentoring, forms of which are used throughout the higher education sector. Peer mentoring often involves using older students to help their peers adjust to university life. Peer-assisted learning is perhaps less clearly defined; at the simplest level, it involves a shift from expert-led learning to a model that places the guide or 'enabler' on the same level as the learner.

PAL has been introduced at St Mary's in the form of student advisors, who are based within the LRC and operate in public areas like our 'learning café' and reception area. The team consists of four people, currently all St Mary's students (although this has not always been the case). They are identified to students by distinctive blue T-shirts with the words 'Can I Help?' across the back. Their purpose is to bridge the gap between the students and the LRC by providing friendly first-line support for a range of different information needs. In so doing, they are hopefully removing barriers to student help-seeking, especially reluctance to 'trouble' more senior staff, who may be perceived to be too busy to deal with their enquiry. The remit of the advisors is to help with using software applications such as Microsoft Office products and the VLE, and also assisting with catalogue searches and finding items on the shelves. At busy times they support self-issue by encouraging and helping students to use the machines. LRC staff have the option of calling the advisors on a mobile phone; this is especially useful when service points are busy and staff are not free to meet a simple need, such as helping with using the photocopiers.

The advisors are supervised by Frank Quick from the subject liaison team, thereby ensuring integration between their on-demand enquiry

service and the in-depth support offered by subject liaison staff. In conjunction with the roving support service offered by other LRC staff, the advisors help to create an informal atmosphere that is aimed at facilitating student enquiries. In many cases where detailed advice is required, the enquiries are passed to the relevant subject team member. At first there were inevitable doubts about the wisdom of employing students as part of the enquiry service, due to their inexperience. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that this model is working well in filtering enquiries and in encouraging students to make use of the different levels of support available in the LRC. The advisors have not replaced permanent LRC staff, but are simply offering an alternative access point for subject enquiry services.

We are always looking at new ways to make our service more relevant to students. The advisors maintain a Facebook group which has a growing number of members. They select people by searching the St Mary's University College network and sending friend requests. They also respond to messages sent to the inbox and via the chat function. The advisors have furthermore just started offering a service that involves giving generic feedback to students doing group presentations. This allows students to run material with an impartial observer acting as both audience and critical friend. The use of instant messaging is also being explored as a way of initiating contact with students both on- and off-campus in real time, as we feel this has much potential for direct engagement with our users.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The work of a subject librarian at St Mary's University College is still in the process of readjustment to reflect the changing demands of our students and academic staff. While long-established skills such as budget and stock management remain central, the role has broadened out considerably in recent years to encompass duties not traditionally associated with the post. We now play a far more active part in the teaching process than has previously been the case, and have taken on a wide range of new responsibilities in the fields of IT and blended learning support. We also play a key role in the multi-pronged enquiry and support service within the LRC, working in conjunction with desk staff and student advisors to deliver on-demand support to students. All this helps us to improve the students' experience of university, and to provide valued support to the work of teaching staff. Maintaining this position

in the future will nevertheless depend on retaining an open attitude to new responsibilities and service models as student needs change.

#### REFERENCES

- 1 IPSOS MORI on behalf of JISC, 'Great expectations of ICT: how higher education institutions are shaping up', available from <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/publications/publications/greatexpectations.aspx> [accessed 3 November 2008]
- 2 Centre for Information Behaviour and the Evaluation of Research, 'Information behaviour of the researcher of the future: a CIBER briefing paper', available from <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/resourcediscovery/googlegen.aspx> [accessed 3 November 2008]
- 3 Ibid., pp 18–20; p 31