Developing a collections review framework at the University of Southampton

Jonathan Chipp
Access and Evaluation Librarian
Content, Collections and Discovery
University of Southampton
jc10@soton.ac.uk

Introduction

Questions about the scholarly value of library collections have at least two key aspects. One involves getting to grips with what we mean by value. On the face of it that's a very big question. It requires us to understand what kinds of values are relevant here and how to describe the amount or quality of a particular value that a collection has. The other aspect involves acknowledging the concrete circumstances in which the question is posed. Libraries review their holdings because they want to achieve particular ends: spatial efficiencies, new kinds of study spaces or more focused collections, for example.

Drawing together these two aspects (scholarly value and concrete circumstances) gives us a helpfully pragmatic way forward. The question becomes: given that we want to make particular changes to our collections, what sorts of scholarly value should we talk about?

The issues that prompted us to embark on a review of our physical collections will be familiar to many. Key aims were:

- to ensure that the content of our collections addresses the needs of our users
- to redevelop the physical spaces in which our collections are housed.

It became apparent that these issues touch on a range of different values. For that reason, we would need a range of metrics and a framework in which to organise them in an intelligible fashion.

First steps in developing a framework

A literature review quickly revealed a host of metrics, both numeric and narrative, that we might use to capture the scholarly value of our collections. We assessed 51 metrics, allocating to each a notional level of confidence: good, moderate or low. We elected to retain thirteen of them and organised them into four broad types: academic interest, utility, benchmark and size.

Academic interest

Three metrics, none of which is numeric, were collected under the heading 'academic interest'. The first was to identify any research groups that are associated with particular collections. The second was to map any courses and modules to particular collections. In the third we sought to identify any interesting provenance attaching to particular collections.

Utility

We grouped two metrics under the heading 'utility'. Both are numeric, and both try to capture the intensity with which a collection is circulated. The first is the circulation-to-space quotient, that is, the number of circulations in a five-year period divided by the amount of shelf space occupied by that collection. The metric is the circulation-to-inventory quotient, that is, the number of circulations in a five-year period divided by the number of items in the collection.

It is worth noting that, because both of these metrics are quotients, some care has to be taken in interpreting them. A collection with fifty circulations that occupies 50m of space will return a circulation to space quotient of 1 (50:50 = 1). Likewise, a collection with 500 circulations that occupies 500m of space will return the same figure (500:500 = 1). For that reason it is important to contextualise the results of these calculations. Low figures indicate lower intensity of circulation. (Compare, for example, 1 circulation in a collection of 50 (1:50 = 0.02) with 100 circulations in a collection of 50 (100:50 = 2).

Developing a collections review framework at the University of Southampton

Benchmark

We collected three metrics under the heading 'benchmark'. One is numeric and two are more narrative. The numeric metric captures the scarcity of items. We used Copac CCM tools to establish which items in a collection were held by five or more Copac libraries. We then expressed the number of items as a percentage of the collection as a whole. The other two benchmark metrics recorded 1) whether the material in the collection was of an unusual format and 2) whether the collection policy associated with an area of stock was notably unusual.

Size

Four of the five metrics collected under the heading 'size' are numerical measures. The exception is a recording of any unusual access issues: whether, for example, the material is not on open access. The remaining metrics record 1) the number of items in a particular collection, 2) the total length of shelving over which the collection is spread, 3) the amount of empty shelf space within the collection and 4) the rate at which the collection has grown in a five-year period.

Two other aspects of the framework: characterisation and planning

Taken together, the four groups of metrics gave us quite a detailed and ordered description of our collections. The next step was to connect those descriptions to the questions of value and collection development with which we started. Making those connections involved two things.

We adopted the typology of collection types developed in the RLUK report *Unique and distinctive collections: Opportunities for research libraries* (Research Libraries UK, 2014). With that typology in view, we drafted a chart of what we might expect our four groups of metrics to look like for each collection type: heritage, legacy, self-renewing and finite. Inevitably that involved some speculation, so in addition we used part of a workshop meeting to canvass librarians for views on which parts of our collections may be candidates for heritage or legacy status. By combining these approaches we aim to refine the fit between collection types and metrics.

Having – at least notionally – mapped our collections in terms of the heritage–legacy–self-renewing–finite typology, we drafted high-level management strategies for each type. These are very general statements about the direction of work that we would expect to see in relation to each collection type, emphasising, for example, withdrawal of finite stock, regular evidence-based weeding in self-renewing stock, considering digitisation opportunities in relation to legacy stock and looking for promotional opportunities in relation to heritage stock, and so on. Our expectation is that these strategies will be reviewed and developed over time.

Conclusion: next developments

The development of the framework is still at a very early stage but it is clear that some aspects of it require further consideration. Three issues in particular stand out:

First, the more narrative metrics can be difficult to capture. In particular those metrics that we have grouped under 'academic interest' are challenging. The provenance of some of our collections is well known; but this is not always the case. How can we be sure that we have captured all the relevant history of our collections? It is also the case that both research and teaching interest in particular collections fluctuates. Courses come and go, as do research groups. Do we have structures in place to capture this kind of information?

Developing a collections review framework at the University of Southampton

Secondly, we might ask whether we need to use all of the metrics that we have identified. For example, the two quotient metrics – circulation-to-space and circulation-to-inventory – cover very similar territory. Both metrics tell us about the intensity with which a collection is circulated. That has particular value for thinking through what kinds of space to develop adjacent to particular collections. We might consider locating quiet study space next to stock with low circulation intensity, for example. But do we really need both metrics?

Thirdly, the framework is designed to analyse our physical collections and excludes e-resources. There is pragmatic value in that. It limits the amount of data and number of metrics involved in the analysis. It also speaks to one of our principal drivers: the need to free up physical space. What would be the merits or de-merits of a more holistic approach that included e-resources?

Overall, developing the collections review framework has given us the opportunity to think through a host of complex and interrelated questions about the scholarly value of our collections. It also provides us with a fairly detailed summary description of what our collections are like. Finally, it gives us an analysis of those collections and an indication of the kinds of things we should think about doing with them.

Reference

Research Libraries UK (2014). Unique and distinctive collections: Opportunities for research libraries. Available from http://www.rluk.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/RLUK-UDC-Report.pdf [accessed 15 September 2017]