
Reaching out to researchers – from subject librarian to sales rep



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INTRODUCTION

In academic libraries many strides have been taken in embedding information literacy into undergraduate study but a group that may be omitted, if not ignored, are the academics themselves. This article describes how desktop library visits have been used at the University of Liverpool library to build links with research and teaching staff. It explores the way one-to-one meetings can improve the information literacy skills of academic staff and assist in the promotion of the skills and services available to them via the library. Desktop library visits were found to be an effective tool in building good working relationships with an academic department, which led to increased collaboration and integration of the library. They can be particularly effective in reaching researchers who may not have identified a need for information literacy training yet are missing out on tools and sources that could help them in their work

REACHING OUT

The reality in most universities is that academic staff engage in teaching and research to lesser or greater extents. Even PhD students are often involved in teaching and may have more contact with undergraduate students than some of their more senior colleagues. Academic staff will recommend research strategies and key sources to their students based on their own experiences and, unless they are up to date with what is available, this advice can be misleading. In my own experience as a subject librarian, I regularly had the experience of a lecturer sitting in on an information literacy session who would exclaim, 'I didn't know we had all this!' or similar when presented

with resources. In encounters with researchers, I had often observed that they were not using the time-saving tools available to them.

Students have been shown to be much more likely to act on the recommendation of their lecturer than that of a librarian; their lecturers can be 'gatekeepers'¹ If we are promoting our services only to students we are missing this vital part of the jigsaw. It can be argued that promoting the library directly to students is less effective than gaining 'library champions' amongst academic staff who will sell the library, its services and resources, to their students. As research income and rating are essential to the reputation and financial security of a university, libraries need to make sure they engage with researchers and provide them with the tools and training they require.

WHAT ABOUT INFORMATION LITERACY CLASSES FOR ACADEMICS?

The simplest solution would be to offer information literacy training sessions aimed at academics, yet these sessions may be poorly attended, with one exception – training in reference-management software such as EndNote and RefWorks. This has been noted in other universities' libraries² Reference management software training can become information literacy training when, for example, it becomes clear that an academic is unfamiliar with searching Web of Knowledge or other key databases. Suddenly it can dawn on the academic that librarians have skills and experience to offer and can assist them in effective searching and management of information. After all, if we cannot help academic staff, what use will we be to their students? There is a place for group training, but the specific needs and niche research areas of researchers demand an individual approach.

BACKGROUND

On beginning a new post as subject librarian at the University of Liverpool, one of my priorities was to build up good working relationships with the departments. I looked to my earlier MA research into academic staff and information literacy and the findings, which suggested an individual approach to information literacy training for staff. I was drawn in particular to Peter Godwin's concept of a 'desktop library visit', first introduced at London Southbank University³ By arranging structured visits instead of a basic 'I'm your new subject librarian' meeting I hoped to gain an understanding of the department and the information literacy skills of staff.

To implement desktop library visits for the academic staff in the University of Liverpool management school (ULMS), I sent an e-mail to all academic staff, knowing that if all ninety took up my offer I would be overwhelmed – and that if none did my hunch and initial research were wrong. In the end I had responses to my first e-mail from twelve staff. What was interesting about the respondents was that they tended to be mid- to late-career academics, typically at professor or senior lecturer level, some of whom had worked at the institution for many years. These are just the sort of staff who would be unlikely to attend a training session. The e-mail I sent is below; it deliberately does not mention information literacy, or training, but rather ‘sells’ the visits by emphasising the benefits.

Dear All,

The **Desktop Library Visit** is new service for Academic Staff from your ULMS Librarian.

Contact me to arrange a visit, and save time using Library databases and other services for your research and teaching. I’ll come to your office, or use a laptop in the ULMS café.

MetaLib... Business Source Premier... Library Catalogue... RSS... Google Scholar... Tables of Contents Alerts... Integrating Resources into VITAL... EndNote... Copyright... Using Mobile devices for library resources... and more

- Wasting time on fruitless searching?
- Need some time saving tips?
- Want an update on resources specific to your research area?
- Interested in incorporating Information Skills into the modules you teach?

Book a **Desktop Library Visit** - Contact Emma Thompson, the ULMS Librarian emma.thompson@liv.ac.uk ext 43940 to arrange an appointment.

An appointment was arranged with each of the staff, who were asked to e-mail an outline of their teaching and research interests in advance of the meeting. This helped to identify keywords and databases and give structure to the meetings. A form was developed (based on that used at London Southbank University) with prompts and space for notes, covering topics that could be raised, for example:

- key databases
- current awareness – RSS feeds and journal tables of contents
- off-campus access
- information literacy – for postgraduate and undergraduate students
- copyright
- institutional repository.

The form acts as a checklist, ensuring that the main areas the library needs to promote are covered. I found it useful to make notes to follow up after the meeting, for example to arrange information literacy support for a specific module or to send further information on a particular database. The appointments were arranged to last 45 minutes. In this relatively short structured session we could address many areas, at a pace and level determined by the individual lecturer, and if further detail was required this could be discussed at a follow-up meeting where necessary.

THE VISITS

The visits began with a general question about the research interests of the member of staff. Any researcher enjoys talking about their own particular research area, and giving them the chance to do this was a key part of the interview. Gaining an understanding of the research areas of staff was one of the major benefits of the exercise, so that when new resources become available there is a clear idea of who may benefit. This was particularly beneficial for me as a new member of staff. Of course academics have their research interests on their web pages, but in these face-to-face interviews I could gain an insight into who they are collaborating with and which journals are the key ones in their area, and learn more about their interests.

I brought a laptop to each meeting, to demonstrate various resources and tools, for example how I use a personal start page on NetVibes to organise RSS feeds for journal tables of contents, using TicTOCs <http://www.tictocs.ac.uk/>. I could also show how I incorporated features like widgets for MetaLib and the library catalogue into my home page. I found that demonstrating how I use these services helped staff see the benefits.

THINKING OF TRYING STRUCTURED VISITS?

It is very easy to think of reasons not to open yourself up to the academic staff in this way. Teaching may take up a lot of your time, or you may be concerned that so many staff will take up the offer that you will be doing little else. If the

clash between teaching and these visits is a concern, bear in mind that more efficient methods of delivering information literacy support can come out of a visit. By learning more about the teaching commitments of staff you can become better informed and suggest appropriate timing for information literacy teaching. This can be of more benefit to students than the librarian's being parachuted in at the beginning of a semester to tell the students 'all about the library'. By adopting a partnership approach with the department (much easier when you know the individuals), teaching can be arranged at appropriate times during the academic year instead of being bunched at the beginning.

Many subject librarians liaise with a number of subject areas, where staff numbers are very high. Whilst it is very unlikely that all the staff you contact will take up this offer, you may wish to pilot visits with one subject area, or approach research groups instead of individuals. Offering this service to staff could have the same public relations benefit as 24-hour opening can have for user services: only a small proportion of students and staff will choose to visit the library at 4 am on a Tuesday, but they are glad they can if they need to. In the same way, even though many staff will not take up this offer of support they are unlikely to view it negatively. If you are overwhelmed by requests for your time, the solution may be visits arranged on a first-come first-served basis, over a number of weeks. I found that some staff had kept my e-mail on file, then approached me and asked for a visit some months after the original offer.

FUTURE PLANS

After this successful pilot with management school staff, the next step for me is to try desktop visits with psychology, my other subject area. Other Liverpool subject librarians are considering how structured visits may work with their subject areas. This approach is easy to adapt and to customise to different subject areas. The visits can fit into a virtuous circle of benefits for both the library and the department involved. (See Figure 1)



Figure 1. Benefits of desktop library visits

REFERENCES

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- 3 P. Godwin, 'Making life easier for academics: how librarians can help staff weather the technological storm', *Journal of eLiteracy* [online], 2(2), 2005, pp68–79, available at http://www.jelit.org/59/01/JeLit_Paper_20.pdf [accessed 27 October 2009]