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# Engagement with impact

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# Engagement with impact: enhancing the student learning experience during year one of a functional library model

Tamasine Ashcroft, Lisa Bird, Stephen Bull, Polly Harper, Ann-Marie James and Catherine Robertson

## Abstract

In summer 2017, the University of Birmingham reconfigured from a subject librarian model of academic library support to a functional or task-based model, including the creation of a dedicated Engagement Team.  Using case studies from the new team, an internal survey of staff across the University alongside a survey of librarians from other institutions, the article highlights the many perspectives on the debate: the Library management impetus for consistency and strategic engagement, academic perspectives on how well the Engagement Team works for them, and views of Library staff. The case studies demonstrate the team's contribution to the institutional teaching and learning agenda, particularly around academic skills enhancements, creating connections with staff and students, and through improved processes of collection development.  This article adds to the relatively small body of literature on the impact and value of a functional model configuration that includes a dedicated Engagement Team.


KEYWORDS: Relationship management, academic libraries, functional library model, academic engagement, teaching and learning.

## Introduction

In August 2017, the Library Academic Engagement Division within Library Services at the University of Birmingham reconfigured from a subject librarian model of academic library support to a functional or task-based model. The reconfigured division consists of three teams: Library Engagement, Learning Enhancement and Library Research Skills. The Library Engagement Team provides a named contact for schools, but the primary focus is on understanding the needs of students and staff across the institution. The team work in partnership with colleagues within the library and across the institution to meet these needs. The team has a more strategic focus on engagement and the capacity to engage at a greater breadth and depth than the previous model allowed. The Learning Enhancement and Library Research Skills teams provide skills training and support, respectively, to taught students and researchers.

The purpose of this article is to explore the impact of the functional model and, in particular, the value of a dedicated Library Engagement Team. The article begins with a review of the existing literature, identifying drivers for moving to a functional model and citing examples of perceived benefit. After some context about the Library Engagement Team at the University of Birmingham, the article describes the methodology used involving case studies and data collection surveys. The article then details three distinct case studies to highlight demonstrable advances in: academic skills enhancement, the creation of connections and engagement with key stakeholders, and library collections as a whole. The case studies are complemented by two surveys, one for internal stakeholders and one for library staff at other Higher Education Institutions. The former garners opinion on end-user impact, and provides working examples alongside stakeholder feedback; the latter adds further context, by presenting views on the functional versus subject model debate. The

final part of the article discusses the themes identified in the case studies and surveys, before offering a conclusion and recommendation for further research. The article is likely to be of relevance to any institution with an interest in impact of strategic engagement activity and particularly to institutions that have either moved, or are considering moving, to a more functional model of academic engagement.

## Literature review

An important part of the structure of many academic libraries is the subject librarian (Corrall, 2014; Hoodless and Pinfield, 2018). Subject librarians, also known as liaison or faculty librarians, are usually assigned to work with one or more schools or departments within an institution as the named contact for the library. They have traditionally provided a wide range of support including: collection development, liaison, as well as delivery of teaching and one-to-one appointments.

However, the environment in which the subject librarian is operating is changing. A number of drivers for change have been identified in the literature (Bains, 2013; Doskatsch, 2007; Eldridge, Fraser, Simmonds & Smyth, 2016; Hoodless & Pinfield, 2018; Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013; Young, Ashmore & McKeating, 2018). These include:

- Changes in the external and information landscapes;
- A shift of focus from collections to users;
- The need to align more closely to the teaching and research strategies of the parent institution;
- Increased focus on research and significant changes to scholarly communication/publication;
- Improving the student experience;
- A perception that the subject model is unsustainable.

To address such challenges, a growing number of institutions are abandoning the subject librarian model of support, replacing it with a largely functional or task-based structure. Examples cited in the literature include:  The University of Manchester (Bains, 2013), University of Sheffield (Barr & Tucker, 2018), The National University of Ireland Galaway (Cox, 2017) University of Arizona Libraries (Andrade & Zaghloul, 2010), University of Guelph, Canada (Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013), Loughborough University (Young et al., 2016), University of Nottingham (Eldridge et al., 2016) and University of South Australia (Doskatsch, 2007).

Instead of named individuals providing all specialised library support for given schools or departments, the functional model provides small teams of staff specialising in a particular function who then offer that function to all schools and departments across the institution.  Findings from a UK study by Cooke et al. (2011) indicate a "lack of full awareness of the services on offer" (p. 26) amongst academic staff. Hoodless and Pinfield (2018) suggest that a functional approach may help address this by providing "an unambiguous picture of the services and support the library has to offer" (p. 354). Jaguszewski and Williams (2013) describe the need for an "engaged model" and "to participate in the entire lifecycle of the research, teaching and learning process" (p. 4).

In their semi-structured interviews with 11 senior managers in UK libraries around the subject versus functional model, Hoodless and Pinfield (2018) identified five main reasons for changing to a functional model amongst managers whose libraries had reconfigured: ensuring consistency, acquiring new expertise, improving efficiency and focus, instigating cultural change and aligning with university strategy. For those managers whose service had not been reconfigured, 2 major reasons to maintain the status quo were: connection with academic departments and the value of tailoring service.

When discussing the functional model, a theme that emerges strongly in the literature is the need to collaborate and work in partnership: not only with the academy but also with other professional services colleagues across the institution in order to provide linked-up services and initiatives (Church-Duran, 2017; Corrall, 2014; Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013; Mamtora, 2013, Young et al, 2018).  Jaguszewski and Williams (2013, p.4) suggest that "building strong relationships with faculty and other campus professionals, and establishing collaborative partnerships within and across institutions, are necessary building blocks to librarians' success" whereas Rodwell and Fairbairn (2008, p.120) stress the importance of being "an equal professional partner in the research, teaching and learning functions". Corrall (2014, p. 19) summarises the views of a number of commentators, articulating that libraries "need to reposition from support service to professional/scholarly partner and to transform their liaison librarians into embedded experts recognized as academic associates".

Commentators emphasise the importance of focussed engagement to enable better understanding of both the teaching and research needs of the academy and be more involved in these activities throughout the various stages and changes. In this way, gaps can be identified and sustainable solutions leveraged.  Jaguszewski and Williams (2013) suggest that such an approach is necessary to "effect change" and is more powerful than "subject knowledge" alone. Eldridge et al. (2016) summarise it nicely as "the central idea is that our departmental outputs must be based on the needs of the communities we support" (p.167)

The very nature of the role of dedicated engagement teams is also explored in the literature, described as account managers who "act as a bridge between the academic community and our functional teams" (Bains, 2013, p.9). Barr and Tucker (2018) describe this using Kenney's (2015) terminology of "looking upstream" to "predict new trends and identify opportunities where libraries can engage" (Barr & Tucker, 2018). Jaguszweski and Williams (2013) describe their "two new roles, that of advocate and of consultant" acting as a library's "sales force'' (p.16). Barr and Tucker (2018) concur, but caution against the largely unhelpful term of salespeople – they suggest that conversations need "to occur at a personal level" and that "it is with academics as people… that a library's success depends".

Literature around impact is limited with Hoodless and Pinfield (2018) perhaps being the best example of research to date. Of the libraries that had gone functional, they suggest that: "perhaps predictably [they] reported positively on the effectiveness of the [functional] model in comparison to the previous subject-based structures" (p. 352). They also suggested that having dedicated teams make it easier to build good relationships with key functional (academic and professional services) stakeholders. They, however, call for further studies to develop and test measures of success including the views and experiences of those outside of the library community. At Loughborough, Young et al. (2018) note that the staff working within engagement "have mentioned how the deeper engagement work has enriched their role, as they begin to see the bigger picture of the School strategy" (p. 7) which is a positive impact for the Library. With regard to the Schools themselves, Young et al. (2018) notes that they found impact from higher visibility leading to the Library being included in consultation in various key issues at School level at a much earlier time. They also found that increased attendance at meetings across Schools meant that communication of important information was given directly to key stakeholders, face-to-face.

This article contributes to the relatively small body of literature currently available about the impact of the functional model sometime after formation. Literature on the value of a proactive Engagement Team with a focus on building relationships and partnerships across the institution is particularly scarce and it is on this important area that this article focuses.

## The Library Engagement Team

The University is structured into 5 Colleges (Arts and Law, Engineering and Physical Sciences, Life and Environmental Sciences, Medical and Dental Sciences and Social Sciences). The Library Engagement Team consists of 4.0 FTE Library Engagement Advisors and 1.0 FTE Head of Library Engagement (job-share) with each Engagement Advisor taking on responsibility as a named contact for all schools in a college. The Schools in Life and Environmental Sciences are shared between the Library Engagement Advisors for Engineering and Physical Sciences and Medical and Dental Sciences.

The allocation of Subject Advisors into the Engagement Team was based on the demonstration of strong communication, influencing and relationship building skills. The team were given lead areas such as collections engagement, resource lists, research and formal strategic engagement. Two of the key over-arching objectives for the Engagement Team in the first year reflected the impetus outlined in Hoodless and Pinfield (2018), namely to develop a greater consistency of service, and to move from transactional to strategic support and align with University strategy.

The service priorities for 2017-18 for the team can be summarised as follows:

- To work with key stakeholders through a strategic annual report and action plan approach;
- To identify requirements and resource implication for Schools offering new programmes at the University's Dubai campus, which opened in September 2018;
- To articulate to schools the new service-wide embedded skills offer for taught students and to review with key school-based stakeholders how skills can best be integrated into their curriculum;
- To work with schools to increase engagement with ResourceLists@Bham, the University's reading list system, to address student concern around core text access (use of the system has subsequently been mandated by University Education Committee from autumn 2020);
- To work with schools to identify need, develop solutions and advocate around study and learning spaces in order to address student perception around lack of study space.

Whilst some of the case studies detailed in this article were planned, and relate directly to the identified service priorities, many emanated from engagement with academic departments.

The Library Engagement Team work with a wide variety of academic and professional services colleagues. Some key stakeholders referred to in this article include: Heads of Education (HoEs), a senior academic having responsibility for the education agenda in each School, Heads of Research (HoRs), similar role to HoE but for research, Academic Library Representatives, Student Experience Officers (SEOs), Professional Services staff members assigned to named schools to work with students and staff to improve the student experience, Registry and The Guild (student Union).

## Methodology

Approval for the research was given by the University of Birmingham Research and Ethics Committee.

In order to inform the case studies, the team developed two data collection surveys. Firstly, an external survey of other libraries was sent to lis-relationship-management, the Jisc mailing list for 'The Relationship Management Group for HE Libraries' (https://relationshipmanagementgroup.wordpress.com). The survey, consisting of 6 questions, focussed on the library structure for engagement, and the perceived pros and cons of the functional and subject model.

An internal survey was also sent to key stakeholders in the roles of: Heads of School, Heads of Education, Heads of Research, Library Representatives, Student Experience Officers and those that

have responsibilities for Staff-Student Committee.  The survey asked members of staff who were at the University prior to the reconfiguration to rate if they felt that areas had shown: Significant Improvement, Improvement, Neutral (about the same), Deterioration, Significant Deterioration, Unsure/NA.   Staff members that had started at the University since the 2017 reconfiguration could not make a comparison and so were asked to rate the same areas as: Very Satisfied, Satisfied, Neutral, Dissatisfied, Very Dissatisfied, Unsure/NA.

Both surveys ran between 20th November and 3rd December 2018. A reminder e-mail was sent for both surveys after one week.

## Survey results

A total of 22 responses were received from the external survey. The mailing list comprised of 65 distinct institutions (222 individual members) making a 34% response rate.

A total of 35 responses were received from the internal survey. 164 staff members were emailed asking them to complete the online survey making a 21% response rate.  The majority of respondents (29) had been working at the University prior to the reconfiguration, with only 6 respondents starting after August 2017. Interestingly responses were received from all groups contacted apart from Heads of School and Heads of Research; as the survey was teaching and learning focussed the latter is understandable.

In the analysis, presented in this article, respondents who answered 'Unsure / NA' were omitted from questions where this applied. The number of respondents after this was taken into account is shown in the figure captions. The responses from the pre- and post-2017 staff are treated separately but data are often presented in the same figure and results are sometimes combined within the text.

## Case studies

### Academic skills enhancement

A significant element of the Library's contribution towards the development of teaching and learning is through academic skills enhancement. The reconfiguration created a Learning Enhancement Team (LET), consisting of a combination of academic, writing and digital skills advisors alongside former subject librarians. All skills provision was combined under the overarching umbrella of the University's Academic Skills Centre with the aim of providing more transparent, consistent and sustainable skills enhancement across the institution.

The new LET took this opportunity to create a central menu of embedded skills workshops (consisting of academic, writing, digital and information literacy skills) from which academics can request sessions for their courses. The aim of this is to provide skills enhancement, aligned to learning outcomes and "embedd[ed] at point of need" (Hill, Tinker & Catterall, 2010, p. 14)**.**

The Engagement Team's role in this has firstly been to raise awareness and understanding of the new menu approach across the University. This is vital in terms of impact. As Creaser and Spezi (2012) discuss "raising awareness of what the library can do to support teaching …. is a key component of demonstrating value" (p. 10).  The team delivered this via multiple approaches, from contacting all previous requesters of workshops, discussing at relevant School Committees and proactively meeting with key stakeholders.

The team has also used their relationships with Schools and growing "awareness of specific curriculum and assessment demands" (Hill, Tinker & Catterall, 2010, p. 14) to identify areas where there are significant gaps, needs, or issues in existing provision. Notably, discussions with staff have

involved both understanding opportunities for new skills enhancement provision, but equally, considerations around the content and volume of requests.

This proactive engagement has resulted in the identification of gaps in skills provision for a number of areas, such as Biosciences and Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences. As a result, new embedded workshops have been developed to meet the needs of these Schools.

A dedicated engagement team are also well placed to exploit opportunities to enhance learning support. During an Economics staff-student committee concern was expressed around a lack of student confidence in searching for data. The Engagement Advisor worked with the Learning Enhancement Team to broker the delivery of a data research skills workshop for these students. Additionally, the team continue to collate and present feedback from staff and students around the menu offerings, including suggestions of potential new content, to be considered for future menu iterations.

The internal survey showed that all Heads of Education who responded had seen a 'Significant Improvement' in 'Awareness of teaching support available from Library Services'. The awareness for all respondents is shown in Figure 1: over 2/3 of staff who had worked at the institution pre-2017 had seen improvement; with all post-2017 staff satisfied. One pre-2017 staff member perceived deterioration, relating to problems during the transition period over sessions booked pre-reconfiguration. This highlights the importance of clear communication and honouring pre-agreed teaching commitments in order to ensure a positive relationship going forward.
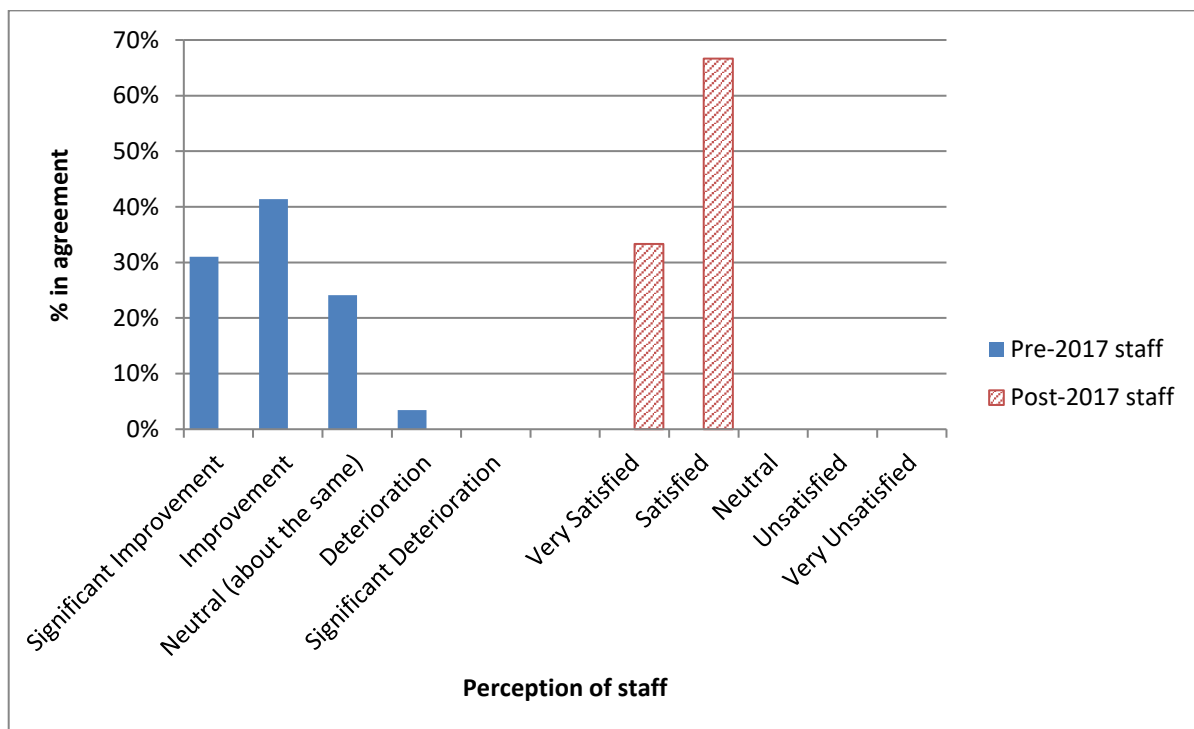


**Figure 1:** Awareness by the academy of teaching support available from Library Services. Respondents who were at the institution pre-reconfiguration were asked how their awareness had changed (solid bars, n=29); those who have joined subsequently were asked for their level of satisfaction (hatched bars, n=6)

## Creating connections

Jaguszewski and Williams (2013. P. 4) suggest that an "engaged model" looks to "participate in the entire lifecycle of the research, teaching and learning process" while Bains (2013) puts simply that the function of an engagement team is to "build relationships, spot opportunities" (p. 9). Doing all of

these things effectively means creating connections both within Schools and across Professional Services. Examples of student and staff engagement are now considered.

## Student engagement: The student voice

Under the subject-support model, attendance at Staff-Student Committee (SSC) meetings was patchy and inconsistent due to conflicting pressures. Now the dedicated Engagement Team works closely with SEOs to ensure an invitation to every SSC in their College. One member of the team collates updates from across all Library Services teams, providing a report which each Advisor then tailors to their College. This ensures greater efficiency and a more consistent presentation of the whole service.

By working in synergy, the Engagement Team are better placed to track impact and easily identify cross-over between SSC meetings. Two examples are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Examples of Issues identified at Staff-Student Meetings, along with their outcomes, many of which have come about by working in synergy.

| Gaps/Issues identified | SSC where identification of gaps/issues made | Outcomes |
|---|---|---|
| Students unable to watch DVDs recommended for their modules as the Library's new computers lacked DVD drives. | Modern Languages | Additional Library DVD drives have been purchased which can be borrowed |
| | Creative Writing | |
| Insufficient copies of a key textbook | Education | Engagement Team discovered the text was recommended across 4 modules. They could then purchase additional copies to ensure appropriate text-to-student ratios. |

The functional approach of a focussed engagement team facilitates this cross subject working and avoids subject based silos.

As a result of their contribution to SSC meetings, Engagement Advisors in one College were invited to participate in a Student Rep Academy Conference, delivering an interactive polling session and taking part in speed networking to gather insight into student experiences. From this, an action plan was developed addressing the key issues raised. Examples include:

- Rebalancing the distribution of texts between libraries;
- Increasing awareness of the Academic Skills Centre, study spaces and Resource Lists via lecture shout-outs, postcards in tutor pigeon-holes and improved signage.

The team are now working directly with the Guild (Student Union) to develop a partnership with all College-Level Student Representatives.

A hot topic at SSCs during 2017-18 was perceived lack of study space in the Main Library and around campus. Little (2014) states that "Space is one of the most pressing and contentious issues on university and college campuses around the world. Everyone needs more of it and no one has enough of it" (p. 632). Through sitting on SSCs, Library Engagement Advisors could regularly feedback developments and respond to students' questions. Examples are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Examples of Study Spaces initiatives that the Library Engagement Team have played a significant role in, along with their outcomes.

| Initiative | Library Engagement Team Involvement | Outcomes |
|---|---|---|
| Promotion during the revision period of an under-used site library offering 500 study spaces, located 1.5 miles away from the main campus. | Through attendance at SSCs, School-based contacts and mailing lists, the team offered targeted promotion to complement a wider marketing campaign | Footfall in the busiest week of the campaign increased by 17% on the previous year |
| | | Many new users of the Library were students from the College of Life and Environmental Sciences, with whom the team had worked particularly closely over this initiative |
| Development of a campus-wide PC desktop image promoting study spaces | Fed-back this School-based suggestion to relevant group within the Library; worked with colleagues in Academic Services and IT Services to design an image and roll-out to cluster PCs | An image was rolled out on all University cluster PCs during the 2018 summer term |
| | | Study spaces desktop images have been used as 'Business as usual' in 2018-19 |
| Introduction of an hourly-updated "Traffic Light" Main Library floor availability report | Fed-back this School-based suggestion to relevant group within the Library; worked with colleagues in Library Customer Support to design, pilot and widely promote this service | The report is displayed on plasma screens across the Main Library |
| | | Pilot successful and service has become 'Business as usual' throughout 2018-19 |
| | | Significant positive student feedback, with many finding "the traffic light system helpful and accurate" (UG Maths students) |

Figure 2 shows internal survey responses around contribution of Library Services at SSCs: 50% of respondents who had been at the University before 2017 perceived an improvement, whilst 100% of respondents who started post 2017 were satisfied. One respondent commented:

"Library Services have been very proactive within our Staff Student Committee and have ensured that all relevant student queries are followed up… I believe that they have been one of our greatest assets in improving staff student interactions."

Two of the respondents rating 'Neutral' commented they had always received an "incredible high standard of work, support and involvement" from the Library, suggesting that it is the skills of the staff engaging rather than the structure that is more important to effective engagement.
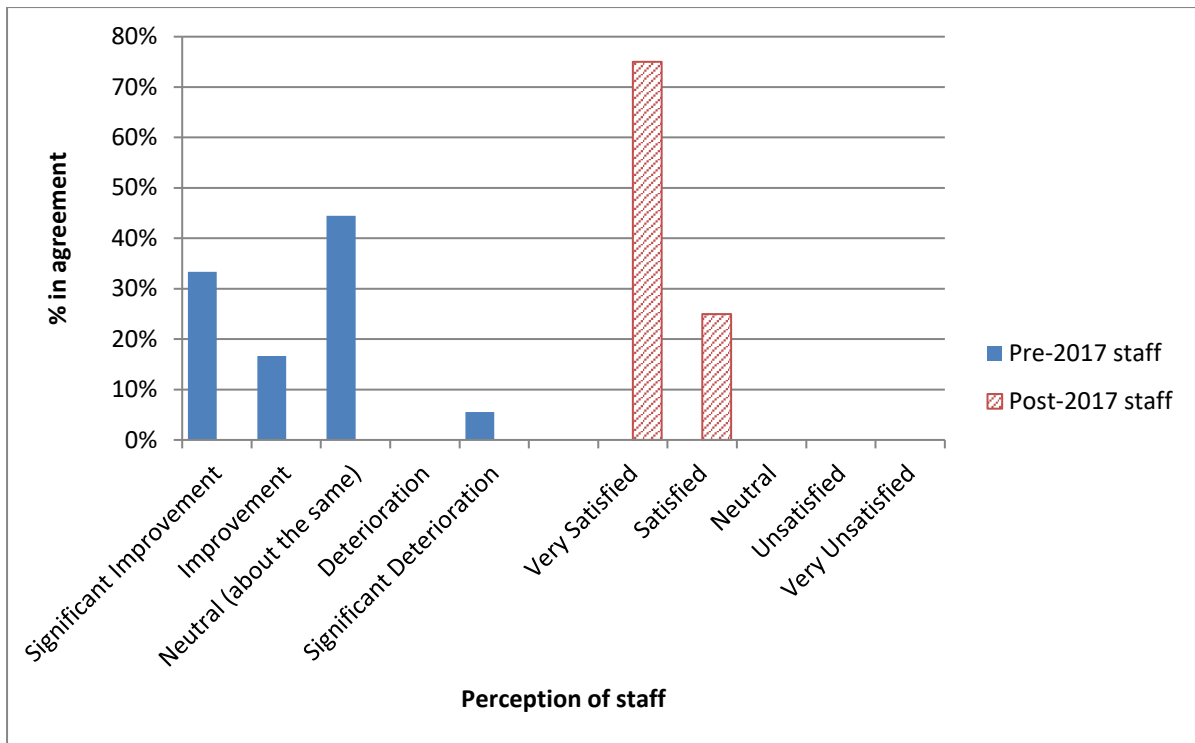
**Figure 2:** Contribution of Library Services to Staff-Student Committees. Respondents who were at the institution pre-reconfiguration were asked how the contribution had changed (solid bars, n=18); those who have joined subsequently were asked for their level of satisfaction (hatched bars, n=4)

Figure 3 demonstrates internal survey responses in relation to how well the 'Library is listening to students in the school.' Almost 60% of pre-2017 respondents saw an improvement with all post-2017 staff being satisfied. One respondent commented:

"[Their Engagement Advisor] has been incredible. He's so responsive and willing to do whatever he can to address feedback from the students."
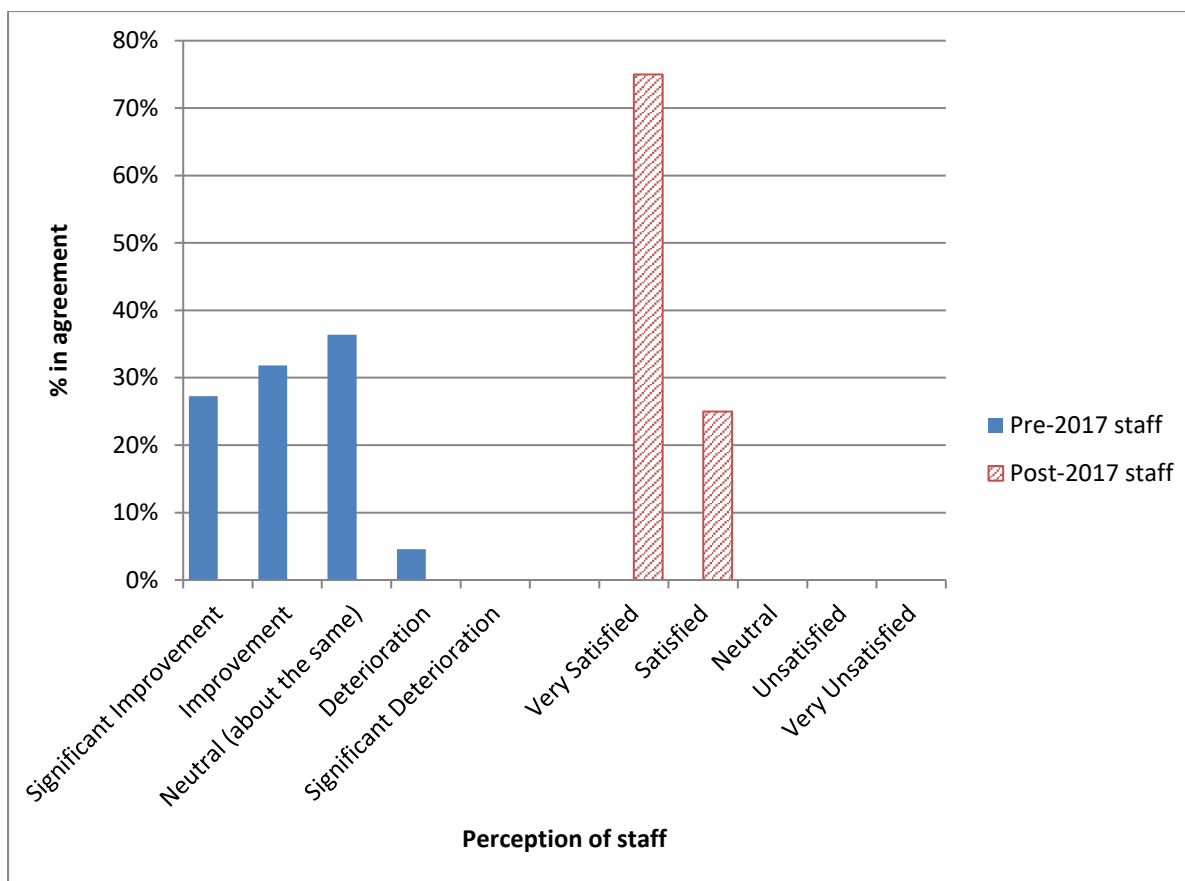
**Figure 3:** How well Library Services is listening to students. Respondents who were at the institution pre-reconfiguration were asked how they felt this had changed (solid bars, n=22); those who have joined subsequently were asked for their level of satisfaction (hatched bars, n=4)

The respondent who perceived deterioration in contribution at SSCs (Figure 2) was different to the respondent who perceived deterioration in how well the Library is listening to students (Figure 3). Unfortunately neither elaborated in the free-text comments on their reasons for these ratings.

### Staff engagement: Partnering with the academy

The Engagement Team are responsible for working with key School-level stakeholders to understand School-level priorities for teaching and the student learning environment, including those articulated in their School-based Education Plans. The team achieve this in a number of ways, particularly via attendance at regular fora and ad-hoc meetings. This group of case studies provides examples of such engagement including: contribution to School Education Committee Meetings, Annual Reports and engaging with new academic staff.

The team have looked to embed themselves on key School Education Committees. These are useful fora for gaining intelligence on curriculum development (e.g. new programmes, changes in student numbers) and regularly reporting on library developments which support teaching. This provides an opportunity for the team to identify potential gaps in library provision. Complementing this, the team also work with College Academic Policy Partners to automatically receive and respond to new programme approval documentation, ensuring any library implications are picked up early. As an example, working on an approval for a new forthcoming Linguistics programme identified the need for a subscription. By gaining this intelligence early, the Engagement Advisor ensured the School followed appropriate procedures for requesting a new resource, meaning it stood the best chance of being purchased prior to course commencement.

Staff engagement has also been undertaken via an Annual Report and Action Plan process. Other institutions such as Universities of York, Sunderland and Loughborough (Blake & Gallimore, 2015; Grieves, 2018; Young et al., 2018) have previously adopted this approach. Blake and Gallimore (2015) suggest that the "The value of the meeting is recognised by departments, as we develop shared priorities for partnership working" (p. 45).

The annual report provides a summary of library support at school level, identifying any gaps in provision. Targeted reports were written for 9 schools, where student satisfaction around the Library was identified as relatively low. 8 schools engaged with the process and meetings took place with senior staff including: HoEs, Year Tutors, SEOs and/or Library Representative. Young et al. (2018) cite the value in including the School leads for teaching and research.  Following the meetings, School-level action plans were developed for each, with 51 actions identified overall. Central themes were service development, resources, academic skills, communication and strategic intelligence. Two examples are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Examples of themes that emerged from the Annual Report and Action Plan process, along with their outcomes.

| School/Department | Gaps/Issues identified via report meeting | Outcomes |
|---|---|---|
| Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences | Minimal embedded academic skills support for UGs | New suite of embedded academic skills workshops developed for first years. |
| | Lack of student awareness of key library services (Such as academic skills, study spaces, resources) | Communications improved through postcards, posters, key messages sent through key school contact, presence on School VLE pages. |
| French Studies | Significant drop in department's annual book spend | Worked with academic staff to significantly increase spend |
| | Issues with student access to the Main Library's Research Reserve | Process for accessing Research Reserve now improved and understood. |
| | | Business intelligence around required library support for the Teaching Excellence Framework (Office for Students, 2018) |

In both of these examples it was felt that the reports were crucial in identifying the issues and securing focussed meetings with key stakeholders. It is felt that remedy actions were unlikely to have emerged and acted upon without the subsequent development of an action plan.

A final example of staff engagement is via new starters. Jaguszewski and Williams (2013) comment that "Librarians need to be positioned to help solve… large-scale challenges" (p. 4) and targeting new academic starters at the beginning of their career ensures key information is delivered effectively, with good practice cultivated from day one.  The Engagement Team email all new academic staff (approximately 1,000 in 2017/18), providing key information about Library support for their teaching and research. A meeting with their Engagement Advisor is offered, as well as an invitation to a New Starters event.  The latter is a coffee and networking session followed by a World Café activity showcasing the range of library support available, allowing numerous connections to be made in a

relatively short amount of time. The e-mail communication has seen an approximate 15% response rate, greater than via the subject model, with each event attracting between 20-30 new academics: the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. The standardised approach ensures every new academic starter receives consistent information – with a much greater understanding of the teaching and learning support available to them and their students.

The internal survey showed that all Heads of Education who had responded saw improvements in their interactions with the Library Service. One Head of Education commented:

"I am fortunate to have an excellent contact in the library who is proactive in engaging with and supporting us. This is the main reason why things have improved so much".

Figure 4 shows that 50% of new staff were satisfied or very satisfied with the support available to them; with the remaining 50% being neutral. Almost a third of staff who had been at the institution pre-2017 had noticed that the support for new staff members had either 'Improved' or 'Significantly Improved'.
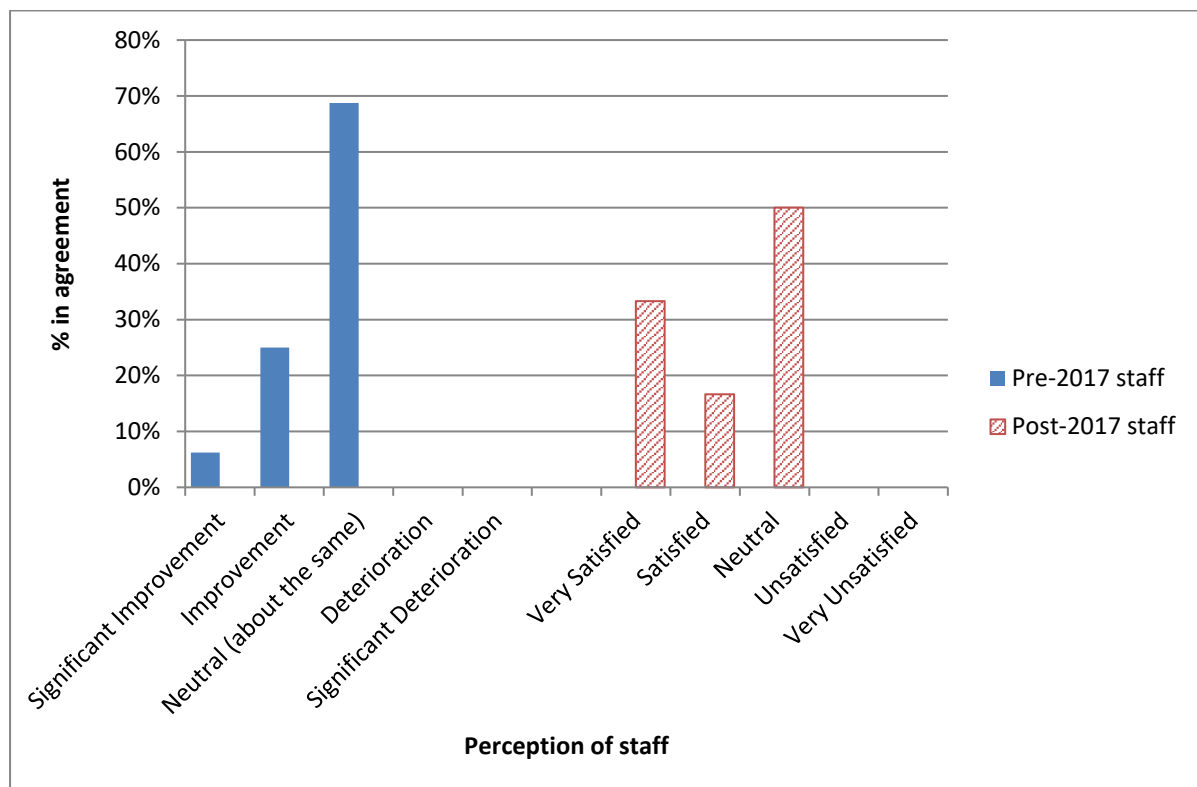


**Figure 4:** Library Services support for new staff. Respondents who were at the institution pre-reconfiguration were asked how they felt this had changed (solid bars, n=16); those who have joined subsequently were asked for their level of satisfaction (hatched bars, n=6)

## Collections

Hoodless and Pinfield (2018, p.2) note "the shift away from libraries focusing on collections to becoming more user-oriented and developing organisational structures to reflect this". As collections processes changed, this had implications for the traditional collections role of a subject librarian: something that the new functional model has looked to take into account. Although the Library always had a policy of academic-led subject collection development, previously subject librarians would also be heavily involved in such decisions.  Now, through the University online reading list system and a newly developed resource trials and donations processes, collection

development has become even more academic-driven.  Teaching collections should, therefore, increasingly directly correlate with student learning needs.

## Resource Lists

 A major element of the Engagement Team's role in supporting teaching and learning revolves around the advocacy, and assistance of academics, in using ResourceLists@Bham (James & Harper, 2017). Before the introduction of this system, the student experience of finding recommended course library materials, alongside the Library's provision of said materials, was very inconsistent. Resource Lists are designed to enhance student access to learning resources and as lists are also created and updated by academics themselves, inclusive of key information such as student numbers, they directly drive library acquisitions to meet student demand and need.

Before reconfiguring, advocacy was delivered by 11 Subject Librarians. As the responsibility, now, of a much smaller team, advocacy efforts have moved to be more strategic and, crucially, sustainable. For example, the team runs regular generic workshops for all academic staff.  Feedback for workshops reveals their value, and academics' appreciation of the pedagogic potential of Resource Lists: "These face to face sessions are very valuable… allowing for exploration of design layout to optimise student learning, practical use of resource lists specific to own needs and opportunities for development of use in student peer learning" (Academic; Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation).

Examples of strategic approaches include liaising with key academics in Schools to boost uptake. During Summer 2018, the Director of Education for Arts and Law worked with their Engagement Advisor to employ and train 30 Postgraduate students, creating 132 lists across the College, over an 18-day period. Similarly working with the Head of Education for Computer Science in January 2017, the School's number of lists tripled within a fortnight.

One measure of engagement with Resource Lists at Birmingham is through student feedback. Comments range from approval of the system: "Resource Lists are fantastic - I'm in my third year and can't believe I've only just discovered them" (UG, Classics) to a perceptible appreciation of the content itself "All of the listed texts are interesting, edifying and, crucially, penetrable" (UG, Law). Academics have also responded positively: "my students…commented this would save them time and encourage them to locate and read around the topic more widely" (Academic, Local Government Studies).

 In terms of student engagement, Figure 5 shows a 90% increase in usage of the system from the academic year 16-17 to 17-18. This looks set to continue, with list views more than doubling on day one of Autumn Term 2018 (6,686) compared to the previous year (3,289). Academic uptake of lists has also grown by 74% between August 2017 and 2018.
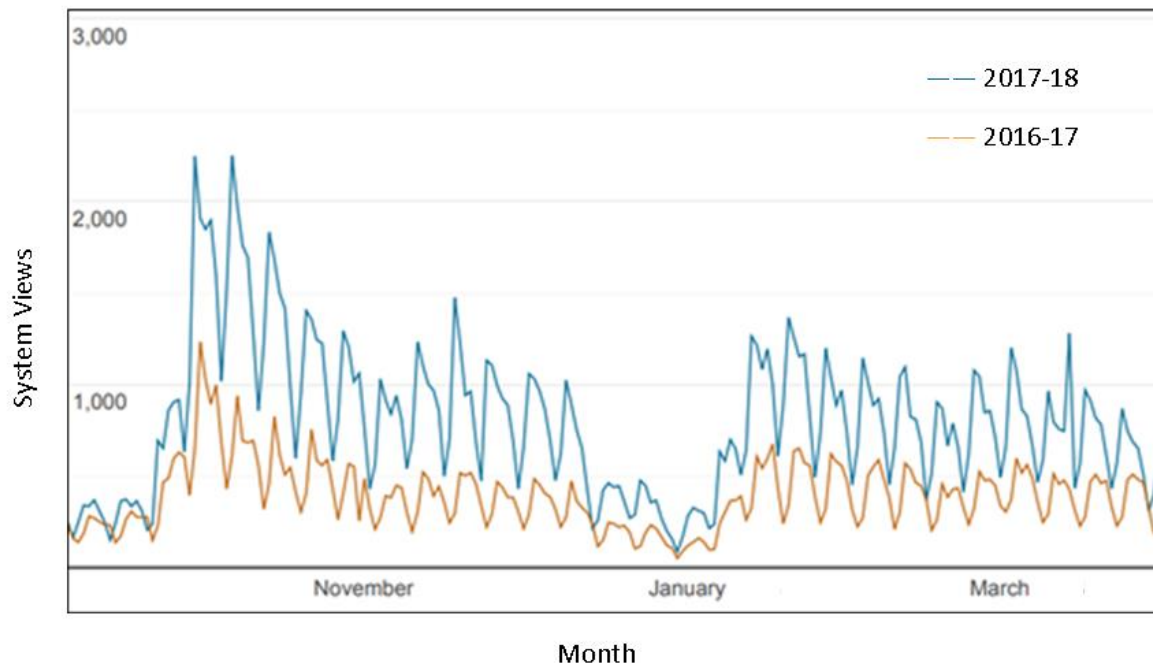
**Figure 5:** Usage of ResourceLists@Bham for the academic years 2017/18 (blue line) and 2016/17 (orange line)

Thanks to ongoing advocacy efforts and "keeping the system on the agenda…where the right people are" (Rimmer & Downs, 2017, p. 11) a University Resource List Policy has now been agreed. This will mean a move towards university-wide implementation of Resource Lists, for September 2020. The impact of this on teaching and learning will be significant.

Having a small but dedicated Engagement Team, able to agree priorities and create generic reusable workshop content, means that the roll out of advocacy was consistent across all schools. This is easier to achieve than when reliant on individual Subject specialists where levels of involvement and enthusiasm could vary depending on conflicting priorities and training loads.

### New resource selection
Under the previous subject-based structure there was an inconsistent and ad hoc approach to obtaining feedback on the trial of new resources. Having a single Engagement Team has allowed the Library to offer a consistent and equal message across the University, improving feedback and evidence of need.

In a new approach, the Engagement Team collated information about all resources being trialled into one attractive publicity brochure. This was circulated to staff and students, taken to School meetings, added to the website and promoted via social media. It was important to the Engagement Team that students were also given the opportunity to feedback on the trials, meaning we could learn directly from them what they needed to support their learning and research. Patrons were asked to provide feedback demonstrating evidence of need and including information such as which taught programmes and research groups the resource would directly support.

This all resulted in a 200% increase in trial feedback during this first year of having a dedicated Engagement Team, with 62 pieces of feedback from academics , and 66 from students. Notably, in the previous year, no feedback was received from students. This then formed the basis of robust evidence-based resource business cases, allowing the Library Services Executive Group to prioritise budget commitment based on teaching and research impact.

# Surveys

## Further findings of the internal survey

Key reasons for the move to a functional model were to align activity more directly with University strategic drivers and to be able to evidence support for teaching and research. The survey showed that the most improved area for pre-2017 University staff was in the 'Range of things that Library Services can offer to support the School': Figure 6 shows that 79% perceived an improvement. These respondents held a range of roles across all five of the Colleges within the University, showing that improvement is seen regardless of subject area.  This may reflect the fact that the new functionally organised teams make it easier for those outside of the Library to understand the range of services available.
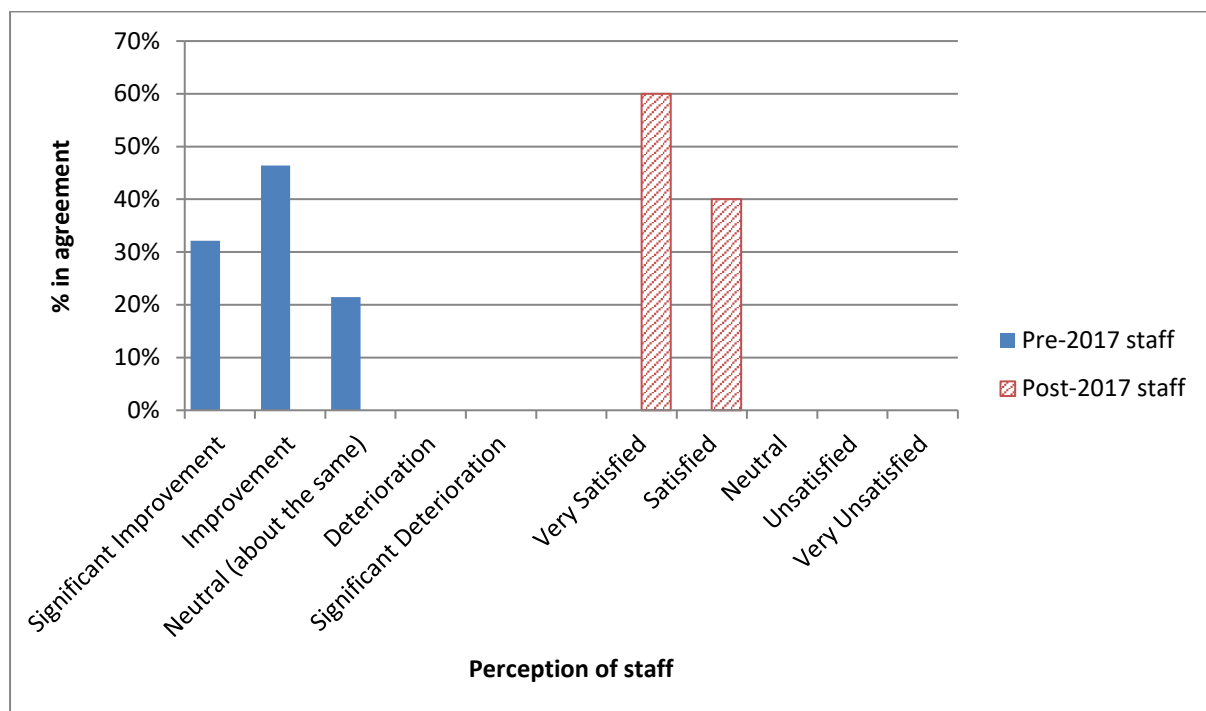


**Figure 6:** Range of things that Library Services can offer to support the School. Respondents who were at the institution pre-reconfiguration were asked how they felt this had changed (solid bars, n=28); those who have joined subsequently were asked for their level of satisfaction (hatched bars, n=5)


Interestingly, despite a marked improvement in the awareness of the range of services offered, the survey showed a more mixed picture in 'Knowing who to contact' in the Library (Figure 7). Most of the negative responses came from the College of Arts and Law where there had been more disruption due to their Engagement Advisor being away from campus for the first months of the transition period.  As heavy users of Library Services, they are also more likely to want to contact people regarding a range of services and have greater concerns about subject expertise.
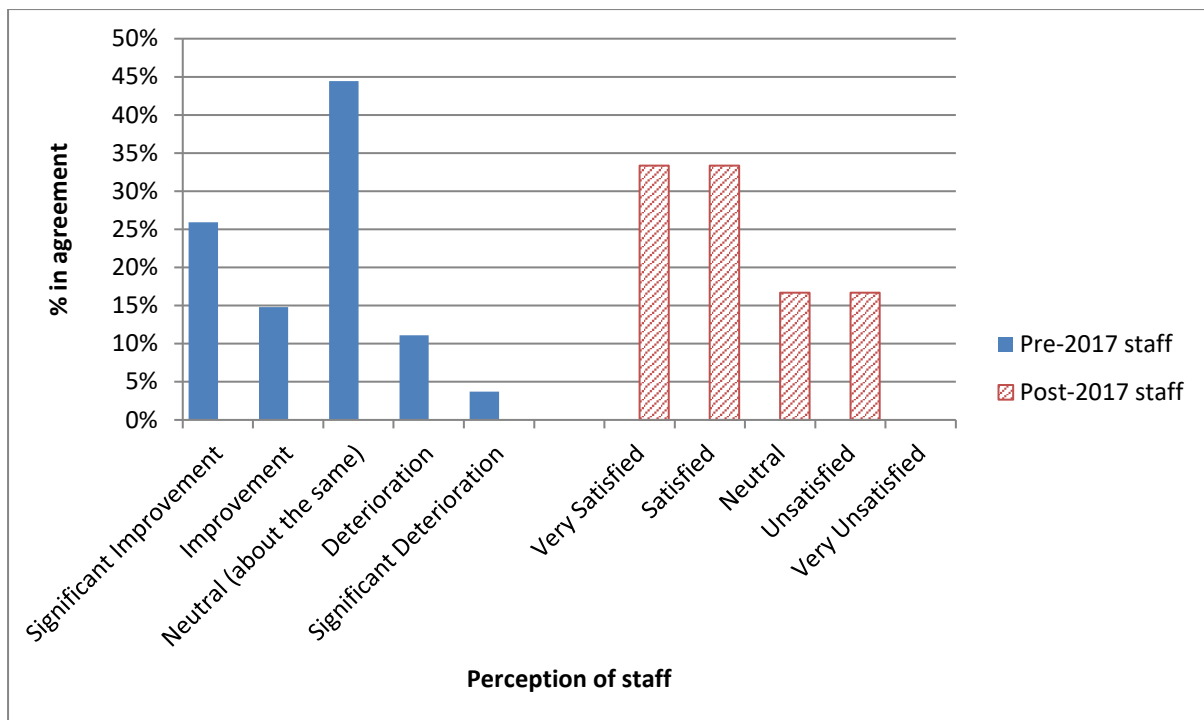
**Figure 7:** Knowing who to contact in the Library. Respondents who were at the institution pre-reconfiguration were asked how they felt this had changed (solid bars, n=27); those who have joined subsequently were asked for their level of satisfaction (hatched bars, n=6)

Vitally, no respondents felt that there had been deterioration in being 'Confident that someone in the Library can answer my questions' (figure 8). Combining opinions of pre- and post-2017 staff sees 59% of staff very satisfied or noticed an improvement. One of the arguments often cited for not moving from a subject librarianship model is the ability to be able to answer the range of questions from a School in an excellent manner. Yet despite the move to a task structure, there has instead been a large improvement in being able to respond to the needs of the Schools.
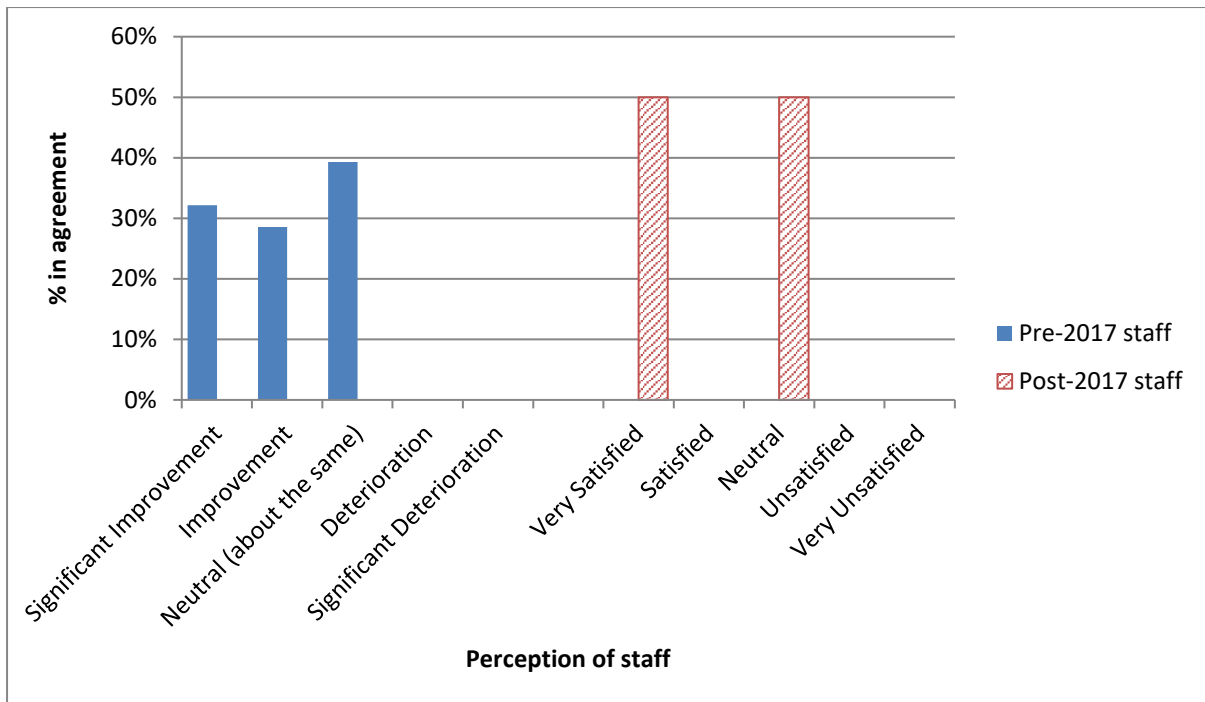
**Figure 8:** Knowing who to contact in the Library. Respondents who were at the institution pre-reconfiguration were asked how they felt this had changed (solid bars, n=28); those who have joined subsequently were asked for their level of satisfaction (hatched bars, n=6)

The second main area of improvement was in the 'Overall Perception of Library Services'. Figure 9 shows high percentages of respondents were satisfied/very satisfied (83%) or had seen improvement (75%). One member of staff said their perception had 'Deteriorated', but as they did not leave any comments it is difficult to know why they felt like this.
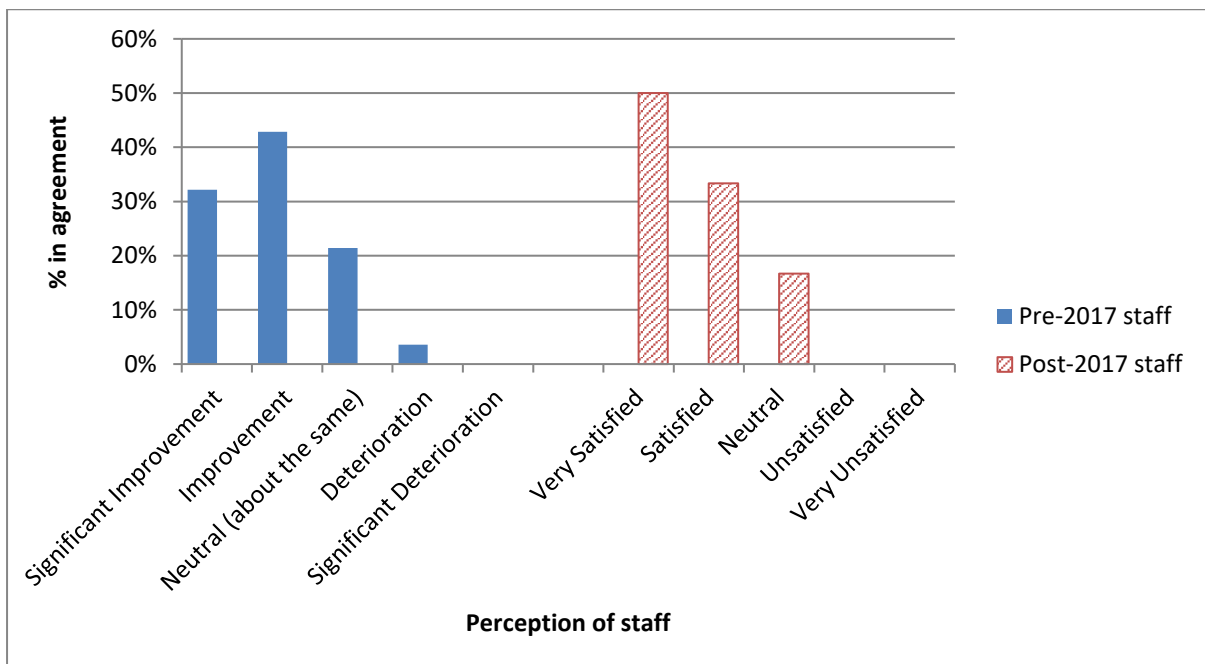


**Figure 9:** Overall perception of Library Services. Respondents who were at the institution pre-reconfiguration were asked how they felt this had changed (solid bars, n=28); those who have joined subsequently were asked for their level of satisfaction (hatched bars, n=6)

## Findings of the external survey

Figure 10 shows that less than one fifth of respondents stated that their institution has adopted a fully functional approach. However, it is interesting to note that just over half of institutions include some element of the functional approach. Two organisations specifically mentioned that they were currently reviewing their structure.
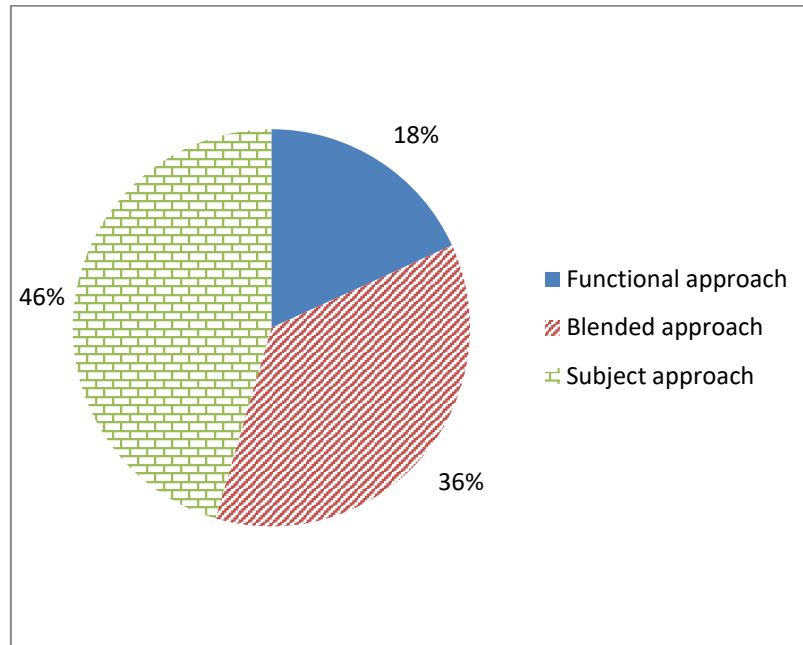


**Figure 10:** Functional, subject or blended approach. Respondents were asked which model of academic librarianship did their institution adopt (n=22)

For those institutions retaining the subject model, the key benefits articulated reflected those identified in Hoodless and Pinfield (2018): having a single point of contact, personal relationship building, and tailoring services to departments. As one response noted: "[we can be] embedded in a way that a functional model can never be…[this] results in direct action" (Pre-1992 response). This was also reflected in a recognition of the disadvantages of the functional model "one size does not fit all – different departments have different needs / cultures" ('Other' university). Conversely the predominant disadvantage of the subject model was recognised by 67% as inconsistency: "Over and under servicing occurs" ('Other' university). This echoed the key advantage of providing a consistent service by those identifying as using the functional model.

The survey on lis-relationship-management brought an interesting lens to the discussion, that of the perspective of the subject / engagement staff themselves. Of the functional model one response noted: "some people feel they are losing some of their skills" (Pre-1992 University) and highlighted the satisfaction of delivery in the subject model "Staff satisfaction - the liaison roles… actually sort the academic problems out e.g. add something to the VLE [Virtual Learning Environment] or buy a book in quickly, and as named contact(s) reinforce the importance of that role." (Pre-1992) However, it was noted that the broad range of skills required in Subject Librarianship can be a challenge "not every librarian has the full skills to pull this off." (Pre-1992). The debate elicits a strong emotional response and support for the subject model was strongly felt and often articulated: 3 responses specifically noted that they couldn't see any disadvantages of the model.

In terms of the benefits of being functional, four of the six functionally-organised libraries felt that the structure was more efficient "Our new Engagement Team has TIME to focus on that task." Asked about areas that were more effective in the functional model there were a range of responses, from the establishment of library committees to tackle ordering and collection development, involvement

in curriculum reviews and programme approvals, and increased/enhanced research and scholarly communications support.

## Discussion

Reflecting on the case studies as a whole, the key recurring theme evident from actions plans, new starters and Resource Lists, in particular, is the consistency that the functional model engenders. It is useful to consider if this is a result of the organisational structure *per se*, or might equally be a product of the size of the teams – from 11 Subject Advisors (in two separate teams and at 2 locations) to a single team of 4 co-located Engagement Advisors. A smaller team with a more focussed remit, by necessity also lends itself to taking more of a streamlined team approach, providing the foundations of consistency.  Furthermore, as noted earlier, the Engagement Team were all selected for the match of their skills set to the role, and as a result the more effective working of the team could be perceived as simply a result of having the right people in the right roles. Overall, it is evident that the organisational structure facilitates the consistency of service, and perhaps more importantly, that the reconfiguration provided an impetus and opportunity to change and re-focus the service ethos.

The case studies also evidence the benefits of separating advocacy and engagement from the delivery of service.  This is particularly noticeable in the area of academic skills where provision and demand was significantly weighted to certain Schools in the past, and tended to continue to increase the more a Subject Advisor provided and engaged. By splitting promotion and delivery it is easier to view service provision more holistically, ascertaining gaps and over-servicing and taking a strategic approach to providing a more consistent service across the board. The experience at Birmingham was largely supported by the external survey with majority of respondents citing under and over – servicing of departments as one of the major disadvantage of the functional model

A second clear theme is the broader range of engagement the functional model allows. Whilst the Engagement Team engages for the whole of Library Services with all Schools more consistently and strategically, an argument could be made that this is simply a change of emphasis from depth to breadth.  Certainly there is no longer an in-depth knowledge of collections and resources in the Learning Enhancement Team, which focusses on skills acquisition, or in the Engagement Team and this may account for academics showing a slight decline in knowing who to contact. However, the survey did not show any reduced confidence in expertise or query handling.  A dedicated Engagement Team have the time and resource to try different approaches to relationship building and are starting to look at how we can measure the impact of our engagement activities.  The internal survey shows that the majority of academics surveyed saw an improvement in the 'range of things that Library Services can offer to support the School'.  This suggests that the functional model has enabled service –wide engagement and the impact has been noted by our sample of academics.

In terms of collection development the success of this model depends heavily on the understanding within the Academy that they are now largely responsible for driving Collection Development to ensure resources align with learning needs. The case studies show that we are moving towards a partnership approach with resource list advocacy and developing cases for new resources.  However in subjects where academics are naturally less engaged, and with no Library subject specialist to fill the role, we may also need to look at more automated methods to ensure the required resources are purchased and student satisfaction with the collection is maintained.

 Ultimately whilst this may be a more effective model for our organisation, it is clear that with the same level of resource there is a tension between the depth and breadth of support and an opportunity cost of providing strategic engagement.

Finally whilst a number of the service developments outlined in the case studies were library-generated, there are a number of examples of initiatives, generated from academics and Schools themselves that have benefitted all users. These include student-led suggestions and involvement, such as the introduction of DVD players for loan and engaging postgraduate teaching assistants to add resource lists, to academic-ideas that improved services for all, notably the traffic-lights and desk-top images to advertise study spaces. The value of the Engagement Team has been evident in these examples too: not only in being at, or instigating, the meetings where these ideas have emerged but also ensuring that the ideas are channelled to the most appropriate team/group in the library to be considered and taken forward. Whilst many of the examples remain at transactional level, a shift to more strategic engagement and alignment with School Education Plans (SEPs) is apparent, especially through action plans and more formal engagement.

## Conclusions

Building on the literature around the potential benefits and disadvantages of a functional model, this article has aimed to fill a gap by highlighting specific service developments and enhancements to the student learning experience of a dedicated Engagement Team. Taken separately, these may have been possible in discrete areas in the previous subject model and indeed there are many examples of excellent individual service developments internally, and high-level engagement is evident in many other subject-based libraries.  However, having a dedicated Engagement Team at the University of Birmingham has allowed us to effect these service developments more consistently and service-wide, bringing a strategic long-term aspect to supporting the student learning experience.

The 'subject versus functional' debate elicits strong emotions and it is clear that different models fit different organisations, based on the culture, vision and aspirations of each. It would be interesting to consider whether the model works better for larger teams and/or institutions where consistency is perhaps more of a challenge. Whichever model is followed it is the social capital that is gained from engagement that is of most significance. As Schlak (2016, p. 418) states "…relationships do not simply exist to exist…they constitute a form of capital that librarians and administrators can tap into to further both local, internal goals as well as broader institutional level goals". There is increasing expectation from internal and external bodies to demonstrate the qualitative impact of these partnerships in the support of learning and teaching. Having a dedicated engagement team and supporting systems in place could enable the introduction of more innovative approaches to relationship building and help make the measurement of the impact of engagement activity more tangible.

Whilst the case studies and research has focussed predominantly on the learning and teaching agenda, a future and growing priority for the Engagement Team at the University of Birmingham is around the research agenda. It would be insightful to consider similar research and case studies to that presented in this article, but for the impact that a dedicated engagement team can make on the experience of researchers.

Using different lenses, this article has highlighted the many perspectives on the debate: the Library management impetus for consistency and strategic engagement, the differing academics requirements from the Library, and ultimately Library staff's own views.

Regardless of the library structure, the focus on library outreach, customer relationship management and 'professionalising' engagement and relationship management within libraries is welcomed.  More case studies and highlights of the impact of this work shared across the community would help to evidence, and further develop, the ways in which libraries directly impact positively on the student teaching and learning experience.

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