Developing library services in response to engagement with academics

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BACKGROUND

Like many universities, LSE library surveys its academic staff annually. In the past we have had problems with response rates and in 2007 these dropped to an all-time low of approximately 9% of academic staff. To address the decline in responses we decided to implement an academic staff poll and keep it extremely short. It had the tag line 'win a Wii in a minute'. This proved to be much more successful and 2008 saw our response rate double to 19%. The survey was shortened to three questions (which the library uses for bench-marking and reporting purposes).

The creation of a new post – Liaison and Service Development Manager – in June 2009 created an opportunity to review the academic staff poll. In the past the free text responses had never been analysed very closely, and it was not possible to identify whether there were improvements that could be made to services. In 2009 we decided to add two questions to the academic staff poll. These asked respondents about a particular service the library offers, namely, *liaison*, the library newsletter. Feedback from these questions could then be analysed and the service currently offered could be looked at and changed in response to user feedback.

RESPONSE LEVELS

In 2009 a total of 254 academic staff responded to the poll, an increase of approximately 60% from 2008. This was a response rate of approximately 32% or almost one third of staff. This was the highest response rate for many years in the library. In 2010, against the pressure of ensuring

another good response rate, the library received 257 responses – once again about one third of academic staff.

So how did we manage to increase the response rate from 2008 to 2009 by 60%? It involved shortening the questionnaire considerably in 2008 and then following this up in 2009 with effective marketing and advocacy. We also offered incentives to both liaison librarians and academic departmental managers for those who could get the highest response rate for their department. This encouraged departmental managers to persuade the academics in their departments to fill in the poll. It was known that academics would fill it in saying things like 'I've filled it in so my departmental manager will win a prize.'

We ensured a quick follow-up, announcing the lucky prize winner from the respondents who had entered the prize draw and ensuring that they received their prize. We also used this as a photo opportunity with the library Director, who awarded the prize. The winners in the academic departments were also announced quickly and prizes awarded. To achieve this the initial analysis had to be carried out very quickly.

Photo of Elizabeth Chapman (Director of Library) and Claire Milne (Academic staff poll lucky prize winner)

RESPONSE BY DEPARTMENT

In 2009 and 2010 we had good representation from the majority of departments and responses increased for almost all of them. Impressive increases were made in the departments of Law, Government, and Media & Communications in 2009. In 2010 Media & Communications consolidated its position with the highest response rate. The best increase in 2010 was from the Department of Management, which went from 14% in 2009 to 43%. We plan to target departments who have had lower levels of response next year and to try new methods of engagement.

QUESTIONS

Three standard questions ask respondents how much they agree or disagree with the following statements:

- My research work is well supported by the Library's collections and services
- My teaching activities are well supported by the Library's collections and services
- Overall, the library provides a good service to me.

The results from 2008, 2009 and 2010 were very consistent for two of the three questions (support in all cases between 93 and 99%). However, there was a dip in satisfaction (down from 93% to 86%) for satisfaction with research support.

In addition, respondents were given the option to include free text comments. Not many chose to do this in 2009 or 2010. This was disappointing, as comments may have helped us to examine why there was a dip in satisfaction in support for research.

Many comments were very positive about services or staff and these were welcome boosts to morale in the library. Some respondents also left comments about the collections and recommendations. These were passed on to the collection development team for action. However, because the poll is anonymous it is impossible to follow up recommendations such as 'more journals in my area'.

MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT

In 2009 we decided to ask two additional questions in the academic staff poll. We wanted to ask questions that would provide us with meaningful information on which we could act. The first asked respondents if they currently read the library's newsletter, *liaison*. The second asked what they would like the library to keep them informed about.

The results from the first question showed that 66% of respondents either read or sometimes read *liaison*. Only 5% had never heard of it, but 30% indicated that they do not read it at all. In light of the feedback received, the format and purpose of liaison were reviewed to ensure that it was meeting the needs of academic staff and researchers. Some small changes have already been made, including shortening stories and linking where possible to a longer story, as well as adding more images to make it more visually appealing. We

now review our newsletter regularly and are developing it so that it continues to meet the needs of our academic and research staff. In the future we would like to embed it more closely in our online subject guides and also in social media tools that we are starting to use; this may necessitate a change in format.

The second question also gave us useful information. An overwhelming 73% of respondents indicated that they want to be kept up to date with new resources in all formats. The remaining comments indicated that there was nothing they wanted to be informed about (12%), or commented on opening hours (3%) and training sessions being offered by the library (2%).

We were able to cross-correlate responses to find out what respondents who do not currently read *liaison* wanted to be kept up to date with. The majority, 67%, indicated that they would like to be informed about new resources or subject information. The remaining 13% mentioned other services, including contact details for their liaison librarian, training and opening hours, opportunities to purchase new books and how much e-packs are used by students.

The results indicate that it is not possible to just use *liaison* or indeed any one method to communicate with our academic users. Ways of delivering information to staff about new resources acquired by the library were investigated in late 2009; these include Web 2.0 technologies to see which, if any, were appropriate for this purpose. Different means of producing lists of resources were compared; some of these involved investment of considerable amounts of time for technical development, while others had implications for the cataloguing workflows.

It was agreed that a new resources list would be created. The development of this took longer than anticipated, but we believe that it provides all the necessary functionality which was asked for. In addition, the way that this development has taken place means that new items are grouped as a subset within our library catalogue. RSS feeds can then be taken from the library catalogue and used in webpages such as subject guides and blogs to further promote the new resources that the library acquires.
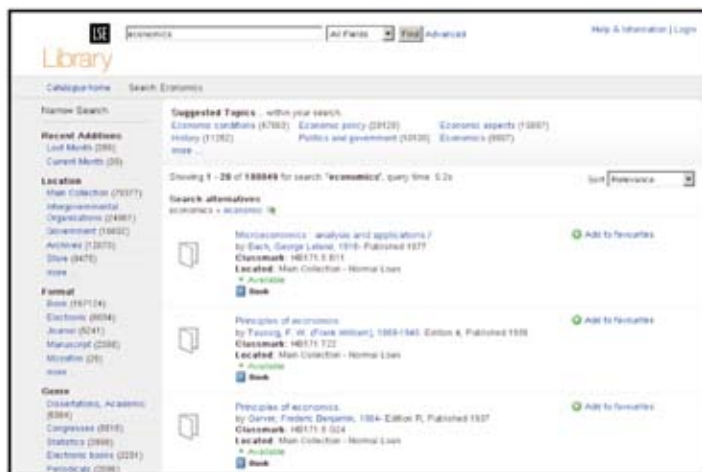

Figure 1. Library catalogue screen showing recent additions

After the analysis of the feedback from the academic staff poll, individual departmental reports were produced. These were sent to the head of department and the departmental manager by the liaison librarian. This included a breakdown by department of their response rate (compared to the survey as a whole), their feedback on the questions and a section listing the library actions in response to feedback including timescales. The reports were received with great feedback and academic staff could see the value in filling out such a poll.

FOLLOW-UP

In 2010, following on from the success we had in 2009, we thought long and hard about the additional questions we wanted to ask academic staff. We wanted to engage with them in a meaningful way in something that would be of relevance to them.

We asked two additional questions about their views on introducing an e-first policy for journals and books. We knew that this would be an issue about which many academics would have strong views and this meant that it was easier to engage with them.

Our results showed that the majority of respondents (92%) supported the implementation of an e-first policy for journals. Many academic staff reported that they use e-journals exclusively and pointed out the benefits of e-access to resources, especially for off-campus use. These results support evidence which suggests that e-journals are becoming increasingly important to researchers, as reported in the findings from a study of twelve user behaviour projects.[1] The table below has been produced from that report:

Study	Finding
The digital information seeker 2006[3]	journal articles central type of resource
Researchers' use of academic libraries 2007[4]	researchers place a very high value on electronic journals
Ejournals: their use, value and impact 2009[5]	- e-journals are a powerful part of academic libraries - article downloads have nearly doubled - Return on investment (ROI) considered very good for e-journals - users download 47 articles a year - strongly correlated with papers published, numbers of PhD awards, research grants, contracts income

In total we received 101 free text comments (approximately 39% of respondents). Of these a third were positive comments in relation to an e-first policy for journals. For example, 'A great idea – the large majority of academic staff I know now access most journals electronically anyway. Surely this would free up more funding for more subscriptions?' and 'I don't recall the last time I consulted the print version of a journal!'

However, there were still some reservations about an e-first policy for journals (about 5% of respondents). These were mainly concerns over off-campus access, long-term access, the relationship with and perhaps dependence on publishers.

Unsurprisingly, the introduction of a similar policy for books was not as popular. 40% of respondents were supportive of it but many still had reservations as indicated by the free text comments. It is interesting to note that there was a similar split (40/60) within most individual departments. There were some exceptions to this, including Anthropology and Law who were overall much more negative about such a policy, whilst Finance and Mathematics were overall more positive.

Almost half of all comments had concerns about an e-first policy for books. In total 46% of free text comments – many from respondents who were in support of an e-first policy for journals – had strong negative views about a similar policy for books. The issues raised concerned readability and usability; losing part of the book experience and associated decline in book-reading by students and staff alike; and long term preservation and sustainability.

Comments included the following:

'Browsing books on shelves constitutes an integral part of research and learning, which cannot be provided by e-copies.'

'While it is great for journal articles, some books are difficult and some of the online platforms that freeze up after you go through ten pages (myilibrary, I think) make it difficult to use with longer text'.

'The option of reading a book is a necessary part of a university education. E-books combined with copyright laws means that students would not see or read a book in its entirety and this is NOT acceptable.'

Some respondents specifically mentioned they would support an e-first policy for books as long as it was for teaching material only. For example, 'My "yes" for question 5 applies only to Course Collection material (with perhaps further prioritisation within that collection for e-texts).'

Conclusion

The experience at LSE Library shows that it is possible to engage with academic staff over meaningful issues and that if you act on their feedback by improving services you can build up very good relationships. The success that we have had has been dependent on liaison librarians becoming involved and persuading their colleagues in departmental manager roles and academic staff themselves that this is a worthwhile exercise. It has been vital to have this group on side. As part of the feedback process I attended a departmental manager meeting in November 2009. This was a good way of introducing myself to this group and also of telling them about our services, explaining why we were doing things and asking them for their feedback. Now all that is left to do is to find new ways to engage with them so that we continue to build the relationship.

Notes

1   Lynn Silipigni Connaway & Timothy J. Dickey (February 2010), The digital information

seeker: report of the findings from selected OCLC, RIN and JISC user behaviour projects. http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/publications/reports/2010/digitalinforma-tionseekerreport.pdf [accessed 20 August 2010].

2   Ibid, p 27.

3   Research Information Network (November 2006), Researchers and discovery services: behaviour, perceptions and needs http://www.rin.ac.uk/our-work/using-and-access-ing-information-resources/researchers-and-discovery-services-behaviour-perc [accessed 20 August 2010].

4   RIN/CURL (April 2007), Researchers' use of academic libraries and their services http://www.rin.ac.uk/our-work/using-and-access-ing-information-resources/researchers-use-academic-libraries-and-their-serv [accessed 20 August 2010].

5   RIN (April 2009), Ejournals: their use, value and impact http://www.rin.ac.uk/our-work/communicating-and-disseminating-research/e-journals-their-use-value-and-impact [accessed 20 August 2010].