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Being useful: services for researchers at the University of Northampton

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In June 2007 the Library and IT departments at the University of Northampton converged into a single Department of Information Services (INS). During the restructuring a new role was created, that of Research Support Specialist (RSS). The University was then fairly new (having won research degree awarding powers in 2005) and keen to become “a leading regional, national and international centre for research and knowledge transfer” (from the University’s Strategic Vision, 2005). The creation of the new RSS role therefore provided an opportunity to develop services for researchers that both supported this vision and met individuals’ needs.

This paper describes how these services were developed and, in particular, how it was ensured that they were useful to and valued by the research community.

Research support partners

The RSS role provided a departmental focal point for research support. This benefitted both the research community and those that served them. Colleagues within and beyond the department had a named individual to contact and both groups could be quickly signposted to the most appropriate point of help. Sometimes this point of help fell within the converged department, for example subject specific resource questions were best answered by the Academic Librarians whilst login queries were the province of INS Customer Services. At other times, researchers were best served by staff in other university departments, for example the Graduate School or the Research and Strategic Bidding Office.

The development of good, collaborative working relationships with members of other departments has been essential to the success of research support services from INS.

The Northampton research community

Identifying members of a research community is not as straightforward as one might expect. Research students are relatively easy to count (but not necessarily to locate, hidden as they are in offices all over campus), but identifying individual research active members of staff can be challenging. Research administrators, managers and trainers are also important members of the research community, while those who employ and manage researchers, such as Deans, Senior Managers and the University Directorate, have a vested interest in research activity too.

Add to this the variation in needs brought about by individuals' priorities, accountabilities, career stages and project demands, and it is clear that one type of service will not fit all.

So what does the research community want?

In any given week the RSS will field queries from the research community on subjects as diverse as data encryption, choosing where to publish, accessing resources, data management planning, journal creation, web tools for research and so forth. Many of these arrive by email and are dealt with on an individual basis. However, there are a number of other routes to finding out what researchers need. Informally, face to face meetings with individual researchers or research groups often throw up interesting service requests; whereas formal committee meetings at both School and University level can be more effective in offering a broader overview.

By being a full member of the University's Research Committee and Research Degrees Committee the RSS has direct access to research leaders and managers, as well as a degree of credibility with other members of the research community.

Providing services in collaboration with others tasked with supporting researchers can also be a very effective way of establishing genuine needs. For example, working with the Graduate School on research student inductions has led to the development of targeted training courses and significantly raised the profile of the RSS among research students.

The development of networks such as these does not happen overnight, and moreover does not guarantee that the views of all researchers are taken into account. Because of this, it was decided that researcher views should be canvassed by means of an online survey.

The Researcher Needs Survey

This survey, undertaken in June 2008, examined researchers' use of and attitudes toward existing services, solicited opinions of potential new services, and gave respondents an opportunity to provide general feedback. The results are not pertinent here – by now they are dated and in any event would not apply to other institutions – but *the real value of the survey lay in the evidence base it provided for subsequent decision making and service changes.*

As a result of the survey recommendations were made for immediate action, further investigation and action subject to additional funding. The full survey report is available here:

<http://www.northampton.ac.uk/info/20394/postgraduate-research-students/552/researchers-in-the-library/14>.

Research support strategy

Having gained an understanding of researcher needs through the various means of communication described above, it was also appropriate to set the new services within the context of departmental and university strategy.

By aligning services with strategy they are more likely to find favour with those in authority, a necessity if any are to require extra resources or impose further costs.

At Northampton the five point INS Research Support Strategy and Plan drew on both the INS Departmental Plan and the University's Research and Knowledge Transfer Strategy. All three were guided by the University Strategic Plan. The five points covered the provision of resources, training, support for research processes, physical and virtual research spaces and practitioner research and innovative practice.

Supporting the research community – some examples

a) Information support and training

Core support from the library had always included information skills training, access to research collections (internally and externally), library web pages for researchers and one to one help. However, with research now falling into a single portfolio, it became possible to focus these onto known researcher needs. So in addition to basic training on Metalib (necessary for those new to the University), research students and their supervisors were taught how to find highly cited papers; use alerting services; make the most of the web for research purposes; prepare theses for electronic submission; and manage their research data. The RSS also took the service out to the researchers by offering a weekly 'Help Desk' service in the research centres on both campuses.

b) The institutional repository

The request for an institutional repository initially came from the Director of Research and Knowledge Transfer, inspired by the need for publications data for the University's RAE2008 submission. Driven by this and subsequent reporting requirements, the Northampton Electronic Collection of Theses and Research (NECTAR) has developed into a comprehensive record of University research outputs. The University's Annual Research Report is produced from NECTAR and publications lists generated from NECTAR appear on individual staff profiles and School research pages. There has even been a suggestion that the repository may be used as part of a set of staff performance measures. Thus NECTAR is offering value to researchers, research managers and employers.

c) Electronic theses

In December 2008 the Research Degrees Committee agreed that research degree theses should be submitted electronically with a view to them being made openly available in NECTAR and subsequently in the British Library's EThOS service. This provided several opportunities for INS staff to engage with the research community: for example, by providing advice and training on intellectual property rights for research students and their supervisors and in offering joint support with the Graduate School for thesis submission.

d) University publishing

INS staff have been responsible for the development and maintenance of two publishing facilities: the Northampton Open Journals collection (<http://journals.northampton.ac.uk/>) and the administration of University ISBNs. Whilst both of these have had a fairly slow start, the journals

collection has been noticed by our new Vice Chancellor who is now encouraging academic staff to engage more actively in open access journal publication. In a recent interview he stated:

"I'd like to see more staff coming forward with ideas for online journals. We have the library resources, we have the skills base amongst our library staff and we have the software that allows us to take that step. A heartfelt plea to colleagues to come forward with great ideas for journals and we'll help you to get them online" (Vice Chancellor, Professor Nick Petford <http://www.northampton.ac.uk/info/20137/research/806/open-research-at-the-university-of-northampton>).

e) Research data management

Researchers spend a large amount of time generating, collecting, processing, analysing and otherwise managing their datasets. Data are extremely important to them. Clearly, engaging with researchers' needs in this area is a potentially fruitful use of time.

In the summer of 2010 a Research Data Project was undertaken, utilising the Data Asset Framework methodology (reported here: <http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/2736/>). An online survey was followed by in depth interviews with individual researchers and the results informed a new research data policy for the University (available here: <https://www.northampton.ac.uk/info/20283/academic-research/1606/research-data-policy>). With research funders increasingly encouraging the sharing and re-use of data, the adoption of this policy ensures the University is holding its place in the sector (appealing to research leaders and managers) and enabling researchers to tick all the right boxes in their funding applications.

f) Support for the Research Excellence Framework (REF)

Like every other university, Northampton is keen to make a strong submission to the forthcoming REF. In addition to maintaining NECTAR as a tool for gathering publications data, INS staff have been supporting the REF by offering advice and guidance on bibliometrics and citation analysis, and by monitoring REF related activity elsewhere in the sector. The RSS is a member of the University's REF Working Group and is working closely with the REF Manager to ensure that NECTAR software is fit for purpose with respect to the REF.

Research informed practice

It is a key element of the INS Research Support Strategy that library staff should engage with practitioner research and use the results of their own and others' research to inform their practice. The RSS has responsibility for encouraging practitioner research and to this end facilitates a departmental Research and Innovation Group and convenes research training events such as this summer's Research Summer School. Support is also given to colleagues wishing to apply for research funding and the library has recently had a number of successes in this area.

Not only does this activity contribute to University research targets, but it also leads to a greater understanding of the research process and increased empathy with researchers.

In some cases it has led to successful collaborations between library and academic staff on research projects. Ultimately, the successful completion of a research project and subsequent publication of papers lends credibility to library staff in the eyes of the research community.

So what next?

The key to being useful to the research community lies not only in responding to their stated needs but also in anticipating needs that they might not yet realise they have.

In the pipeline at Northampton are plans to upgrade NECTAR software to meet REF requirements; to implement the University's Research Data Policy through a programme of advocacy and training; to overhaul the library's research support web pages; to develop two further open journals; and to explore the potential of a current research information system (CRIS) for the University.

The University is currently undergoing another restructuring of its professional services. As of this month (November 2011) the library and IT services are no longer converged. Staff numbers are being cut. It is indicative however, of the perceived value of the services provided to the research community that the library's research support team is to double in size. In the present economic climate being useful means keeping our jobs.