Collection and use of management information

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Many things can be said to be the lifeblood of a modern university library service – professional staff, good facilities, a relevant collection, e-resources, apps to allow mobile device usage, 24x7 opening hours and so on. But behind the scenes it is so often data that drive us – the ratio of books to students, use of the collection, e-resource downloads and of course everything that we collect for our annual statistical returns to SCONUL. Collecting and understanding the data we have is imperative in allowing us to fine-tune our services, especially in uncertain economic times. It is the backbone of any evidence-based presentation when we find ourselves promoting, protecting or defining our services. With this in mind, City University London Information Services and Libraries determined that there was both a data gap and an opportunity.

The data gap is evident in what is collected across our various sites in terms of library services, and in the questions of how – or whether – those data are used. Although we accumulate a lot of information on our services, the collation and examination of data vary because the data collected by different libraries is not consistent. Although we make an annual return to SCONUL, there was a perception that a wealth of information was probably not being systematically gathered and analysed at a cross-university level. With services coming under increasing scrutiny it was felt that we needed to find out exactly what data we collect at each site in addition to the SCONUL return, what this tells us, what we are perhaps missing, what we could standardise, and then how we could systematically collect relevant data in the future.

This also gave us an opportunity: once we had more data held centrally and in an accessible format we could use them to drive up the quality of our services and help create the annual report to be distributed across the university to academic and professional staff and made available to the student body. This would promote our achievements, raise the profile of the directorate and generate some finger-tip facts which could be used at meetings and inserted into local promotional activities. There was a lot to achieve and another group working on the annual report was waiting for our data, making the total timescale for completion of the project around four months.

With an ambitious target and timeframe, a task and finish group was created. (See the discussion of task and finish groups in the article by Jacqui Gaul, of the Sir John Cass Business School, in SCONUL *Focus*, 48, 2009, pp 58-59.) Briefly, a T&F group is a small team comprising Information Services and Libraries staff of all grades and from all sites tasked with fulfilling a particular brief on a defined timescale. It is not intended to become a long-term committee or a permanent bureaucratic layer, but rather a 'tiger team' which will tackle an issue and then disband.
First we defined what our objectives were:

- to find out what data we currently collect on a site and service basis and then to collate this in a central database
- to discuss and decide what additional data it would be important to collect for the future
- to provide key facts and information throughout the year and for the Information Services and Libraries annual report
- to establish a mechanism for the continuous and permanent collection of important data to drive on-going service improvement, future annual reports and to provide key facts.

For the first stage, we knew that all sites keep data required for the SCONUL return, but there is great variation in other specifics such as local e-resource usage, what is recorded in relation to training sessions, headcount times, etc. We created a basic template of what we knew would be collected, left room for additions and then returned to our sites and services to get started.

When we met two weeks later we had amassed a great deal of information and, thanks to an internal collaboration tool, we had shared the bulk of this with each other already and had begun to analyse and collate it centrally. As expected, we saw a high level of general data gathering across the directorate, with some pockets of excellence, but what was missing was a unified approach to what should be collected and to the sharing and use of those standardised data in a directed and centralised fashion.

Compiling all the data into one spreadsheet meant we now had a snapshot of service-wide and site-specific data and key facts. Although each library serves varying patron types (in relation to postgraduate or undergraduate students as well as subject area) we could make quick comparisons across the entire university and see where data gaps existed, where staff were recording information and where automatic data gathering (SCONUL statistical sample days, gate counts, etc.) was the only system.

This took us to our next stage. The snapshot showed us what we did collect: but was it what we *should* collect? Over the next two weeks we examined the data and came to a consensus about what we should and should not collect centrally; using our professional judgement and experience as well as conversations with stakeholders and colleagues, we established what would be the most useful data to collect and what would generate key facts, and we made sure that each site would be able to collect these data locally.

The final stage was to create a central database where all the data would be entered from this point onwards. This database would be used to generate the information we needed in order critically to appraise our services on a more granular level than before, provide comparisons across service usage and give us plenty of data and key facts. But it could only do this if it was used properly and was continually updated.

It was decided that each site would need a 'cipher' person who would act as the data collator. The database itself would have to be as easy to use and as self-explanatory as possible, in order to enable any staff member to fulfil this role. It is not important for the 'cipher' person to understand all the data they are entering or what they mean, but data must be added in the correct place on a regular basis. The database itself would be housed in the collaboration tool so that it would be a centrally held resource, not dependent on individual members of staff. Anyone would be able to review it at any time.

Each site would have a file to save local data such as hours of training delivered, headcount,

		All libraries	Cass Business School	School of Community and Health Sciences (SCHS)	Main Library, Northampton Square	Law School, Gray's Inn Place
Training hours (1-2-1s, group inductions, training delivered)	2008 – 2009	506	59*	66	255	126
	2009 - 2010	1154	118	540	371	125

*1-2-1s not counted

room bookings, etc., on a monthly basis, and each month this information would be added to the central and cross-site database. Data provided by our e-resource and bibliographic services staff and that generated from the Library Management System would also be added, giving a true picture of hard-copy and e-version usage across the sites and as a whole service.

When all this had been entered, we had an immediate appreciation even on one month's data of various usage patterns across all sites. Facts for the annual review leapt off the screen. Although the system is still in its development and testing phase, and we have tweaked it since its launch, it is starting to prove its value and as the data mature it will become even more useful as we look to make historical comparisons of our services, their usage and the patterns of usage.

Much of these data were used in the annual report and are being used to promote the services we offer internally and externally. They also allow us to examine possible unforeseen consequences with regard to the relocation of academic departments.

This project was another example of the success of the concept of the T&F group. Non-bureaucratic, focused teams made up of people from all sites and from all grades were able to get to grips with a multi-site issue quickly and deliver a high quality solution. We were able to centralise some functions through innovative use of technology and then devolve the granular data-collection to the local experts. The result has been a wealth of data for the annual report, and an increase in the evidence-based material for use in promoting our services. Improvement plans across a range of services are possible now that we have a deeper and more systematically collected level of data.

As an example, at each site, subject librarians collected data on how many 1-2-1s, inductions and other training sessions they delivered. But they kept the data in different ways, places and formats. Now each site's local record is added to

a centralised database on a regular basis so that we can track which site (and therefore, to a degree, which school) has the greatest training requirements, or might require more subject librarian support and so on.

The format is kept as simple as possible to make data entry easy as well as allowing an understanding of the data at a glance.

A copy of the City University London Information Services and Libraries Annual Report – *A year in review* – which used much of the data the group generated, can be seen via the link below: http://www.city.ac.uk/library/about-the-library/index.html