Chapter Five

Supporting Academic Librarians' Transition from Generic to Research Dedicated Roles

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Abstract

In 2014 the library service at Nottingham Trent University (NTU), United Kingdom restructured its academic liaison team to create a new dedicated research support team. In this case study, the author considers the issues involved in supporting librarians who are moving from a generic full-service model to a dedicated research role. Approaches to developing new technical knowledge and skill competencies are addressed as are the differences between their old and new roles in relation to interpersonal skills and behavioural competencies, reflecting the changed nature of the relationships they were expected to develop. Based on the experience at NTU conclusions are drawn regarding best practice in supporting librarians moving from generic to research specific roles.

Keywords: training; research support; organisational change; up-skilling; staff development; academic libraries; United Kingdom

Introduction

Nottingham Trent University (NTU) is a large university situated in the midlands of England with a student population of just under 27,000, of whom approximately 6000 are studying at postgraduate level. The University is structured around three colleges: Arts and Science; Business Law and Social Sciences; and Art, Design and the Built Environment. Nine academic schools sit within these colleges. The colleges provide business and administrative functions while the schools are the focus for academic activities. The NTU Graduate School works in partnership with the nine schools to support the management of postgraduate research degrees.

The University defines itself as 'teaching-intensive' and 'research-active' and aims to prioritise activity that promotes and enhances high-quality learning opportunities for all students, including raising their awareness and experience of research. Its aim is to achieve sustainable growth in the quality, volume and applicability of research, although it has no aspirations to become a research intensive university. To this end, there is a strong emphasis on equipping researchers (many of whom are early career researchers) with the appropriate skills to succeed, and maximising the impact of the research carried out to improve awareness of the University and its reputation for the research undertaken. In 2014 the library service at NTU restructured its academic liaison team to create a new dedicated research support team.

This case study is based loosely on Stake's (1995) approach of observation with conclusions drawn by the author who considers the organisational change and human resource issues involved in supporting librarians who are moving from a generic full-service model of support to a dedicated research role. In addition to looking at approaches taken with regard to developing new technical knowledge and skill competencies, the chapter considers the differences between the librarians' old and new roles in relation to interpersonal skills and behavioural competencies, reflecting the changed nature of the relationships they were expected to develop with their new key customer group of active researchers. Based on the experience at NTU conclusions are drawn regarding best practice in supporting librarians moving from generic to research specific roles.

Academic liaison and the need for change

Library support for research had been provided by an academic liaison team (ALT) which had been in operation largely unchanged for over ten years. It was well established and integrated into the University and held in high regard by academic staff. It operated a 'full service' model, in that all aspects of academic support work were handled by the team through a single named contact. From the perspective of academics or researchers this was a very simple but effective model as they simply had to contact one person for any of their library needs, including research support. It has worked well while the university environment remained relatively stable in terms of research support needs but the team had been operating at full capacity for some time both in terms of the volume of work undertaken and also the breadth of knowledge and understanding they needed given the wide range of responsibilities they already had. The library's support for research was satisfactory but operated within a relatively undemanding environment; it was broadly meeting demand, but not helping to inform, shape or lead on developments. In terms of practical support the offer from the team to researchers could be characterised as:

- Collections focussed, but without any dedicated funding for research materials. Research materials tended to be acquired with 'one off' funding or as part of a balanced overall collection to support learning, teaching and research.
- Limited involvement in or support for management of research outputs. There was encouragement to contribute to the institutional repository but it was not mandated.

- Ad hoc support provided to researchers on advice on publishing options, retaining copyright etcetera.
- Limited researcher training offered and usually outside of mainstream activity. Much of it was on a one on one basis.

The context for research support in the United Kingdom (UK) universities was, however, undergoing some significant changes, and these were beginning to be reflected at NTU in increasing demand for a more active role in terms of supporting what was becoming an increasingly critical university activity. The national agenda to enhance access to publicly funded research had gained considerable traction within the UK over the previous three to four years, spurred on in part by the influential government sponsored Finch Report (Research Information Network, 2012) which proposed a move to open access (OA) for all public funded research. Arguments for and against OA were debated across UK universities which were all considering its implications. Some funding bodies were already insisting on particular approaches to OA, but there was not a consistent requirement or indeed response across the UK Higher Education (HE) sector. In parallel with this public debate, the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) which is a system for assessing the quality of research every six years in UK higher education institutions, was also making moves towards OA and more generally indicating that it would be expecting greater understanding of the impact of research carried out at the next major review in 2020.

NTU was, of course, not immune to this, and the changes to OA and REF were encouraging the University to take a more strategic approach to how it undertook research and how this was managed. The conversation had started about how to respond and in particular what role libraries might have; after a long period of inaction there was now talk about the future and the library had been challenged to play a significant role in it. External pressures were driving developments and creating the impetus for change,

with the library now being seen as part of the response. The potential for the library to extend its role beyond traditional collection management and provision to include a range of new services relating to the management of research output was gathering momentum – an opportunity to create a much more central role. It was recognised that, in broad terms, the library could add value by:

- administering open access fees on behalf of the University;
- developing and managing policies relating to publishing options;
- providing training and advice on intellectual property (IP) and publishing/dissemination options;
- maintaining the Institutional Repository as a complete record of intellectual output;
- developing new services such as citation impact analysis, trend analysis et cetera;
- providing templates to simplify tasks for researchers.

To deliver the above, the library would have to increase the resources invested in it considerably, not something that would be possible given that no additional funding for staffing was available. Other equally important priorities for the team meant that switching resources to research support from other areas was also not possible. Responding to the demand would also have required further extending the breadth of skills and knowledge required by the team, again something that, given the current extensive range of responsibilities, was not a realistic proposition.

The way forward from a generic full-service model of support to a dedicated research role

The question faced therefore was whether it was possible to respond to the increasing demand within the existing staffing structure as increasing the pay bill and enlarging the team were not options. Our assessment was that it was not possible to expand the depth of knowledge and understanding required for research support and

expect that to be delivered alongside all other existing services for teaching and learning. Informed by investigations undertaken by Research Libraries UK (RLUK: Auckland 2012) and evaluated by Brewerton (2012a; 2012b), we concluded that the time had come to specialise and move away from the generic model that had served us well for more than a decade. Although this was primarily driven by workforce planning and job design factors it was also recognised that the development of a separate team with its own distinct identity provided some interesting opportunities for marketing and promotion that may have been more difficult if part of a bigger service offer. Notwithstanding all this, there was understandably a degree of concern at the breaking up of what had been a very successful service operation; and it was also felt to be important to be clear that the new research support remained firmly embedded within the overall library service, and was not seen as a 'free standing' team disconnected from the rest of the library service. This was a careful balancing act.

Having taken the decision to restructure there followed a very real and pressing need to respond quickly to the new needs of the University. This required the revised staffing arrangements and new services being in place more quickly than we would have ideally wanted, but it was considered important to be seen ready to respond to the timescales of the University and not the library. In reality the first full year of operation was always going to be something of a transition year, with two key priorities: first, to have some form of training support available to researchers from the start of the new academic year – so just a matter of weeks after the team had been established a programme of workshops and training events had been prepared, and secondly, to recognise and accept that to a large extent the up-skilling of staff would have to take the form of 'learning on the job', with skills and knowledge being acquired and developed on a just-in-time basis, often only one small step ahead of it being needed. While it is undoubtedly possible to argue

the merits or otherwise of this approach the reality was that we had no alternative.

A prerequisite to the above was, of course, the formation of the team itself, which was to contain four full-time staff from the original ALT team of twelve. We took the view from the very start that all members of the existing team were more than capable of carrying out the specialist research support function, and therefore the restructuring would be carried out on the basis of expressions of interest and mapping of personal interest in the new role. While this approach gives no guarantee of success, and is not always replicable elsewhere, when you have good reason to believe it will work then it much reduces the stresses associated with organisational change and allows the staff affected to focus on the outcome of the process rather than the process itself.

It was noted by Simons and Searle (2014) that they found no clear pathway for the acquisition of new library research skills, and this reflected our own experiences at NTU. However our experience (and good fortune) was that the hard/technical skills associated with the new role (for example, bibliometrics) although initially thought complex were actually relatively easy to get to grips with. The absence of quality external training to support the acquisition of the new skills was in fact not a major problem. We believe that to some extent this was thanks to the small size of the new team whose members were very supportive of one another and keen to share what information and skills they had acquired.

Equally, gaining a working understanding of the key developments in research (both in terms of policy and discipline) was relatively easy to achieve, with the main challenge matching and relating them to the local university context, and, in particular, to the needs of specific research groups and individual researchers. Active engagement in social media discussion regarding new initiatives was perhaps the most important contributor to the success of this strategy, proving to be considerably more valuable than any other channel of information.

Table 1: Link between 'old' activities and tasks and new role

Activity	Comment
Information literacy	Continues, but emphasis moves from teaching low level/basic skills to large groups to help with advanced techniques on a 1-1 or small group basis. Remains a significant element of job.
Subject knowledge	Continues, largely unchanged, but now includes awareness of key research trends including funding opportunities.
Social media understanding/awareness	Continues, but emphasis now on advising on management on researcher identity.
Managing information	Continues but emphasis moves from simple to complex/advanced in relation to bibliographic referencing, copyright compliance and citations. Remains a significant element of job.
Special Collections	Continues, but higher profile in new role and expected to actively engage with development and management.
Running of workshops and training events	Continues but with greater emphasis on alignment with external researcher frameworks such as the UK's Research Development Framework (RDF).
One to one help/advisory service	Continues, no longer providing an 'on demand' service but 1-1 appointments are offered.
Production of guides and online support material	Continues, same.
Collections management	Continues, but only in relation to research materials (was a major time consumer in previous role).
Reading list (creation, management etcetera)	Stops, was a major time consumer in previous role.
Study skills support/teaching	Stops, was an increasingly large part of previous role.
Data management	New to research role, providing advice and training.
Maximising and measuring impact	New to research role, compliance with institutional policies, citation tools, bibliometrics, social media engagement/promotion.
Publishing advice	New to research role, providing advice on where and how to publish (including OA options), funder requirements and mandates etcetera.

Table 1 demonstrates that although the application of the work may have changed substantially, when the old and new roles were considered from the standpoint of tasks and activities undertaken, there remained a good degree of match between them. The environment and context were clearly different between the new research team and the learning and teaching team in terms of institutional priorities and customer profile, but the new core activities continue to have much in common with the old role. Where new areas of activity were introduced (for example, bibliometrics) they were in broad terms matched by a reduction of a corresponding area (for example, reading lists). In general terms it could be said that while there were new skills and knowledge to be acquired (and some to be dropped) the skills, knowledge and competencies required were essentially the same, although, it must be acknowledged, likely to be tested to very high levels.

Informing an overstretched team that there were areas of skill and knowledge that they no longer had to apply was never going to be a hard sell and they were of course enthusiastic about developing the new skills and knowledge required. The key challenge, as previously noted, was finding a systematic way to complete the process. The external training support environment for these areas is not at the same level of

maturity as it is for other training needs, and therefore there was more difficulty in identifying suitable training courses than otherwise might have been the case. In reality the end result was a combination of product supplier demonstrations and presentations and a very large degree of self-directed investigation, study and on-the-job learning (with the librarians often just one small step ahead of the researcher they were supporting). The end result has been entirely satisfactory and the team's knowledge and skills are now at the required standard, but the team had been required to exercise considerably more initiative and resourcefulness in acquiring the expertise than had been anticipated originally. Turning now from the 'hard' skills to the 'soft' skills it is particularly satisfying to confirm that the core behavioural competencies of a librarian in a generic liaison role are exactly the same ones required in the specialised research role. This is what we had originally expected to be the case but it is very pleasing one full year down the line to have had that confirmed. It is undoubtedly true that the librarians have been tested and stretched to a very high level, which they have been able to respond to. The context in which they have been deployed is of course very different to that of the previous role, but we believe the evidence supports our view that the core skills can be successfully transferred.

Such behavioural competencies (team working, influencing skills and so on) are often characterised as 'people skills' and their importance cannot be overstated in relation to the development of the new team. While technical knowledge and skills are obviously needed to create and maintain credibility with the research community, they are of little value if the team and its members cannot gain the trust of researchers and demonstrate to them that they are 'on their side' and wanting to help. Such trust creates the outlet for their 'hard' skills to be effectively deployed. This is particularly important in relation to help with regulatory and compliance issues, in which it is not unusual for the researcher to have little personal interest and so they are particularly grateful for any support and assistance that can be provided.

Table 2 reproduces the core (or common) behavioural competencies that intentionally remained unchanged from the old generic role to the new specialist one.

Conclusions about best practice

While new skills and knowledge had to be acquired, some of which was challenging to organise, the transfer and adaptation of existing core behavioural competencies was fundamental to the success of the new team. Conversely, had the team comprised highly knowledgeable and skilled staff who were less strong with regard to interpersonal skills then its success might have been more uncertain. Based on the experience at NTU, the transition from generalist to specialist can work – and work exceptionally well – if those core transferable 'people skills' are already present and well developed. The new technical skills and knowledge required, while undoubtedly demanding, were not found to be overwhelming, particularly when matched with other technical areas which were being deleted from the job role. In terms of lessons learned by the experience at NTU, the key messages are:

- Assume that experienced generic liaison staff are entirely capable of transferring to a dedicated research role.
- Expect challenges in providing the new 'hard' technical skills and knowledge in a systematic way, and be prepared to be opportunistic about how they are acquired, but be confident that staff will be capable of rising to the challenge.
- Anticipate that the key determinant of the success of the new role will be largely down to the interpersonal / behavioural competencies of the individual, which are common to all library liaison roles and therefore likely to already present in any

Table 2: Behavioural competencies carried over from previous generic role

Competency	Description
Customer focus: provides the best quality services to internal and external customers, meeting their needs by working in partnership.	Provides a quality service that is regularly reviewed. Anticipates customer needs. Actively seeks feedback on services from customers and makes appropriate changes to service and to underpinning policy/strategy.
Organisation and delivery: adopts a clear approach to change. Planning, prioritising and organising work, making effective use of time and resources.	Takes account of organisational priorities to ensure that operational and strategic plans are being implemented and achieved.
Adaptability: adapts to new situations and areas of work flexibly and with enthusiasm, including recognition of, and work towards, addressing own development needs and those of others.	Embraces and manages change. Seeks opportunities for change, supporting colleagues in implementing new ways of working, effectively and supportively communicating the rationale for change.
Creativity and innovation: adopts a creative approach to problem solving and seeks opportunities to innovate.	Reviews, tests and implements new concepts, models and approaches to practice in support of service development and delivery.
Making informed decisions: analyses problems and uses a range of means to make well informed decisions.	Uses analyses, reports and data to test the validity of options and assess risk before taking decisions. Ensures optimum decisions are taken.
Communicating and influencing: gives and receives information effectively, negotiates and persuades to achieve the best possible outcome.	Communicates effectively with a wide range of diverse internal and *external* stakeholders, influencing and negotiating change. Networks internally to keep ahead of developments.
Team working Co-operates enthusiastically with others in own team and in other formal and informal teams.	Leads aspects of team work, seeking and implementing improvements to the team's outputs/service and developing colleagues within the team. Challenges colleagues.

high performing library team.

- Encourage the staff to concentrate on making contacts and developing new

working relationships with key stakeholders as a priority.

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