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Abstract

In the UK, it is becoming widely accepted that Information Literacy support should no longer focus solely upon student skills. Projects such as JISC 'I-Skills' (JISC, 2005) and 'Big Blue Connect' (MMU, 2004) illustrate that staff in higher education institutions can also benefit from information skills training; enhancing both their teaching and research practices.

This paper discusses the issues encountered during the implementation of the St Martin's Library Research Support Strategy (St Martin's Library Services, 2005) and looks at the considerations involved in the transformation of this policy into a framework of comprehensive skills support activities.

The use of central staff development workshops and departmental training is described and evaluated in detail in the hope that the experience gained from this work can inform other institutions embarking on similar activities in the future, highlighting aspects of good practice and identifying activities found to be less effective or of low-impact.

Introduction

St Martin's College has grown rapidly over the last decade, building a reputation for excellent teaching and one of the best institutions for employability in the UK (McCall, 2005). The strengths of the Institution lie in the dedication of the teaching staff and relatively small class numbers that create a supportive learning environment which nurtures the academic skills of its students.

St Martin's College recently applied for Taught Degree Awarding Powers (TDAP) with a view to becoming a University. Following the publication of the Sir Martin Harris report, the College will be embarking on an ambitious venture to form a new University for Cumbria from 2007, after a planned amalgamation with Cumbria Institute of the Arts (Harris, 2005). It has been apparent from the start that this process may provide new challenges for the College and place a greater emphasis on the research profile of the Institution.

In January 2005, St Martin's Library Services appointed a Research Support Co-ordinator to provide comprehensive research skills support for all staff; training individuals on issues such as literature review methodologies and reference management, to ensure that all individuals in the College are readily equipped with the enhanced skills for scholarly and research activities. The post was supported by College

Strategic Capacity Funding in recognition of the need to strengthen this function.

It was critical that the support introduced by the Research Support Co-ordinator would inclusively address the needs of both academic and support staff, providing appropriate training for individuals of varying levels of research experience. Some staff undertake academic research regularly at the College while others have a greater engagement in the practical application of knowledge.

It was clear that the Research Support Co-ordinator would need to implement a range of support mechanisms in order to support this diverse demography of staff information skills; however, with limited resources the support offered to staff would need to be prioritised and introduced in phases.

Developing a research support strategy

The work of the Research Support Co-ordinator was underpinned by a strategic framework to demonstrate the clear aim and focus of the role. Library Services developed a Research Support Strategy to position the Service within College scholarly and research activities and to identify key responsibilities and tasks that the Research Support Co-ordinator would take forward in order to support this important agenda.

The strategy focussed upon two major aspects of research support: resources and training. Objectives were identified to increase the existing provision of online resources and develop a research texts collection, the inter library loan service was also to be reviewed to ensure that staff were able to access collections of resources beyond St Martin's.

Library Services had already begun to implement an Information Fluency Framework that provided a structured way of providing information literacy, critical thinking and IT skills support for both staff and students within the Institution. A large emphasis was placed upon developing the framework further, extending its scope and ensuring that the learning objectives underpinning the structure aligned with the College research profile.

Liaison between the Library and academic faculties was emphasised as an essential partnership for research support, working collaboratively to advocate the importance of scholarly activities and the development of information skills.

The Research Support Strategy was presented at the College Research, Scholarship and Knowledge Transfer Committee for approval before being rolled out to faculty management committees. The support from these committees was essential for the success and acceptance of the strategy and associated work. Without support from senior management it would have been potentially difficult to engage staff with the new library activities.

Responses to the strategy document varied; some faculties fully embraced the

importance of skills support, incorporating it into the faculty aims and placing staff training as a priority within the academic schools. Other faculties agreed that the research support strategy would help to encourage research within the departments and support less experienced staff but chose not to implement it directly into their faculty plans.

The differing levels of uptake from faculty committees placed an increased importance on the promotion of the strategy at the 'ground level' through relevant documentation and attendance at academic meetings. A leaflet was distributed to all staff, outlining the support available to them; however, it was soon evident that the best publicity tool would be 'word of mouth'.

Prioritising information skills support

Skills support from the Research Support Co-ordinator was to be implemented in several ways:

- . Departmental training arranged with heads of schools or divisions and tailored to departmental aims
- . Central staff development workshops to provide an ongoing programme of training sessions for any member of staff, regardless of other departmental support
- . 1:1 support meetings to provide focussed training on the specific needs of individuals
- . Extensive training materials for independent study

Workshops needed to be planned, training materials written and sessions promoted. To prioritise this work and gauge the current awareness of the information fluency framework within the College an electronic survey was conducted. All staff were invited to respond to the survey, identifying their perceived importance of information fluency and personal training priorities.

The survey ran shortly after the initial publicity of the research support strategy and reported that 43% of the survey respondents were familiar with the term 'information fluency'. 65% of these individuals had heard of the term from Library Services, 10% from academic colleagues. It was encouraging to know that almost half of the staff had become aware of the work of Library Services but illustrated the need for additional publicity.

67% of respondents stated that they would be interested in attending training on how to use specific library resources and how to search effectively. 35% of staff showed an interest in training about how to evaluate the quality of information and 33% in legal issues of information use. This information was extremely helpful in the planning of sessions and prompted the development of many guides that could support staff to search relevant online resources.

A programme of central staff development sessions was planned and developed to offer generic information fluency support to all staff and research students in the College while extensive liaison took place with academic departments to try to encourage uptake of

departmental training opportunities.

Central sessions were organised into two themes: 'how to' sessions that covered generic information skills like how to search effectively or how to reference sources of information, and then 'quick guide' sessions that offered training about selected types of resources, for example, a quick guide to searching electronic books or a quick guide to searching the Internet. Departmental sessions often supported academic searching skills with relevance to key subject resources.

Care was taken to make all training sessions fully interactive, with reflective exercises included that would encourage staff to consider their current skill levels and consider the ways in which information fluency could support their research and day-to-day work.

Uptake of departmental support

As might be expected, uptake of the departmental support was varied. Some departments requested support immediately after viewing the Research Support Strategy while others still remain unsupported. Many departmental sessions were arranged after library attendance at faculty management meetings where the Research Support Co-ordinator had the opportunity to discuss the importance of information fluency with the academics and contextualise the available support with their departmental priorities.

The most effective academic engagement took place when information fluency skills were shown to have clear links with high quality academic research. It was important to demonstrate an understanding of academic activities and to show an awareness of the existing skills of staff while emphasising the importance of information fluency training for the efficient retrieval of current research materials.

Once the first departmental sessions had taken place, many more staff approached the Library for support. The majority of staff found the training to be very useful, and fed back that the sessions provided an opportunity for them to investigate new resources or at the very least to have an expert available to discuss their queries.

Occasionally individuals commented that the sessions were pitched at a level that was considered to be too basic; however it was difficult to balance the content of a session across the range of abilities found in any one group. Advanced workbooks were taken to sessions for more experienced users, however, this was still not an ideal solution as practical workshops were often time intensive for the tutor and too many questions were asked to successfully run two levels of training concurrently.

In order to avoid the provision of irrelevant training for advanced users it was made clear, wherever possible, what the sessions would include and that the training was considered optional for more skilled members of staff. In many cases experienced researchers still chose to attend and described the content as a good 'refresher'.

There are still many schools within the College that have not received any departmental support. Several staff from these schools chose to attend the central staff development sessions but support is still patchy. It is intended that these schools will be targeted in the next academic year with increased visibility of library staff at school meetings where possible and the use of successful examples of departmental training to illustrate the advantages of information fluency support.

Library liaison is also underway with the faculty business units and research groups to try and target individuals in alternative ways. Tailored support is offered to teams of staff with similar interests or research objectives so if school training sessions are not arranged staff can request tailored support in other ways.

Uptake of central staff development sessions

Attendance at the central staff development sessions has been fairly low over the last year. In many cases this has been due to busy staff timetables and extensive commitments on their time. Several staff explained that when workloads increased the optional training activities that they had elected to do were the first things to be cancelled in order to make time for marking or teaching.

This was the clear advantage of the use of departmental training sessions to target staff, as individuals were given the time to attend and the training was considered to be a priority. The Research Support Co-ordinator is considering the option of repeating the sessions more often to accommodate busy staff; however, this obviously runs the risk of using the library staff time ineffectively across a larger number of sessions with fewer participants at each.

The other reason given by staff for low attendance at the central sessions was their ineffective promotion. All central training sessions are publicised yearly through a single printed booklet but many staff do not choose to look through this guide. Staff attendance was notably higher when sessions were additionally advertised via College-wide emails sent around a few days in advance of the workshop dates.

Workshops titles also potentially discouraged users with the inclusion of library terms that perhaps did not fully communicate the session objectives to those individuals unfamiliar with the jargon. Although session descriptions went on to discuss the content in more practical detail many staff discounted the sessions as irrelevant to them before reaching the additional text.

Feedback from staff that did attend the central sessions was very positive. Staff commented on the use of the content for their daily activities and said they had not been aware of how much there was to potentially learn. They found the content relevant and enjoyed the interaction in the sessions but some commented on the lack of subject focus.

Although subject focus is very important for the application of information fluency skills it is very

difficult to provide tailored training in an open workshop. Care was taken to look at which schools participants were attending from in advance of the sessions to ensure that relevant workbooks could be taken along and discussed. However, it did not seem feasible to run sessions for each faculty or school as the workload would have become uneconomical.

Actions for the future

Several steps must now be taken to move staff research support forward. As discussed above, it is critical that departments currently lacking support are targeted during the next academic year. This will be done with a clear work plan, identifying potential alternatives to school management committees, perhaps directing support via course committees or research teams.

The central staff development sessions will be reviewed. The current session content seems to be effective and relevant but it will need to be repackaged, possibly with a new focus on academic activities, for example, completing a literature review or writing a paper. This may result in the repetition of content across the different sessions; therefore, care will need to be taken when planning and promoting the workshops.

It would be advantageous if the sessions could be publicised via email; however, this might not be possible as there are strict guidelines on global College email to avoid spamming of content to staff. Alternative solutions may include publicising the workshops on the Library web pages a week or so before each session runs or distributing leaflets that publicise the information fluency support to staff more regularly than the central booklet.

1:1 sessions have been available to staff upon request for a few months and several individuals have accepted the opportunity for focussed help. Some of the enquiries have been directed to liaison librarians with specific subject responsibilities, while many were directed to the Research Support Co-ordinator.

The 1:1 sessions have been a fairly inefficient use of library time but do appear to be valued by academic staff. If this service is to continue more library staff will need to deal with advanced information fluency enquiries. In most cases the staff have the skills required but lack confidence as they have not undertaken research work themselves; therefore, it will be the responsibility of the Research Support Co-ordinator to support the staff in this new role.

Finally, the training materials for self-directed learning will be made available electronically to increase their profile and allow access to the information from any PC, on or off campus. Currently the resources are only available in print format and although this allows easy access to the guides it does restrict their use just to individuals that visit the library buildings.

Once the resources are available electronically it may also be relevant to link them into staff

development areas within the College virtual learning environment to publicise the importance of information fluency further and embed support into more College activities.

The progress made in the first year of research support implementation is very encouraging. A large proportion of the staff body are now actively engaging with the importance of information fluency and regularly contact the Library for advice and support on this topic.

An important secondary effect of this work has been to increase the collaborative provision of student information fluency support. Many staff that attend information fluency training sessions gain a greater understanding of the magnitude of the subject and in turn see the benefits of student skills support. Strategic meetings are also underway between the various student support services to bring together academic and support skills within the curriculum so that all provision is co-ordinated in a collaborative way.

Although there are adjustments that need to be made to increase take-up of staff support, many effective supporting mechanisms are now in place and a few minor amendments next year should take the Research Support Strategy forward at full speed.

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