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User education

Supporting your researchers

Requests from academic staff at the University of East London for more training to support their research led to an event tailored to their needs. **Sally Crosthwaite** and **Catherine Johnson** report.

Sally Crosthwaite

Catherine Johnson

AN ACADEMIC STAFF survey had been carried out by the subject librarians at the University of East London in 2004. The librarians wanted to repeat the exercise to inform academic staff of new resources and training opportunities (especially in new databases and other electronic resources such as Endnote) and find out their current training needs. The results prompted the decision to hold a Research Support Day. There has been a renewed emphasis on academic staff carrying out research and many felt that they needed help finding the best resources or discovering how the library could benefit them.

As so many staff wanted help and advice, it was not possible for us to help everyone individually. It was decided to limit the day to staff and PhD research students so we could concentrate on use of resources for research. Also, the lecturers did not want to be taught with their students. They often comment they learn a lot from sitting in on sessions with students but this time they wanted sessions specifically directed at their needs.

Drop in – and have lunch

The day was organised by the Subject Librarians Group. Drop-in sessions were planned: academics could pick and choose which sessions to attend so they didn't have to spend a full day at the event, and we could showcase more of the resources that the library offers. Those who wanted to come were asked to tell their subject librarian, but we also made it clear that anyone was welcome on the day.

We decided to hold the event at Docklands Campus Library and Learning Centre. This is the newest of the three libraries and houses the majority of subjects. We were able to use two training rooms in the library

and the main lecture theatre located next to the library so it was easy for people to move from one session to another.

As an incentive for people to come to the whole day, a hot buffet lunch was organised and served in The Hub, an informal group learning area in the library. The lunch also acted as a thank-you to library staff for their help with the day.

We split the day into general 'library' and specific 'subject' sessions. The sessions lasted 45 minutes and offered a taster of the resources available, a demonstration and advice on how to obtain further help. There was no hands-on element but the sessions were held in the training suites so if anyone wanted to follow on the PCs they could.

Tell everybody

The Research Support Day was advertised through email, posters and word of mouth. The marketing team designed flyers and posters, and the flyers were sent as emails to all departmental staff by the relevant subject librarian. Posters were printed and displayed across the whole university including the library and departments. Subject librarians also used their networks within departments to speak to influential members of staff and ask them to spread the word. Emails about the event were also sent from Andrew McDonald, Director of Library and Learning Services. The lunch, posters and flyers all came out of the library's promotional budget.

Academic staff want more

On an online feedback form (created using the wonderful SurveyMonkey), we asked people to note which sessions they attended and how they heard

Practical tips

● Get your marketing department involved and produce some eye-catching publicity. Just because it is an in-house event doesn't mean that it shouldn't be marketed professionally.

● Get your library management behind you – emails from the Library Director will be noticed by the Deans.

● Plan well in advance and do some research on lecturer availability before choosing a day.

● Listen to your lecturers during the year and note down their needs. Incorporating their suggestions into the research day is a practical demonstration of good communication.

● Arrange opening and closing sessions. They need only be brief, but it will give the day structure. And a short address from one of the senior management team at the beginning and end will emphasise the professional nature of the event.

● Make use of the Survey Monkey to get concrete feedback on the event.

University of East London, Docklands Campus Library and Learning Centre

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about the event. They were also asked whether the drop-in sessions were preferable to a more formal conference, whether the training was pitched at the right level and which sessions they would have liked to attend but couldn't. About 30 per cent of the attendees responded.

According to an article on library impacts on e-learning, 'formal training opportunities were very important to faculty members'[1] and this was certainly born out in the staff feedback on the research day. Getting the thumbs-up were: the basic format, the drop-in sessions (rather than a more formal conference) the length of the sessions and the level of instruction. The vast majority of the lecturers found out about the research day via email, which proves that, with professional flyers, and perseverance, emails are noticed.

There were fewer people in the individual database sessions (mostly held in the afternoon) than in the more general morning sessions. Perhaps lecturers already felt confident with the databases, as was noted by some subject librarians. But it may also be that they are not aware of what online resources are offered, which underlines the need to hold the research day annually.

All about timing

The general comments yielded some good suggestions. Although staff and researchers were very enthusiastic about repeating the day, it was clear that the timing this year was far from ideal. There was a suggestion that service staff should also be included in the email invitations. There seemed to be a lot of interest in Endnote and a call for more hands-on sessions, perhaps scheduled in the morning, as participants were more 'alert' then. This 'afternoon energy slump' could be another reason that there were fewer attendees for the afternoon databases workshops. One particularly encouraging comment was: 'It was an extremely interesting and useful day. Although I knew quite a bit about the library services I still managed to come away with some useful updates and tools. I think it is something that should be held on an annual

basis for each new intake of research students' – a good quote to include in the publicity material next year.

What subject librarians thought

The subject librarians were asked to comment on organisation, the success of their own sessions and suggest improvements.

Organisation

Although there were some 'opening-night' jitters, even from some of the most experienced subject librarians, the feedback from the library staff was extremely positive. The organisation and streaming of the various sessions seemed to work well. We were lucky to be able to schedule all events, including lunch, within the main library building so there were no real logistical problems. We were particularly pleased with the professional, eye-catching flyers, programmes and posters and the support from management – especially the reminder email sent out to Deans by Andrew MacDonald, which provided a real, official endorsement.

The sessions

Attendance at the sessions varied from about 35 in 'Introduction to Research' to two or three for some of the individual databases workshops. In the latter, some librarians found that their lecturers were already familiar with searching techniques. However, the librarians were flexible enough to be able to move the sessions into areas where the lecturers did need help. Lecturers and research students proved to be no different from undergraduates in that there were quite a few late arrivals to sessions. And, as with all user education sessions, it proved virtually impossible to fit both the demonstration and practical element into 45 minutes.

All the subject librarians felt that they learnt from the preparation for the research day. Certainly, the librarians who presented Endnote sessions came away with a much more coherent knowledge of the system, and the preparation of the database sessions

References

1 J. V. Dempsey et al. 'Training and support: obstacles and library impacts on elearning activities.' *College Student Journal*, 42(2), June 2008, pp. 630-36.

2 B. Tynan and D. Garbett. 'Negotiating the university research culture: collaborative voices of new academics.' *Higher Education Research & Development*, 26(4), December 2007, pp. 411-24.

3 S. MacDonald and L. Uribe. 'Libraries in the converging worlds of open data, e-research, and Web 2.0.' *Online*, 32(2), March 2008, pp. 36-40.

Sally Crosthwaite (s.crosthwaite@uel.ac.uk) is Subject Librarian for the Business School and Catherine Johnson (c.johnson@uel.ac.uk) is Subject Librarian, School of Architecture and the Visual Arts, University of East London.

allowed the librarians to explore aspects of databases (e.g. citation alerts) which they would rarely get a chance to present.

It can only get better...

Scheduling the research day a week later might increase attendance, but there will always be some scheduling conflicts. This is something that will have to be carefully researched next time.

It was suggested that in future there should be an official welcome session in which the structure of the day is explained and the participants introduced. As one of the subject librarians noted, 'I don't think that we should ever assume that everyone knows who we are.' It was remarked that the day seemed to 'fizzle out': an official closing session would bring more 'cohesion' – especially if this included a short address from senior library management. It was noted that this would bring a 'better sense of a whole service activity rather than a group of individuals all doing their own thing'.

The content of the sessions will, naturally, be reviewed. Although there did seem to be a greater interest in the more general sessions, some tweaks in the publicity could change this. Lecturers are being encouraged to do more research, so if this aspect was emphasised in the title of the session (e.g. 'Citation Research for Social Sciences') numbers might improve. New lecturers in particular face challenges, having to pursue teaching and research in a new environment[2] so could be individually targeted. Stuart MacDonald has noted that 'Information and communication technologies are transforming the way academic researchers work'.[3] Who knows what innovations will affect our ever-changing field and may warrant inclusion in next year's research day? [U]

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