Is the library collection fit for purpose? Collection analysis at the University of Lincoln

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WHAT QUESTION DID WE WANT TO ANSWER?

Does the current subject distribution of the collection match the current configuration of the university as defined by faculty and subject distribution?

THE BACKGROUND

In 2004, the Library moved into a converted warehouse. The building was technically full when we moved in because at a late stage we accommodated the art and design library, which was moved from another campus, thereby removing at a stroke any room for growth that might have been part of the planning process until that point.

Concern was such that a 'stock space management group' was established in 2006 to monitor the space available and try to ensure that there was enough. Since then, migration from print to electronic format has become a departmental priority. One would expect the space pressures to have declined over time, therefore. However, we still seem to spend part of each meeting of the stock space management group – which now meets roughly quarterly – ascertaining whether we have room for the stock where space pressure is tightest.

The question arose as to how closely the distribution of our library stock was aligned with the current faculty and subject profiles, as measured by student numbers, and whether this might help us determine an optimum shelving arrangement – and how far away from it we were. As is doubtless the case everywhere, our collection has its strengths and weaknesses. In the former category are areas such as business and management – where we have been able to build for decades – and also art and design, where we have merged two originally separate collections. The weaker areas include subjects which have recently come on stream and for which we have struggled to lay down a strong foundation since to date we have had to fund such innovations out of normal budgets. These include dance and drama, and health subjects such as nursing and complementary medicine.

The original intention of the profiling exercise was to provide evidence of our weak areas for use in any bids for additional funding to build up our collection. The current financial environment means that this is a vain hope. However, the results of the analysis still have their uses.

THE ANALYSIS

Our library system is SirsiDynix's Horizon. The senior academic librarian worked with the circulation systems librarian, who consulted with the cataloguers, who determined Dewey runs by subject. (The cataloguers rather than academic subject librarians were approached because it was thought they had an overall view, whereas subject-librarian input might have led to some overlap of subjects.) Around fifty subject divisions were thought to be appropriate and manageable. The resulting spreadsheet lists each of our five faculties and the subjects therein. Subdivisions of subjects, by faculty, range in number from eight to sixteen. Listed under each subject are the number of students and their percentage of the total student body and the number of items in the collection and their percentage of the total collection. Using this data, a table was put together which shows the percentage of the collection as compared with the percentage of student numbers for each subject, and which subject collections are less than, more than or equal to (the difference being less than 1%) the equivalent student numbers.

The table also shows the age of the collection in age bands: less than two years, three to five years, six to ten years, eleven to fifteen years and greater than fifteen years. From this data the percentages by age band can be determined, and the percentages of greater than ten years and greater than fifteen years have been calculated.

The example (Figure 1) shows the data and calculations for dance and drama which, as has already been mentioned, is one of our newer subjects but which includes texts of plays that have been in the collection for longer. E-books were included.

Age of collection	Dance and drama
Equal or < 2 years	132
3–5 years	226
6–10 years	369
11–15 years	274
> 15 years	630
Total items	*1,631*
% of total collection	0.47
Items in collection	*346,158*
Number of students	478
% of total	3.00
Number of students	*15,939*

Figure 1.

From this was determined the situation in Figure 2.

	% of collection v % of total student nos.			>10 years as %	>15 years as %
	Less than	Equal (< 1%)	More than		
Dance & drama				55%	39%

Figure 2.

HOW CAN WE USE THIS INFORMATION?

Though the original intention in gathering this information – to use it as evidence in negotiations to increase funding – is not appropriate at this time, it still has its uses. It provides the academic subject librarians with an age profile of their subject collections and gives them a 'health check' as to whether their subject collection is greater than or less than the student profile. As it is not feasible in the current financial climate to improve the age of the collection by 'front loading' it with an increase in the proportion of new items purchased, we are approaching it from the other direction. The academic subject librarians are being asked to weed their subject areas during the summer of 2010: to address the items that are more than fifteen years old in the first instance and also to look at those that are between ten and fifteen years old. The hope is that a similar exercise carried out after the summer will reveal a much reduced proportion of old books (except in areas where age matters less, as mentioned earlier). The obvious benefit will be one of space released, but it should improve usage since items that are sought should be easier to find, and thereby contribute to an increase in user satisfaction.