

Changing the world one researcher at a time: A Skills and Engagement approach to Library Research Support

Abstract

The Research Skills Team¹ in the Library at the University of Birmingham is a unique² formation of librarians, a postgraduate skills officer and postgraduate teaching assistants.

The team's clear focus is the researcher themselves, and their 'lived experience', from the moment of registration on a PhD course, through post-doctoral early career posts, to lecturer and professor level.

The team's mission is to be a seamless interface to the research services offered by the library, to demystify the increasingly complex scholarly communication system, and to advocate for initiatives such as open research.

By taking a holistic approach to the researcher experience and orienting services accordingly, and by safeguarding staff time to finesse an ongoing suite of training opportunities, the library is demonstrating an ongoing commitment to facilitate high quality research.

Background

In 2017, the Library Academic Engagement (LAE) division was reconfigured to better support the University strategy, and to strengthen the division's threefold remit of engagement with academic schools, development of students' learning and academic skills and support for research.

Although no additional resource was available as part of this restructure, an opportunity was taken to more directly align the library related research support offered by former library Subject Advisors with the information related skills required by researchers from research student level to academic staff who publish on a regular basis.

Under the previous structure of support, where individual Subject Advisors were the key channel of communication between the library and a School, there was awareness that some Schools disproportionately benefitted from information-related research support. By replacing and enhancing this inconsistent service, the new team offers:

- A 'menu' of **information skills** related indicative content was created, so that schools select from a suite of skills training for their postgraduate students.
- A programme of open workshops offering **wider developmental opportunities** for postgraduate students.
- A new suite of **open workshops** was developed for all researchers including **academic staff**, which offers guidance on fast-developing topics such as Research Data Management, Open

¹ Library Services, University of Birmingham (2018). Research Skills Team.

<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/libraryservices/library/research/contact-the-research-skills-team.aspx> (Accessed 3 May 2019)

² We have not found a structure that mirrors ours, but would be interested to speak to colleagues who work in this way.

Research, Research Metrics and Curating Online Identity alongside new tools and techniques in literature searching and bibliographic management.

- **1:1 appointments with Research Skills Advisors** are available, to give research staff and students the opportunity to discuss their research question, understand that they are accessing the best resources and using the most appropriate tools to develop and manage their own research outputs.

Meeting the 'lived experience'

Library Services sits within Academic Services in the university structure. One of the four key principles of Academic Services is 'understanding the lived experience'. Instead of privileging the internal library processes, the training and support offered by the Research Skills Team is focused on researcher goals. In practical terms this is achieved by:

- Offering workshops that reflect the tasks undertaken throughout researcher careers and then throughout the research lifecycle. For new researchers this includes workshops on thesis writing, surviving a viva and managing a relationship with a supervisor. Our postgraduate development officer has worked with the University Graduate School to improve the Development Needs Analysis form, based around the Vitae Researcher Development Framework³. This ensures that our offering is contextualised and relevant.
- Offering small group workshops allows us to facilitate discussion and networking between researchers who are often working alone or in focussed project groups. Surprising cross-disciplinary conversations are an attractive side benefit of this type of meeting and conversations continue outside the training room.
- Integrating practical elements in workshops so that researchers come away with an action plan, or an ORCID, or an increased citation count because they have worked on disambiguating their author record on the 'big 3' citation databases. (The latter is of course done in the context of a discussion about responsible metrics).
- Understanding the practical pressures on researchers at different career stages. In response to early career researchers who sometimes struggle to carve out time to write, or compose grant applications, for example, we have developed a programme of 'Shut up and work' days where our quiet training room is turned into an open plan office. Researchers set their goals and we provide coffee and biscuits at set break/networking times to give a light but supportive structure.

Scholarly communications skills V services

Library Services has responded to the changing scholarly communication landscape by providing a framework of support which enables initiatives such as open access publishing and research data management. The influential information specialist Lorcan Dempsey⁴ has suggested that changes in

³ Vitae (2010). 'Vitae Researcher Development Statement'. <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers-professional-development/about-the-vitae-researcher-development-framework> (Accessed: 25 April 2019)

⁴ Dempsey, L., (2016). Library collections in the life of the user: two directions. LIBER Quarterly. 26(4), pp.338–359. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.18352/lq.10170>

research libraries reflects an 'inside-out' approach, where rather than just encouraging users to be consumers, there is:

“a growing interest in sharing research and learning outputs, research expertise, and other institutional assets with external users. Together, these are becoming an important focus for academic libraries”.

In response to this, the Scholarly Communication Services team in Library Services has developed services and systems that allow researchers to manage their publications and datasets. These sophisticated processes are constantly developing to meet the frequent updates in funder and publisher mandates. The University of Birmingham encourages adoption of open research beyond mere compliance, however, and the Research Skills Team's exposure to researchers in their everyday work enables targeted advocacy.

The Research Skills Team works alongside Scholarly Communication Services colleagues to keep up to date with initiatives such as Plan S⁵, and developments such as improvements to the institutional data repository and eTheses repository. Whilst the team keeps their knowledge as up to date as possible, there is a recognition that there is a natural remove from working with these systems in a tangible way every day. In some way this gives us parity with researchers who are learning about the publication landscape too. We can put ourselves in their position, and we are still learning – we have empathy with their situation and can use our librarian experience to navigate the systems alongside them, but with some 'insider' knowledge.

As recommended by an ARCL (Association of College & Research Libraries) report:

“the transformation of the roles of academic librarians will be most effective and most powerful when we weave together information literacy and scholarly communication, integrating the two into new services within our professional practice. In turn, organizational structures need to support this direction”.⁶

Other key internal alliances

The realignment of the Library Academic Engagement division in 2017 resulted in the formation of three other key teams.

- The Engagement team consists of advisors who maintain the link between academic colleges and the library. The team act as 'brokers' for the training offered by the Research Skills Team. They also pass on valuable feedback and information gleaned at postgraduate researcher consultative committees and other college meetings. By keeping our engagement colleagues up to date with training and support activities, we ensure that we are part of the holistic library picture in the academy.
- The Learning Enhancement team provides academic skills support (including information literacy) for undergraduate and taught postgraduate students. They provide a menu of workshops similar to that created by the Research Skills Team and encounter comparable issues in terms of providing stimulating training sessions to groups. Issues regarding andragogy are shared and continuing professional development in teaching and learning

⁵ Coalition S. (2018). Plan S: making full and immediate Open Access a reality. <https://www.coalition-s.org/> (Accessed 25 April 2019)

⁶ Association of College and Research Libraries (2013). Intersections of scholarly communication and information literacy. P.20 <http://www.ala.org/Intersections> (Accessed 3 May 2019)

benefits when both groups are brought together. Both teams also run a service of one to one appointments and using the same systems and processes avoids reinventing the wheel.

- Library Customer Support colleagues are responsible for the 'Front of House' services that greet researchers when they enter the library. By meeting on a regular basis to update one another, the teams understand when it is appropriate to refer researchers to the team. A pilot to more effectively use the library's 'QuestionPoint' software for answering research skills queries is about the launch. This will create a 'knowledgebase' of answers that colleagues can use to inform future enquiry work.

LCS staff also look after and develop dedicated spaces such as the Research Suite in the Main Library. By using communication channels built up by Engagement Team colleagues and by speaking to researchers in workshops, we are currently working to form a user group for the researcher space, so that decision making can be done in partnership with researchers themselves.

Consolidating researcher development in the library

Perhaps the most unique aspect of the Research Skills Team is the inclusion of the Postgraduate Development Officer (PGDO). The role began in the University Graduate School (UGS), but moved into Library Services in 2016. It was felt that the beneficial communication networks that the library had with the academy could be exploited more effectively to provide tailored training for postgraduate research students. By offering workshops mapped to the RDF⁷, which integrate well with more traditional 'library' areas, researchers are offered a more holistic range of educational and networking opportunities⁸. Whilst many libraries, including our own, offer a comprehensive suite of academic skills sessions for undergraduates and taught postgraduates, few have integrated comparable offerings for postgraduate research students. The library is a natural home for this.

The PGDO uses a hotdesk in the UGS building at set times during a working week and so maintains a good relationship with UGS colleagues and understands how best to communicate our complete training offer. This close relationship has meant that initiatives such the new mandate in 2017 that PhD students complete a Data Management Plan (DMP) at the end of their first year before progressing to the next, has meant that the rest of the team has been able to respond by developing workshops both for PGRs themselves and for supervisors, to train on the principles of research data management, and in the use of the DMP Online tool.

The PGDO also recruits, trains and mentors four postgraduate teaching assistants who carry out a number of the skills sessions for their colleagues. This has the dual benefit of offering work and development opportunities to PGR students, and also means that they facilitate the sessions from the closest possible perspective of a current research student. The PGDO herself has a PhD and so understands the perspectives and pressure experienced by participants.

High level support

Once the Research Skills Team had produced their 'offer' and a communication plan, they were invited to present this with a short paper for the University Research Committee. The PVC for

⁷ Vitae (2010). 'Vitae Researcher Development Statement'. <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/researchers-professional-development/about-the-vitae-researcher-development-framework> (Accessed: 25 April 2019)

⁸ Research Skills Team, University of Birmingham (2019). 'Additional PGR Skills'. <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/libraryservices/library/research/additional-pgr-skills/index.aspx> (Accessed 29 April 2019)

Research endorsed the paper and commended the menu to his Director of Research colleagues and other committee members who gave their support.

Skills as a service

The creation of a small but focused team, ultimately means that a tightly run service with a well-defined mission can be operated by:

- A focus on processes. Admin support means that academic related library staff are free to deliver sessions and develop new materials.
- Tangible offer to the community. Working with colleagues in other library teams has enabled us to create a professional booklet which defines our offer advertises it to the academic community.
- Flexibility to develop new courses. Open Research is beginning to be discussed more as a discrete concept (particularly in the context of REF), and although it pervades all our training we can take the opportunity to work with our Scholarly Communication Services colleagues to develop content to meet this new interest.
- Suite of publications that support main tenants of offer. A number of branded documents are used as support material in workshops and these are also available for researchers to use separately.
- Online versions of some key ideas. A number of Canvas (University of Birmingham's iVLE) courses have been developed, particularly a suite of content branded 'Influential Researcher'.
- Ability to offer consultancy to professional services colleagues. The developing expertise of staff in the Research Skills Team, means that they are uniquely placed to offer advice in areas such as bibliometrics. When External Communications undertook work on helping academics improve their publication profiles on key databases, the team were able to consult with key individuals to suggest improvements such as author disambiguation.

Questions for the future

- After one complete academic year with the new menu of workshops, we have noted that we have a good deal of take-up from PGRs, but less from academic staff. We need to review our workshop titles and consider timings – shorter sessions with snappier titles may appeal. We also need to investigate our communication channels to work out if we can send more targeted (and perhaps branded) advertising.
- Currently our workshops are offered across the spectrum of researchers. It's possible that some more senior staff are put off by this, should we offer separate sessions?
- We know that PGR students are given a handbook from their academic college when they start their PhD studies. Unlike undergraduate handbooks, the production of these is not centralised, and so we would like to see what is given out in case information about the library needs to be updated.

Familiarity with a new team and services takes a long time in the bureaucracy of a university, but by working with colleagues across the service and the rest of the institution, we are building momentum with our new offer. Focussing support for individual researchers through the Research Skills Team has enabled Library Services to articulate the wealth of material, tools and value added services available to them.