

Relationship management as a tool for engaging with the academic community

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In November 2015, the authors attended the first Relationship Management in Higher Education Libraries conference, in Stirling, Scotland. The aim of the conference was to explore ways in which academic libraries are using relationship management (RM) techniques to engage with students and the academic community.

The opening workshop at the conference was aimed at producing an agreed definition of RM. It quickly became apparent that definitions varied across the groups, and that it was easier to discuss RM as a set of characteristics / responsibilities.

There was some discussion over whether RM is distinct from liaison. The latter has been defined as 'a formal, structured activity in which professional library staff systematically meet with teaching faculty to discuss stratagems for directly supporting their instructional needs and those of their students' (Miller 1977, cited by Rodwell & Fairbairn 2008).

Rodwell & Fairbairn (2008, p.119) note that liaison in modern libraries covers a broad range of activities, primarily focused on collection development, information literacy, participation in teaching and research, and, significantly, 'managing the relationship of the library with a faculty'.

In addition to building relationships with a 'faculty', Silver (2014, p.9) adds that part of liaison consists in building relationships with academic staff and students more generally. By contrast, Frank et al. (2001) describe proactively developing relationships with academic partners, an approach they refer to as 'information consultancy', as the opposite of traditional, passive liaison models.

Silver (2014) describes an approach to liaison that progresses in stages: from initial contact with the department and starting to build relationships (phase 1), to establishing two-way communication and collaboration, for example around collection development and marketing library services (phase 2), to 'advanced' liaison outreach, such as joint teaching or collaborating on research. RM is the common thread that runs through these activities: it is emphasised from the start that building and maintaining a good relationship with academic colleagues is the key to successful liaison and outreach.

Soules (2001) identifies RM as a component of an overall marketing strategy, showing that interactions with library users contribute to the creation of a positive or negative impression of the library. RM therefore becomes a tool for creating positive interactions and associations, thus enabling effective promotion of the library. Likewise, Frank et al. (2001) describe developing partnerships with academic colleagues as a strategic activity for librarians.

RM at the University of Huddersfield

Although difficult to define and quantify, RM can be discussed in the context of the actions taken in order to manage and develop the relationships with service users successfully. At the University of Huddersfield we have carried out a series of targeted outreach activities in order to promote the library further and to build rapport with our service users; these activities include personalised desktop visits for staff, and optional workshops for students. These were piloted with academic schools that had been identified as low users of the library, and have since been extended to include all academic schools (Stone et al. 2015).

At the RM conference we ran a workshop exploring some of the outreach activities we have trialled as it were from the perspective of the academic community, using a 'spectacles' exercise (Petty 2014, pp. 145–46). We asked delegates to put themselves in the shoes of various service users, e.g. undergraduate students or new lecturers, and asked them to discuss in groups

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what they thought of the various engagement activities we had tried, then feed back to the room. This emphasised the importance of considering users' views and opinions when planning any outreach activities. When working with service users we need to be aware of the diversity of the university population and offer support in a variety of ways in order to reach as many people as possible.

The feedback we received from the delegates was that academics are more likely to engage in activities that are tailored to their research needs – e.g. desktop visits or publishing workshops. They are unlikely to attend events outside their academic school. Optional workshops and drop-in sessions were thought to be appealing to students but they also commented that they may never actually go to one – they're a good 'back up'. There was similar feedback from the group regarding creative workshops, which were seen as engaging for those who do attend but likely to attract low numbers, as some may not feel they are 'academic enough'.

As well as evaluating Huddersfield's outreach activities, delegates were invited to share additional ideas that their service user may appreciate. Suggestions included Skype appointments for distance-learning students, and interactive online materials.

We are aware that although this workshop brought up some useful and insightful feedback, it had obvious limitations in that the participants were all librarians, rather than actual service users. Our next step is to conduct evaluation exercises with our library users. During spring / summer 2016, we have been conducting user experience (UX) interviews with international students, to gain insight into how these students understand and make use of the library. We plan to roll out these interviews to home and EU students next, starting with the academic schools that show the least library use.

Current and future developments

We have expanded our optional workshops to include sessions targeted specifically towards international students and dissertation students. The sessions for the former were held at weekends in the first term, and covered a range of library skills including keyword searching and referencing. Turnout for the first few sessions was initially high, and feedback was positive; however, attendance dropped during the course of the term. Next academic year we intend to run these workshops again in the first term, and open them to all students.

For dissertation students, we ran a series of workshops in the second term, branded as part of a 'Dissertation Toolkit' programme of support created in collaboration with the Students' Union and the IT Training team. These were popular with students: all sessions were fully booked, and turnout was high. Feedback after each session was overwhelmingly positive, with most students saying they had learned something that would help with their research and expressing interest in similar workshops in the future. Due to the popularity of the initial schedule of four workshops, we organised an additional two workshops on referencing, also in the second term. We intend to repeat these workshops in the next academic year, possibly running them slightly earlier in the term.

We have also run more events in partnership with information providers. Following the success of events with input from the IEEE in the School of Computing and Engineering (Stone *et al.* 2015), in November 2015 representatives from the *Financial times* were invited to come roving with us in the Business School as *FT.com* had recently been purchased for those students. The librarians and *FT.com* representatives registered students for the resource on the spot and demonstrated its features, explaining how it could be used in their studies.

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In February 2016, representatives from the IEEE visited the university to talk to students from the School of Computing & Engineering about student membership. They provided a free lunch for students, and delivered presentations about the benefits of student membership for career progression, alongside a demonstration of the IEEE Xplore Digital Library. The event was co-organised by the library and the school, and provided an opportunity for the librarian to remind students of the range of resources provided by the library, and how these could be used for careers planning as well as university assignments (e.g. using IEEE Xplore to find out about what research a company has been involved in, prior to being interviewed for a job with them).

During the 2015–16 academic year Computing and Library Services (CLS) has been involved in the university's open days. The law department brought their prospective students into the library on these days to give them a brief overview of legal resources and research. This builds on existing initiatives such as a legal research teaching session that has been running for a few years for local students studying A-Level law. Building relationships with local colleges and potential future students is important to the university, so this is something for the library to build on.

We are also working on reaching out to members of the academic community who do not visit the library. One of our primary tools in this is YouTube: we are creating short, shareable videos explaining library services and information literacy skills. We have created short videos aimed at students, introducing their subject librarians for the Schools of Computing & Engineering and Education, using free video-editing app Adobe Voice; as well as short animations aimed at lecturers on topics including copyright and online reading lists, using animation software Powtoon. All our videos can be viewed at youtube.com/user/hudlibrary

During the 2015–16 academic year the Business School has funded a temporary Reading List and Collection Development Librarian post in CLS. This is a proactive post that reaches out to the department, ensuring their reading lists are up to date and copyright compliant, and has provided opportunities to promote the role of the library and the skills of the librarians.

Focusing outreach towards historically low users of the library has enabled small initiatives to have a high impact. They have enabled the team to build relationships where there were none before and to promote under-used but valuable services. By taking this bottom-up approach to RM, the service will reflect and respond to the diverse and ever-changing university population.

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