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The establishment of a staff development network amongst partner libraries in the south of England



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INTRODUCTION

Late in 2011 library management representatives from a group of regional libraries in the South of England (Bournemouth, Chichester, Portsmouth, Southampton, Southampton Solent and Winchester) got together at the University of Portsmouth to begin to explore the options for collaborative working. The institutions involved are quite diverse in nature. For example, Southampton is served by two universities, the University of Southampton, a Russell Group university, and Southampton Solent University, a teaching-led university that achieved university status in 2005. Whereas diversity might limit, to a certain degree, opportunities for meaningful collaboration, discussions concluded that the need for a robust staff development programme was an agenda that we could move forward with regarding collaborative working. A staff development network was established between the aforementioned libraries

KEY DRIVERS FOR DEVELOPING THE NETWORK

- Geographic locations mean that these libraries have the potential to be quite isolated.

They do not benefit from the strong networking opportunities elsewhere, for example the M25 Consortium of Academic Libraries, covering Greater London (<http://www.m25lib.ac.uk>), or NoWAL, the North West Academic Libraries Consortium (<http://www.nowal.ac.uk>).

- A number of shared agendas were identified in relation to staff development; for example the need for all staff to have excellent customer service skills in order to meet student expectations in the new fees environment, the importance of demonstrating value and impact and the need to keep abreast with changes in the digital environment.
- Budgetary pressures mean that we need to look for cost-effective ways of providing staff development opportunities; it is expensive to send individuals on professional training days.
- The development of a staff development consortium approach facilitates group learning, sharing of good practice and the exchange of ideas.
- All the libraries have staff undertaking similar roles, from customer-facing enquiry roles to supporting the digital environment and information skills training.
- Managers from the libraries concerned saw the opportunity to involve staff at all levels, including more junior and para-professional roles; there are often fewer opportunities for staff at these levels, yet they too can benefit from looking at the bigger picture in relation to their roles and being able to share experiences.

EVENTS TO DATE

- 9 March 2012: *'Challenges in meeting student expectations: learning from the frontline'*, University of Portsmouth Library

This was our inaugural event, attended by about 30 staff from across the network. It included presentations from two student union presidents from member libraries who challenged us to think about service development and delivery in relation to the change to a fees-based environment. The presidents challenged us on a number of issues that provided participants with much food for thought to take into the afternoon discussions. Key considerations were around developing space, staff support for students, resource provision and the importance of communicating well in a variety of ways

- 19 June 2012: *'Approaches to marketing library services'*, University of Chichester, Bognor Regis Campus

Attended by over 40 staff, this event included a presentation from an external speaker who talked about the University of Warwick Library's approach to marketing and presented a model which was useful to aid the afternoon's discussions on approaches we might adopt in engaging with our different groups of users, for example undergraduates, postgraduates, part-time and distance learners, academic staff and international students.

- 10 December 2012: *'Libraries and mobile learners.'* University of Southampton, Hartley Library

This event was attended by 25 staff. It considered the different ways in which students now learn, with particular reference to the impact of mobile technologies. The key focus here was on the various experiences of mobile learning and on the variety of devices, noting also the challenges presented by IT systems and infrastructures. Group discussions focused on how we can best support mobile learners, highlighting some current initiatives, including the introduction of services such as the online chat and roaming. It was noted that not all users are so confident with such technologies and different levels of support need to be tailored to their needs. There is a staff development agenda in terms of confidence and existing levels of expertise, which also needs to be tackled.

- 27 June 2013: *'Collaborative working to improve information literacy within our organisations'*, University of Winchester

This event included two external speakers who presented on information literacy projects / models. We also introduced a 'teach meet' session whereby participants from the universities involved presented on some initiatives in their own organisations. This was felt to be a very helpful addition to the programme and we are likely to repeat it at future events.

As well as presentations, all events included interactive group work where participants worked in smaller groups (each group including representatives from all six organisations) to discuss issues, share ideas and what they were or could be doing in relation to the topic being addressed.

ANALYSIS

Feedback to date has been very positive. The mixture of presentations on key topics with practical group working has been a good balance and has offered the opportunity both for learning and for sharing ideas and current practice. Delegates have also benefited from meeting peers from other libraries and, where they have similar roles, having the chance to network more generally. Each event offers the opportunity for a tour of the library, another useful element when we are all grappling with the question of how to best develop our space to meet student needs.

A CASE STUDY FROM ONE OF THE NETWORK PARTNERS: IMPACT AND FOLLOW-UP AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PORTSMOUTH (UoP)

At UoP we wanted to follow up on the events and encourage reflective feedback from attendees. The Staff Development Advisor arranged a meeting for staff who attended and asked them to compile a report on the value and impact of each event. This encouraged staff from different library teams to have dedicated time to collaborate and share their experience, and gave a steer for the following type of information within the feedback:

- *presentation – what was included*
- *groups discussions – key issues*
- *recommendations – to bring back to Portsmouth*
- *feedback on the event*

It also enabled staff to consider different libraries and perhaps comment or compare them to our own, whilst also reflecting on the main topics of the day. This The report was then shared with all staff to help them see understand the format of the day, what staff took personally from the day, as well the potential impact on the our business or in relation to potential recommendations we could take forward. Whilst we are investing staff time in attending such sessions, it is important that there is value and benefit to both.

Additionally we are trialling individual asking participants for feedback with the following questions, which we hope to share internally:

- *What are the key points you have learnt as a result of attending this event?*
- *Where do you see this benefiting you in your current or future role?*
- *What do you hope to do differently as a result of attending this event?*
- *Do you have any recommendations or suggestions to bring back to work?*

- *Would you recommend it to others*

The following quotations from attendees from UoP highlight some of the perceived benefits of the events to date.

'I think that we have to form a closer working relationship with our University Marketing Department and also that the student body is not as fixated by social media as we think they are. Sometimes more traditional ways reach a wider audience.'

'As I am part of the promotions and marketing team it was very useful and enlightening to see / hear other universities thoughts and ideas. Undoubtedly we will 'steal' and adapt some of the better ones! I enjoyed the buzz and inspiration!'

'From a developer's point of view much of the value is in staff networking with other libraries but also discussing current and very topical issues – it is important that staff know why and how they are attending and how this will be followed up. In introducing reflective feedback it gives a chance to consider how they are benefiting both personally and professionally. Good ideas / suggestions should be encouraged and shared too.'

'Networking with other members of staff from different universities, hearing their concerns and procedures, was of great use. The overlap of promotional activity with the various institutions gave clarity to the fact that UoP Library appears to be on the right track. I came away with a selection of ideas to carry forward.'

'I am more confident about using an iPad when I am roving.'

'I think the benefits were largely one of awareness-raising. As a member of the library website group – one of the issues talked about in the group is whether the site is accessible to mobile devices.'

FUTURE PLANS

The early success of the staff development network means that we plan to continue to organise events for the foreseeable future. A further event, to be held in December 2013 at Southampton Solent University and focusing on student engagement, is in the planning stages at the time of writing.