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Changing Role and Relationships at the University of Lincoln

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In 2000 a new Vice-Chancellor arrived at what is now the University of Lincoln and almost immediately put in place preparations for the realization of a new vision. Twelve months later, the University looks and feels different. A strategic review is under way, encompassing a reconfiguration of campuses and a change of name, a restructuring of service departments and faculties, and the incorporation of the Lincolnshire campuses of De Montfort University.

Response to curriculum changes and the emerging skills agenda

Visionary change is not new however. One of the developments that has given the most impetus to the standing of the Learning Support department with the academic community was the establishment in the early 1990s of the Chair of Learning Development, funded by an endowment from British Petroleum. Learning Support staff played a key role in promoting and embedding the Effective Learning Programme within the University curriculum, as the first stage of a University Skills and Capabilities Curriculum. The programme is intended to address the need for students to acquire study and employability skills. These were compulsory elements in the curriculum, to be delivered as prepared by the Learning Development Unit, or an equivalent devised by the subject area. The vehicle of delivery has been the University's Intranet, now called the Virtual Campus. Learning Advisers have also participated in associated project work. Several years later, Learning Support staff participate in the delivery of this programme in various ways, such as delivering units or, for Learning Advisers, being unit coordinators for their subjects.

More generally, the Department aligns itself closely with the University's Learning and Teaching strategy, with staff membership of relevant committees as appropriate. Indeed, the Department does not currently have its own strategic plan, perceiving instead that it is preferable for its strategy to be subsumed within the faculties' learning and teaching plans. Future work in this area at a University level will be the result of a close working relationship with the Best Practice Office established in April 2001.

New roles and relationships for Learning Advisers

Learning Advisers have become the linchpins of the particularly close relationship that exists between the Department and the faculties, spending up to 40 per cent of their time in direct support of their subjects. Their role is that of educator not just facilitator. There has been a drive within Learning Support to upskill staff in the area of teaching and facilitation to support institutional developments in learning and teaching. Several cohorts of staff have been put through an in-house Certificate in Training Practice, which is approved by the Institute of Personnel Development. Other staff have been supported in the completion of teaching qualifications. Membership of the Institute of Learning and Teaching has been encouraged throughout the University.

The new staffing structure was based fundamentally on the response of the Department to the evolving curriculum-delivery processes and activities within the University. The distinction that had often been used in the past between teaching and non-teaching was no longer deemed appropriate. Each member of the Learning Adviser team would bring to the delivery process their own expertise and engage in whatever activities were appropriate for the effective and efficient delivery of the curriculum to the students in a particular subject area; these activities included teaching if that was a requirement of the subject. This marked an end to the previous practice of Learning Support staff whereby teaching was considered as outside normal duties.

Learning Advisers act as an interface between the subjects for which they are responsible and Learning Support. Since there are more subjects than Learning Advisers, subjects with which Learning Advisers are not specifically aligned are supported in a liaison relationship. The original intention of achieving equivalence between numbers of Learning Advisers and numbers of subjects has never been achieved, and Faculty Learning Adviser teams cover residual subjects between them. The subject alignments of new appointees have been identified after consultation with faculties. The spread has sometimes been perceived to be uneven with regard to intensity of usage of facilities, particularly information provision or with regard to student numbers. Subject support has extended beyond the Learning Advisers to Service Advisers, who have worked with designated Learning Advisers in support of designated subjects.

Future strategy will be dictated by University priorities, which are currently focused on the student learning experience and learning and curriculum development. The University perceives the need to develop a coherent strategy for supporting learning in learning resource centres both in the development of teaching and learning materials, and in the construction of a learning environment linked to on-campus selfdirected study. Learning Advisers act as faculty coordinators for the Virtual Campus, maintaining web pages and bulletin boards for their subjects.

Learning Resources (the proposed name of the Department) will be grouped organizationally with the Best Practice Office and Teaching and Learning Research. The Department expects to work particularly closely with the former, in its role as coordinator and supporter of faculty learning and teaching strategies, and prime mover in the development of the e-learning on campus and the distance-learning infrastructure in the University.

Conclusion

In summary, institutional relations have evolved and the pace of that evolution has usually depended on the pace set by University senior management. Ten years ago, the BP endowment generated progress in the area of skills support and changes in learning and teaching, and Learning Support staff look to developing in the future a mutually beneficial relationship with the Best Practice Office. A permanent and successful relationship throughout has been the one with the academic community, the cornerstone of which is the work of the Learning Advisers.

Conclusion

Creating shiny new buildings may entice more students to come into them but will not necessarily change anything else. Creating partnerships that encourage and enable the resources, facilities and, most importantly, the staff expertise to be used to their maximum potential is the only way to ensure the payback on the investment that learning centres represent.

Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Lincoln have taken different paths but arrived at the same destination. Their learning centres are playing an increasingly important role in the life of their institutions. Dedicated LIS staff are working directly with School teams and other specialists in a way that is predicted as the future for their profession: 'Increasingly librarians will be judged as part of multiskilled teams, as effective collaborators outside the comfortable box' (Brindley, 2001). The typical working week for these staff bears little resemblance to that of even five years ago. It is now common practice for Information Services staff at Sheffield Hallam University to spend at least 50 per cent of their week in direct collaborative work with schools and other partners in the institution. This gives rise to another issue about new roles. There are some concerns among staff that their remit is being widened beyond their capabilities of time and resources; the fear is that they will end up doing increasingly more, but less well. For the future, it is essential to ensure that technology is harnessed to deal with the routine library management issues so that staff are able to channel their time and energy into those activities where they can add most value.

The SCONUL vision for Information Services in 2005 acknowledges that 'academic liaison will have to ensure strategic alignment and operational attunement and will need to be managed in conjunction with other support functions, such as educational developers and learning technologists' (SCONUL, 2001b). The learning centre approach adopted by Sheffield Hallam and other universities offers a strong framework to enable this type of partnership to flourish and to ensure that academic services staff continue to play a significant role in supporting teaching and learning.

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