A travelling librarian: lessons learnt from a study visit to libraries serving research-intensive universities in the USA

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Introduction

The Travelling Librarian award, generously provided by the English-Speaking Union and CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals), made possible for me a two-week visit to eight university libraries in New England and North Carolina.

The universities visited were: Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Tufts, Boston University, Brown, Brandeis, Dartmouth College, North Carolina State and Duke. These universities all scored very highly for research intensity on the Carnegie Foundation website.[1]

My role at Loughborough carries responsibility for research support. Since I had previously benchmarked levels of research support offered in some UK institutions,[2] the Travelling Librarian award offered me an opportunity to see how the libraries of prestigious, well-funded research universities in the US serve researchers and to identify best practice. The findings are now informing service provision at Loughborough University library.

A report detailing the itinerary and individual visits is available.[3] The purpose of this article is to reflect on the observed best practice and report on how the visits are influencing practice at Loughborough University library.

Planning and preparation

The library visits were organised round a day-long schedule at each university library and the universities put together very detailed programmes to enable both myself and the host library staff to exploit each day fully. At the request of two libraries I delivered a presentation to them as part of the day, which facilitated a good interchange of information. Before setting off I received a menu choice for a brown-bag lunch at MIT, which gives some indication of the level of preparation achieved.

Mixing a long-held desire to visit MIT and recognising the reputation of Massachusetts in higher education, my itinerary was designed to maximise the number of visits to suitable institutions in the first week whilst maintaining a spirit of inter-state travel in the second. Two of the universities were in the Ivy League and all were privately funded except North Carolina State.

Good practice

Before outlining some areas of good practice, one should be aware that differences in funding, policy and climate between US and UK universities mean that not all US approaches can transfer effectively to the UK. For instance, several of the US libraries employed their own fund-raising officer – the tradition of giving to the university being more established in the States. The US libraries were developing extensive off-site storage for relegated hard-copy journals, reference material and other infrequently used material whereas UK university libraries may be more likely to rely on the British Library for the preservation of such material. Climate may explain the success of North Carolina State University (NCSU) library's ice-cream parlour!

Good practice is considered under the following headings, largely reflecting my areas of interest: information literacy, electronic resources, study spaces, customer services, management, liaison, data curation and marketing.

Information literacy
A number of the libraries I visited had staff dedicated to supporting and advancing information

Baker-Berry Library, Dartmouth College

the power and sophistication of these searches varied. A number of the libraries had acquired next-generation resource-discovery tools with 'Google-like' searching from the library's homepage. In particular Dartmouth College had a suite of tools to make the retrieval of bibliographic and full-text resources easy for undergraduates and powerful for users needing to 'dig deep'. Dartmouth also had a director of information management who had helped drive an information management strategy. A number of libraries, notably at MIT and Duke University, had devoted significant staff effort to make interfaces more intuitive and suited to their readers rather than just using them 'out of the box'. Tufts University and others had made good use of LibGuides to provide subject information.

With an international clientele of undergraduates, taught postgraduates, PhDs and academic staff, there was recognition that one reference manager product does not suit all. Several of the US university libraries supported (at least to some degree) multiple bibliographic software tools, typically RefWorks, Endnote and Zotero.

The libraries were generally well resourced though they had experienced budget cuts. Given many students' preference for Google Scholar and for full text, it was interesting to note that one university had cut some bibliographic database subscriptions whilst Boston had monitored turnaways to push for enhanced access to SciFinder Scholar.

literacy, reflected in job titles such as 'assistant director for research and instruction' and 'director of education and outreach'. Elsewhere a subject librarian had particular responsibility for promoting good practice in IL, based on ACRL (Association of College and Research Libraries) standards.[4] Dartmouth College had established collaborative links between the library and teaching practice professionals within the college and had made good use of electronic voting systems in teaching plagiarism avoidance.[5]

US universities have a first-year writing program that incorporates study skills, though the library may partner in delivery of the aspects of this program. Similarly, Turnitin and other plagiarism detection tools were not the library's responsibility in any of the libraries visited. One library manager observed that responsibility for such tools could undermine the library's friendly and helpful reputation.

Camtasia and other video-editing tools were being used both in information literacy and VLEs and at Brown in response to chat message queries.

Electronic resources
One of the challenges facing academic libraries today is providing services to users whom we may never see. And one of the main interactions such users have is with the resource discovery portal. All the libraries I visited had the capability to search both the library catalogue and bibliographic databases from the library's home page, though

Baker Library reading room, MIT

Study spaces

Most of the libraries had a range of superb study spaces, offering both an inspiring scholarly study environment and an information commons for group working, with facilities typified by fixed and movable whiteboards, group study rooms, research space, zoning and a mix of very fine furniture. Examples from Duke and NCSU can be seen on YouTube[6] and on Flickr.[7] Duke University even had bespoke wooden surrounds for its recycling bins. Some libraries had wacky furniture too. Student assistants commonly supported users in the information commons. The spaces created were very diverse, though Brown University uniquely zoned its space by decibel level! Glass walls used for group study rooms made it easy to see if, and how, rooms were being used. Some library services made only part of their library available for 24x7 opening, thus minimising overheads. Brandeis University noted that, based on its usage figures, actually 20x6 would be more cost-effective.

Customer services

Lending of laptops and e-readers were services offered by some libraries, with Kindles being used at Duke and at NCSU. A gadget petting zoo was also available in one library, enabling students to try out new devices. NCSU lent laptops and ipods and, making creative use of scholarships and interns, the library appears to be particularly agile in the uptake of new services. For instance, NCSU libraries have recently developed services to mobile phones.[8] Most libraries offered a scanning service to 'leverage print resources'. Document supply, whilst not cheap, was very fast at some libraries, with 94% of articles arriving within 12 hours at one.

Most of the libraries had a dedicated reference desk, allowing adequate space for a reference interview to take place. A couple of libraries sought to make these most accessible by locating

Yellow bus, Hanover

Tisch Library, Tufts University

them in a centre of the library. Most of the libraries had lockers to minimise opportunities for theft of laptops and so on.

Walk-in access by the general public was encouraged and, refreshingly, most libraries had licences allowing public access to the majority of their e-resources.
Where special collections existed they were housed in appropriate conditions for storage and display, with scholarly study space for consulting the material. At Brown University, the Rauner library was dedicated to special collections. In addition to fine manuscripts, Brown was actively collecting and preserving comics, science fiction and gay/lesbian material for the future.

Management

I was fortunate to be invited to a number of management meetings, including an open meeting for all library staff at Duke University. This gave a great sense of communication and teamworking. Both Brandeis University and Tufts University exhibited an insightful approach to the collection of management information through careful regulation of surveys. Brandeis and MIT both appeared to have less traditional management structures. MIT's allowed for a new technologies team in which subject librarians spent 40 per cent of their time beta-testing a range of new web tools.

Liaison

The US universities reached out to new faculty in various ways. For example, MIT libraries contact new academics before they start. Brown had

developed a 'librarian in the lobby' scheme in which a science librarian, equipped with a laptop, met academics and students in their departments.[9]

Data curation

MIT, Brown and Duke had data librarians. To encourage good practice among faculty, MIT librarians offered a training course in research data management, supported by LibGuides pages.[10]

Marketing

Many of the marketing tools were similar to those in UK libraries, with some good examples of quality photos, bookmarks and blogs. Insulated coffee mugs with the library logo seemed a good idea. There was some thoughtful placement of posters, such as on a lift.

INFLUENCE ON LOUGHBOROUGH UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Presentations I made to all staff disseminated the findings from the visit and specific recommendations were made to the management group and to academic librarians. The study visit has influenced the library's strategic and operational planning. The following developments have been informed by the study visit:

- A pilot e-readers project has been initiated which will explore the usability of ipod Touch, ipad and dedicated e-readers with a variety of scholarly and popular content.
- A funding bid to lend laptops has been submitted.
- One academic librarian has successfully adopted 'librarian in the lobby' with two academic departments.
- A more stringent methodology for reviewing bibliographic database subscriptions has been implemented.
- The number of turnaways to SciFinder have been compared with those of other universities.
- New resource discovery tools have been investigated and a preferred option selected.
- Existing study rooms have been refurbished with glass doors to ensure appropriate use of study rooms.
- Special collections have been reviewed and will be re-located.

In addition, a number of initiatives will be taken forward in the near future:

- Online chat will be trialled by the customer services team in 2010/11.
- The design of a course in research data management is being explored in collaboration with the graduate school.
- It is likely that a greater variety of study spaces, including spaces for postgraduates, will be a feature of a library expansion scheduled for 2012.
- Scanning will be introduced once new multifunctional devices are purchased.
- Support for a wider variety of bibliographic software is under consideration.
- More students will be employed by the library.

CONCLUSION

The study visit has had a broad influence on Loughborough University library's strategic and operational planning. In addition, I have personally gained a wider perspective on academic librarianship. I hope that the many new contacts I acquired will lead to opportunities for future collaboration with one or more of the libraries visited.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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