Subject liaison at Lincoln

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INTRODUCTION

It is intended in this article to outline the model of academic support at the University of Lincoln, and to describe as a case study the support arrangements for the faculty in which the model is most developed.

BACKGROUND

The University of Lincoln has been through many changes in the last five years or so. Its headquarters was originally in Hull. It established a presence in Lincoln in 1996, and in 2003 it closed its Hull Cottingham Road campus and relocated its headquarters to Lincoln. It now has smaller campuses in the Derek Crothall Building in the centre of Hull, at Riseholme Park in the north of Lincoln and at Holbeach Technology Park near Spalding.

The department of library and learning resources in Lincoln occupied a learning resource centre from 1997 to 2004. This building was shared with the faculty of media and humanities and contained a double-height TV studio and media-production facilities. In 2004 the department moved into a former warehouse converted into a university library.

The origins of the University of Lincoln academic support model lie in a 1997 departmental restructure which established the role of learning adviser. In 2001 the department was restructured again. The major functional teams were learning advisers, acquisitions and reader services. The departmental structure also included a management team, consisting of a head of department and two managers, and an administrative team.

The role of learning adviser was described in a case study in the book *Centred on learning*.[1] Two developments have impacted on the model since 2003 when the book was published: the establish-

ment of the role of senior academic librarian (formerly manager) in 2004, with the renaming of the role of information and learning adviser (formerly learning adviser) to become academic subject librarian (or ASL for short); and the departmental restructure of 2006, which led to greater emphasis on faculty teams. This will be explained shortly.

THE ACADEMIC SUBJECT LIBRARIAN ROLE

The main purposes of the ASL role, as outlined in the 2006 job description, are:

- To provide effective support for, and work closely with, university faculties to ensure that their library needs are met
- To be proactive and develop best practice models of support, through knowledge of experiences elsewhere in the sector that are appropriate to university faculties
- To be champion within the faculties for the teaching and learning development office (concerned with the enhancement of the quality of learning and teaching across the university).

The principal accountabilities include:

- To provide specialist knowledge, in and support for, the learning, teaching and research activities of a university curriculum area
- To establish a relationship with a university faculty and develop knowledge of the associated curriculum areas, including developments in teaching, learning and assessment to inform the provision of resources and services
- To contribute to the embedding of excellence, innovation and professional development throughout the university's learning and teaching activity.

SUBJECT COVERAGE

In 1997 the intention was to provide one learning adviser per subject (around 32 at the time). This was never likely to be achieved and the numbers stabilised in the high teens. The 2001 restructure allocated one learning adviser to support each academic department. The 2006 restructure reduced the ASL numbers by two (from 16 to 14). Thus the faculty structure and associated ASLs before and after the 2006 restructure were as follows:

Art, architecture and design – before: 3; after: 3
Business and law – before: 5; after: 3

Health, life and social sciences – before: 5; after: 4
Media and humanities – before: 3; after: 3
Technology – before: vacant for extended period;
after: 1

It might be worth mentioning that the reduction in posts was achieved without the need for redundancies. Two ASLs found jobs elsewhere in the university. Other changes were made through ASLs moving between teams.

FACULTY TEAMS

Introduced with the 2006 restructure was the concept of faculty teams. As can be seen in the above list, three faculty teams have three ASLs, one (with a strong presence at our Hull campus) has four, and technology had one until that faculty merged with the faculty of media and humanities early in 2007, at which point the ASL joined the media and humanities team, giving that faculty a team of four.

One advantage of weakening the link between ASLs and specific academic departments was to protect the position of any ASL supporting a weakening or disappearing department. A recent example was our International Institute for Education Leadership (IIEL), which was relocated in the faculty of media and humanities in 2006 and which has now disappeared as an independent entity altogether. Support for the IIEL was once one ASL's sole responsibility but by the time of its disappearance she had also taken on support for psychology, and since the 2006 restructure she has taken on other subjects as well.

The ASLs in the two teams whose numbers were reduced in 2006 have retained their earlier alignment with a specific academic department and between them they cover the departments who 'lost' their ASLs in the restructure. The ethos of support by the team has developed to deal with this. A simple example is attendance at departmental meetings, which tend to occur on Wednesday afternoons. The team members will spread themselves as best they can to ensure maximum attendance.

At the end of the first year of operation since the restructure, the arrangement appears to be working well. Some academic departments who 'lost' their ASL were initially unhappy but they appear to have got over it. To date, thanks to the professionalism and competence of the ASLs concerned, quality has been maintained and in some cases even improved. Our evaluation mechanisms include feedback from the faculties through subject committees, student panels, student surveys and the like.

The workload of fewer ASLs covering the same span of academic support is monitored closely. Following the 2006 restructure we are developing the concept of faculty teams to include the reader services team, each member of which is assigned to a faculty team to work with the relevant ASLs in order to share the workload. The reader service team helps with obvious things like checking reading lists, but can also support the ASLs in the development of subject web pages; they can attend subject committee meetings with an ASL when appropriate, and can help to staff the subject support desks. The benefits are intended to flow both ways, giving the reader services team a greater understanding of the academic experience than they would have through merely staffing the library desk. In practice this working together varies in intensity depending on the time of year and the business of the main desk, which is the reader services team's first priority. Nevertheless, the principle has been established.

In addition to direct subject support, there is cross-departmental activity covering all teams through groups focussing on support for researchers, customer services, marketing and systems development.

SENIOR ACADEMIC LIBRARIANS

The final building block of the academic support model was the renaming of the two manager posts as 'senior academic librarians' (SALs) by the then director in 2004. Previously academic liaison was the responsibility of one manager, which allowed for only a relatively superficial relationship with the faculties by the post-holder. The split between the two managers allowed the possibility of faculty liaison at a senior level to become a more effective relationship. The SALs line-manage the ASLs in the faculty teams for which they have responsibility.

THE FACULTY OF HEALTH, LIFE AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

The support for the faculty of health, life and social sciences (HL&SS) is the most developed model within the department of library and learning resources. A faculty library liaison committee exists, chaired by the relevant SAL, as a consequence of which the SAL is a member of the faculty executive committee.

The six departments in the faculty are:

- biological sciences
- forensic and biomedical sciences
- school of health and social care
- policy studies
- psychology
- sport, coaching and exercise science.

There is also a centre for clinical and academic workforce innovation (CCAWI).

Four ASLs support the six departments and CCAWI with responsibilities divided as follows:

- biological sciences, psychology, and sport, coaching and exercise science
- social care
- policy studies and forensic science
- health, biomedical science, and CCAWI.

The reorganisation of responsibilities was agreed among the ASLs themselves and represents a fairly equitable division by student numbers.

The ASLs liaise with academic staff, covering areas such as the provision of information resources, the development of the virtual learning environment, administering noticeboards and also the delivery of information skills sessions to students. In addition three members of the reader services team work with the ASLs to form the faculty team. Regular meetings of the faculty team, including the reader services team, are held to monitor progress throughout the year.

The SALs are members of the main committees of the faculties with which they work, covering teaching and learning, research and quality (as members of which they are sometimes called on to participate in validation processes as panel members).

The faculty library liaison committee

Since 2005, the faculty of HL&SS has had a faculty library liaison committee. This came into being at the suggestion of the dean of faculty, following the establishment of a university library committee (since discontinued, with re-establishment imminent). The committee chair is the relevant SAL. The dean is a member of the committee as are representatives from each academic department, the ASLs in the faculty team and student representatives (of which there were three in 2006/07, though only one managed to attend meetings).

The committee meets four times a year. Its terms of reference are to establish and develop a forum for discussion leading to improvement in the effectiveness of library and learning resources (L&LR) services in support of the faculty, and to report to the faculty executive and faculty board on decisions made regarding L&LR services provided in support of staff and students in HL&SS, including opening hours and access; L&LR resources; the development of L&LR services across all the campuses where HL&SS has a presence; exchange of information; and other matters of mutual interest or benefit which may arise. The committee is a sub-committee of the faculty board.

In the last year, the committee has discussed the national student survey, reference management software, funding, statistics on the usage of e-resources, preparation for the Research Assessment Exercise, an extension to IT access at one of our campuses, NHS funding, preparation for the Blackboard Virtual Learning Environment and feedback from the student present.

Other developments which L&LR has undertaken on behalf of the faculty have been the acquisition of ScienceDirect, mostly funded from faculty funds, and a pilot project to develop an institutional repository with RAE outputs from the faculty. The latter has provided valuable information used in the rollout of the RAE repository across the university.

Why does this work so well? A major contributory factor has been the approach of the dean of faculty, which is inclusive, receptive and supportive.

The future

Academic support in the future is likely to be underpinned by a new university library committee, which will report to the university's core executive. The director is also keen to replicate the experience of the faculty of HL&SS by establishing library liaison committees in the other faculties (a feat which was attempted some years ago with one other faculty without success).

Internally within the department, we will seek to develop the faculty teams, in order to increase the support that the ASLs will require from other teams in the department. The university is developing a strategic plan for 2007/12. Part of the departmental contribution to the strategic plan will be to develop the staff to meet the challenges that they will face.

The recent past at the University of Lincoln has been characterised by almost constant change, which is not likely to cease in the near future. The department of library and learning resources seeks to ensure that our support models are robust and flexible enough to deal with it. Continuously strengthening our academic support model should help us to achieve this.

REFERENCE

1   E. Oyston (ed.), *Centred on learning: academic case studies on learning centre development*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003