

Title

Strategic engagement: new models of relationship management for academic librarians

Authors

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Abstract

How do we best bridge the gap between the Library and the diverse academic communities it serves? Librarians need new strategies for engagement. Traditional models of liaison, aligning solutions to disciplines, are yielding to functional specialisms, including a focus on building partnerships. This paper offers a snapshot of realignment across the Russell Group from subject support to relationship management. It then follows the journey of a newly-formed Faculty and School Engagement Team. Techniques are explored for building relationship capital, anchored to a model Strategic Engagement Cycle. Theory is contrasted with the challenges of securing real buy-in to new ways of working amid diverging agendas and assumptions, notably within the Library itself. Consideration is given to the retention of aspects of subject librarian roles. Investment in a relationship management function demands staunch and ongoing commitment to fulfil its promise, not only from its performers but from across the library community.

Keywords

Strategic engagement; communication; academic librarians; relationship management.

1. Introduction

Academic librarians operate in changing times: increasingly strong mandates for open access to scholarly publications and data; periodical inflation impacting on the Library's ability to provide new subscriptions; raised tuition fees and higher student expectations; and a proliferation of new technologies. We are responding to these changes by working in new ways with our university communities. The response outlined in this paper explores the transformation journey of a Faculty and School Engagement Team, a new model for strategic engagement and communication practices throughout the sector.

Our new team was created to enable a transformation of our ways of working with the academic community, moving from a service provider model to become a trusted partner. Where we had existing relationships with academic stakeholders, these needed to be adapted and redefined at a different, strategic level, with closer alignment to teaching and learning strategy and research priorities. This needed to be complemented by the development of additional strategic partnerships. To achieve this, we reviewed stakeholder interactions and activities in a series of workshops. We identified the changes in our roles as a result of the departmental transformation, developed a thorough understanding of relationship management techniques and devised new ways of working. With other sections of our organisation also undergoing change, our remit included bringing strategic insights back to colleagues in the Library, and providing relevant information and intelligence to help align Library collections and services to the needs articulated by stakeholders, or implicit in their strategic plans.

2. Literature Review

The literature on librarianship is clear on the need for librarian roles to change and adapt to the rapidly evolving information environment (Auckland, 2012; Cox & Corral, 2013;

IFLA, 2013); our roles are just one approach to responding. Articles addressing this challenge typically start with subject librarian, or liaison librarian, roles (Gibson & Wright Coniglio, 2010; Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013; Pinfield, 2001). These roles – librarians with links to one or more academic departments and associated subject areas – are common within UK university libraries, and have communication with academic communities at their heart (Brewerton, 2011; Hardy & Corrall, 2007).

Different approaches have been suggested to adapt subject librarian roles to change. One is to respond by developing new types of support for researchers and academics (Auckland, 2012; Bewick & Corrall, 2010; Pinfield, 2001; Webb, Gannon-Leary, & Bent, 2007). Another is to reduce the emphasis on subjects: replacing subject librarians with specialist teams (Franklin, 2012) or supplementing them with specialist roles (Cox & Corrall, 2013; Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013; Cox & Pinfield, 2014). These options continue a debate in UK libraries about the relative benefits of subject versus functional 'specialisms' (Martin, 1996; Woodhead & Martin, 1982).

Some UK libraries have taken specialisation further, establishing dedicated roles for communication with academics ('engagement' or 'relationship management'), essentially treating communication as a function (Auckland, 2012; Bains, 2013; Blake, 2015). This trend has been coupled with increasing interest in communicating with academic communities across all roles (Auckland, 2012; Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013; Malenfant, 2010), leading to the development of a new conference focused on relationship management in Higher Education libraries in the UK (Relationship Management Group, 2015). When 98% of librarians desire better communication with academic staff (Library Journal Research & Gale Cengage Learning, 2015), it is not surprising that relationships are high on the agenda.

What does successful communication look like? It seems to work best when librarians and academics act as partners, bringing equal expertise to the table. Auckland (2012)

argues that future librarians will need partnership building skills. Studies of existing relationships imply that partnership is both a powerful input and output of librarians' relationships with academics; Hardy & Corral (2007) found that a partnership (or 'consulting') approach leads to the most effective communication; Webb et al (2007) felt that effective professional support leads to academics perceiving librarians as "counsel, colleague and critical friend" (p144). Vassilakaki & Moniarou-Papaconstantinou (2015), in a systematic review of emerging librarian roles, identify multiple roles ('embedded librarian', 'information consultant') which develop such partnership approaches.

Roles where librarians focus on effectively ascertaining their communities' needs, rather than delivering specific services, allow space to build these partnerships. We can frame this in terms of the generation of 'intellectual capital', measuring strategic success by the soft skills and relationships that staff engender (Corral, 2014, 2015), and the development of flexible and agile responses to change, for which time is limited in subject librarian roles (Auckland, 2012; Cox & Corral, 2013; Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013; Rodwell & Fairbairn, 2008).

What kind of communication skills do librarians need to fulfil such a role? Jaguszewski and Williams (2013) start with a "capacity to cultivate trusted relationships with faculty and others" (p14). In her study of librarians actively pursuing a flexible approach, Malenfant (2010) identifies "a new skill set – advocacy and persuasion" (p73). These soft skills are often labelled 'emotional intelligence' (Goleman, 1998). Librarians also need to look below the surface of the communications they receive, using research skills to delve into the user experience (Priestner & Borg, in press).

Approaches identified from other professions can be useful in structuring interactions. Librarians have been inspired by consultants' approaches to building partnerships and sharing expertise (Donham & Green, 2004; Hardy & Corral, 2007; Murphy, 2011). Delving into the original consultancy literature can teach us more, especially about using

process consultation as a framework for building such relationships (Schein, 1987, 1999). Viewing librarians as consultants emphasises the value of both communication and expertise. Engagement librarians also need expertise in the information environments their communities navigate.

One example of a system in which we have already built expertise is scholarly communications. Librarians are active strategic change agents in this area, enhancing relationships and communication, as well as understanding (Johnson, 2014; Malenfant, 2010; Silver, 2014; Vandegrift & Colvin, 2012; Wright, 2013). As UK open access policy developments become increasingly high profile (HEFCE, 2015), this seems a particularly fruitful area of scholarly communication where we should librarians should engage. Malenfant (2010, p73) suggests that scholarly communications is just one area for this kind of 'systems thinking': "librarians must think of the many systems of which they are part – higher education, teaching and learning, research, scholarly communication, the academy, the university, the local community, and so on". Understanding these will ensure that libraries provide a transformed, user-focused experience (Brewer, Hook, Simmons-Welburn, & Williams, 2004).

This literature illustrates how new and changing roles in academic libraries are responding to change by re-focusing on communication, and highlights some of the skills and expertise which we might need to succeed. We will now move to consider the experience of our dedicated engagement librarian team, set up to do exactly this.

3. The Transformation Journey

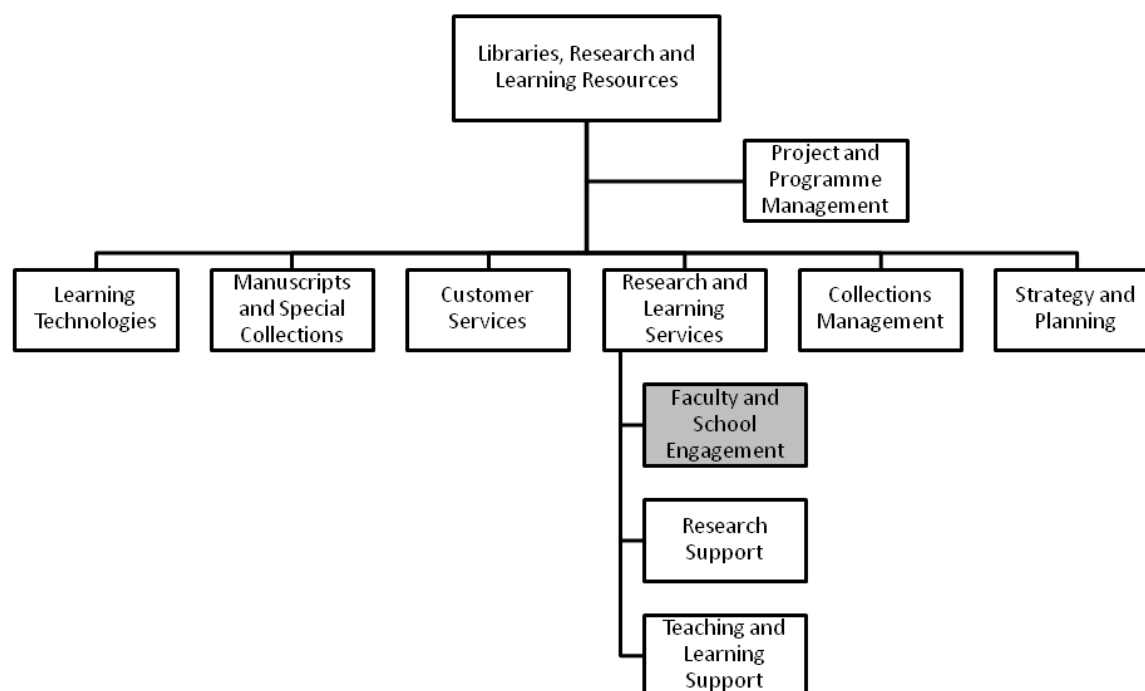
3.1 The Library

The University of Nottingham is a large, global institution, including campuses in China and Malaysia. In 2007, our UK Library moved away from subject librarians as a principal

way to organise liaison staff by creating four Faculty Teams. This paralleled a structural reduction by the University in the number of faculties to five. The change of terminology was significant, as librarians in theory no longer aligned with individual disciplines but with faculty groupings. In practice, however, some processes of subject-aligned liaison continued.

In August 2014, a further process of reorganisation affiliated staff with functional specialisms. This shift prompted disbanding of the Faculty Teams, with staff reallocated to other functions. One product was our new Faculty and School Engagement Team, whose primary function is strategic engagement and relationship management. Our team is envisaged as a key liaison route between the Faculties and Schools and the Library, forging strategic partnerships with stakeholders like Heads of Schools and Directors of Research and Teaching & Learning, and engaging with stakeholder groups such as School and Faculty Boards and Committees. Our aim is to develop and communicate a shared understanding of strategy and direction, and to align our departmental activities more closely with the University's learning and research priorities. The team comprises four individuals, two of whom each led a former Faculty Team. We sit within the Research and Learning Services section, alongside separate groups for Research Support and Teaching and Learning Support. Each role aligns with one or two faculties (one role covering both Science and Engineering). A segment of the structure focusing on the section is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Research and Learning Services section in context



3.2 The Workshops

Our formation was underpinned by four consultant-facilitated workshops. These were structured activities without an overriding theoretical framework, but with a mixture of activities designed to engage us in reflection-in-action (Schon, 1983). The workshops broadly covered these areas:

Workshop 1: Reflection on past and future roles

Workshop 2: Introduction to a cycle for strategic engagement

Workshop 3: Partnering and engagement skills

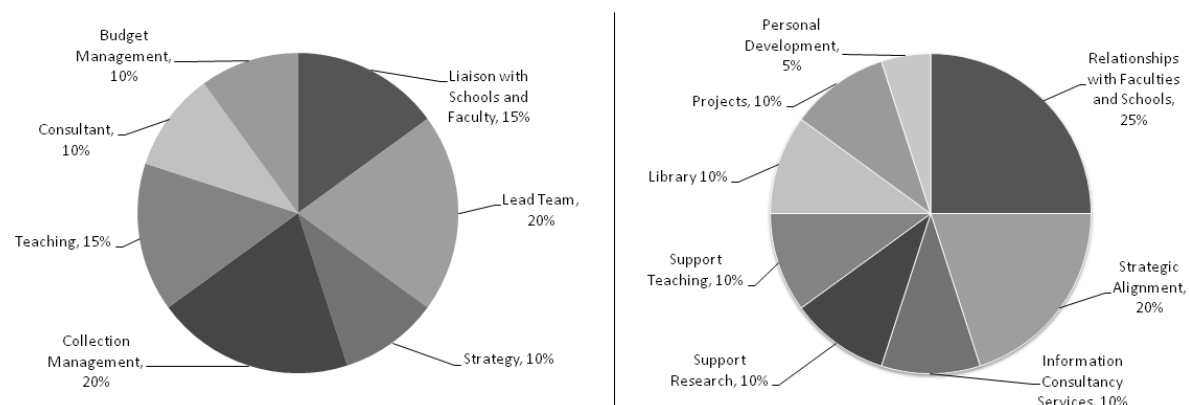
Workshop 4: Continuing the strategic engagement cycle development

In this article we will refer to material we studied or produced in these workshops: for example, comparisons of our old and new roles and the strategic engagement cycle. However, our focus will be more strongly on our experience of change as reflective practitioners. This is inevitably a subjective narrative, but we nonetheless believe that fellow practitioners will benefit from insight into our experiences.

3.3 Change in Roles

The first activity we undertook was to analyse differences between our old and new roles, with reference to job descriptions.

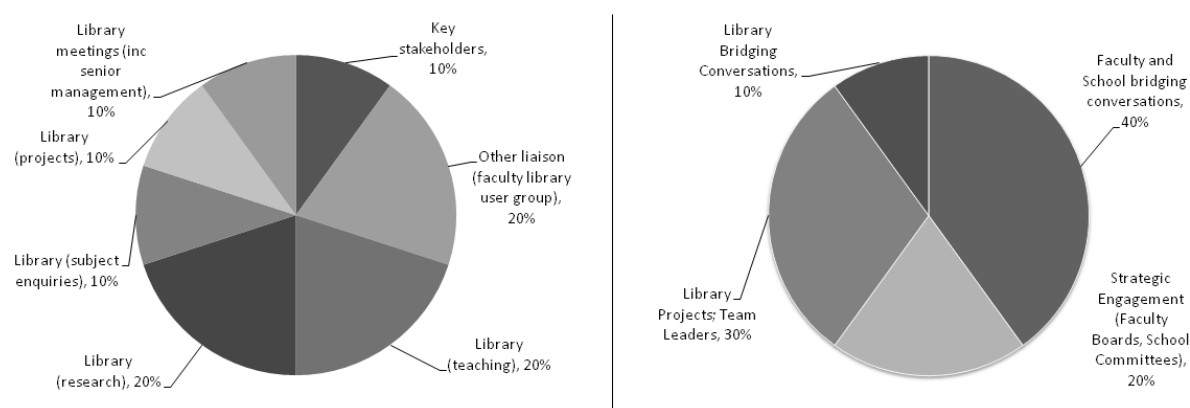
Figure 2: Visual representation of job descriptions. Faculty Team Leader (left, 2007-2014); Faculty and School Engagement Team (right, 2014-)



The Faculty Team Leader roles were already broader than traditional subject librarian roles. The new roles drop former key responsibilities: teaching, staff management, collection management and budget accountability. In their place sits relationship management across academic communities, including formal membership of Faculty Boards. We developed strategies for adapting to these changes, which overall comprised a transition away from operational delivery of services. Those of us who were formerly Faculty Team Leaders did undergo a personal process of loss.

Our workshop then explored new ways to scaffold and maintain positive relationships with identified individuals and groups. A meaningful personal activity was reflecting on how our day-to-day interactions seemed likely to change.

Figure 3: Visual representation of perceptions of relationships. Faculty Team Leader (left, 2007-2014); Faculty and School Engagement Team (right, 2014-)



The team has a key role in relationship management. Figure 3 visualises the perception of relationships from our perspective. It reflects our increased emphasis on interactions with senior stakeholders and groups, and the requirement for what we term 'bridging conversations', each of us 'bridging' the Library and the academic community. The image of a bridge has helped us to re-examine interactions with internal and institutional partners, equipped with potentially diverging agendas or assumptions. We have learned to use techniques of active listening to gain shared understanding, and to clarify underlying drivers and blockers.

Leading a team was part of the old role, and leadership has continued to be part of the emerging role. As Senior Librarians, members of the Faculty and School Engagement Team are members of the Library Leadership Group. This group is comprised of the department's Senior Management Team, and senior staff reporting into them. It influences future direction across the department by pooling fresh and challenging ideas, driving and embedding effective cultural change and knowledge transfer. As well as

managing projects and programmes of learning and development that are the foundation for new services, the interactions of our engagement team with faculties and schools provide insights into their strategies and assure our directions are aligned.

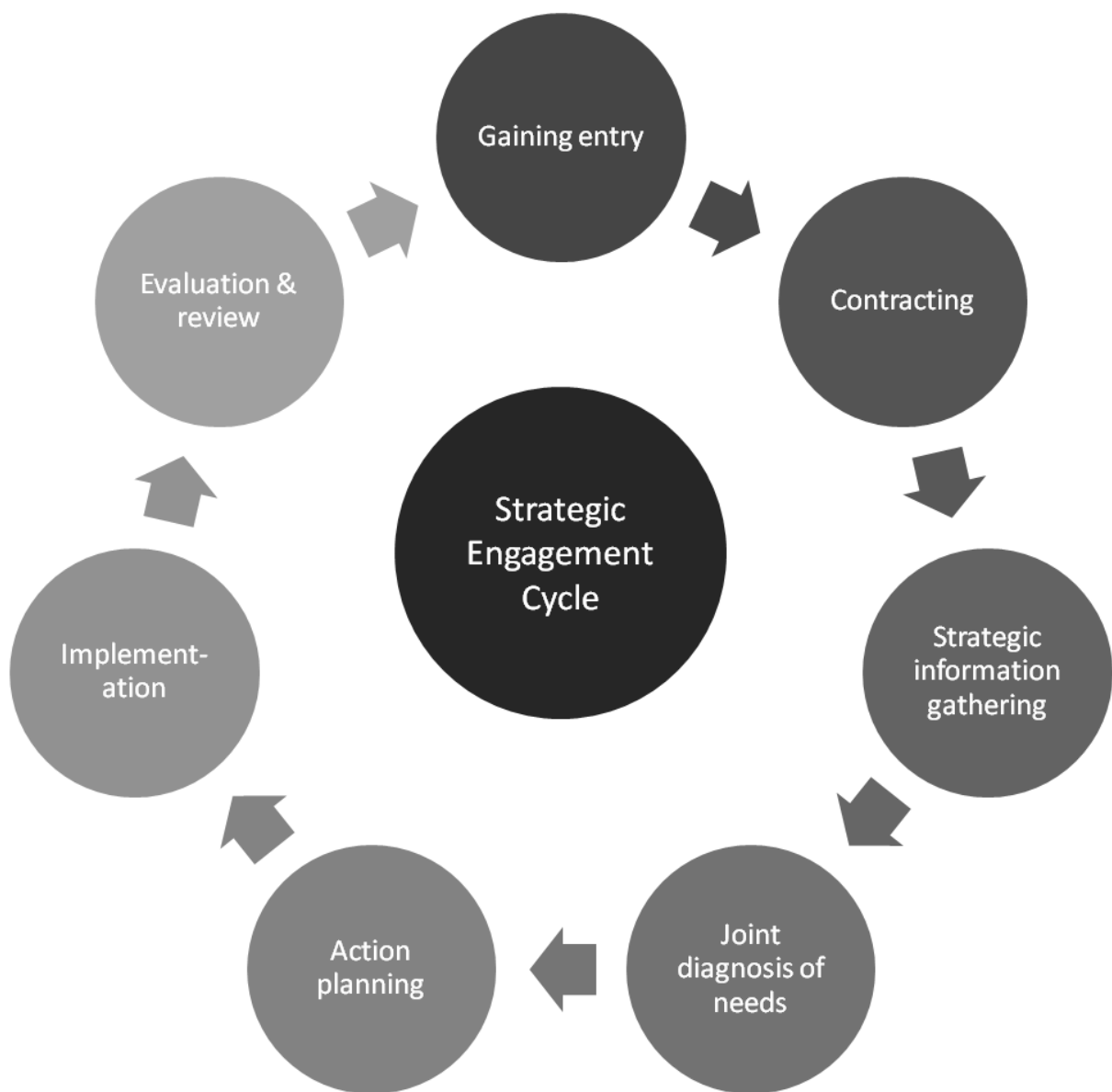
Moreover, relationship building is now targeted at a strategic level. Rather than managing day-to-day liaison about collections and services, our focus is on relationships with key stakeholders in Schools and Faculties, such as Heads of School, School Managers, and academic Directors. The University appointed Faculty Pro-Vice-Chancellors in summer 2015 to develop faculty level strategies, plans and outcomes, providing new opportunities for senior partnership working.

In the broader University, we have developed strategic relationships with senior professional services colleagues. For example, the Senior Librarian (Faculty of Arts) collaborates with four non-academic colleagues on the Faculty Research Board, representing Research and Graduate Services, Information Services, Business Engagement and Innovation Services and the Centre for Advanced Studies. Being a *member* of a Board rather than just in-attendance establishes a different dynamic: access to full sets of confidential papers; presence at whole meetings, contributions to agenda items that are not library-specific; and informal 'corridor conversations'. Strategic engagement triangles are one new approach that we have used to strengthen relationships over time: bringing three people together to exchange information and provide collegiate support.

3.4 Strategic Engagement Cycle

Emerging from Workshops 2 and 4, we have implemented a Strategic Engagement Cycle that builds on consulting processes and offers a model for structuring rounds of engagement with our academic communities. The central idea is that our departmental outputs must be based on the needs of the communities we support.

Figure 4: Strategic Engagement Cycle



This cycle derives from models that are widespread across the consulting industry. The process starts with **gaining entry** with institutional stakeholders, and asking strategic questions (Table 1).

Table 1: Examples of our strategic questions

Strategic Driver	Question	Teaching Focused	Research Focused
Technology	How do you think new technologies will change your research over the next 5 years?		X
Social	How is the professional environment (accreditation, employers) affecting your planning?	X	
Economic	What would you see as the key changes in income and spending affecting your School?	X	X
Political	What are your key challenges in responding to HEFCE / RCUK policy around open access?		X

Sometimes formal institutional processes make communication easy: for example, we have developed routes for engaging with the University Strategic Framework planning cycle, and we sit on Faculty Boards. At other times, we have had to draw on informal networking skills. Unlike in consultancy, our relationships are often long-term. This adds complexity as people in key roles and the roles themselves change: for example, the creation of the new Faculty Pro-Vice-Chancellors. This has presented new opportunities for strategic engagement.

Contracting is not a formal process, but rather an informal one of developing a shared understanding, or psychological contract (Rousseau, 1989), with stakeholders. This covers what our department can deliver and how we will engage. Formal relationships may affect the nature of the 'contract' we build: for example, the Boards on which we sit may have terms of reference with expectations of confidentiality. We have learned the importance of contracting with our own departmental stakeholders as well as external parties. In both cases, a successful contract is one which emphasises partnership between the Library and our academic communities.

Strategic information gathering is an active process of seeking and sharing information across those communities: we are the 'eyes and ears' of the department. It offers a valuable mechanism for identifying future potential activities. In our experience, information is most useful and powerful when we represent perspectives from across the

University: speaking with one voice rather than four. We also have a role in co-ordinating information gathering across the department, particularly for projects, to maximise chances of success, and avoid competition for attention.

When a particular issue or need gains traction, we move on to **joint diagnosis of needs**. This is not about proposing solutions, but reaching a shared understanding of a need across the academic community and the Library. Diagnosis may start informally but will move to more formal agreements, and can benefit from systems thinking, systematic research and analysis of the issues. Having moved from more solution-focused professional roles, we have had to learn quickly to control the urge to suggest possible solutions, and put in the ground work to ensure the department undertakes the right activities, in the right way, for joint benefits.

Action planning is well established in our department, but the stages that precede it in the cycle have changed the context in which it sits. Once the problem has been jointly diagnosed, possible solutions are explored, shared and prepared for implementation. Once again partnership, which we can facilitate, fosters success.

Implementation of change is the reason why our team and this process were created. However, although we might be involved in implementing activities – as part of a project team, or advocating change within faculties – this is usually a stage where our team takes a back seat. Nonetheless, here, as elsewhere in the cycle, our credibility with Faculties and Schools depends upon their perception that we are in the loop with the rest of the department.

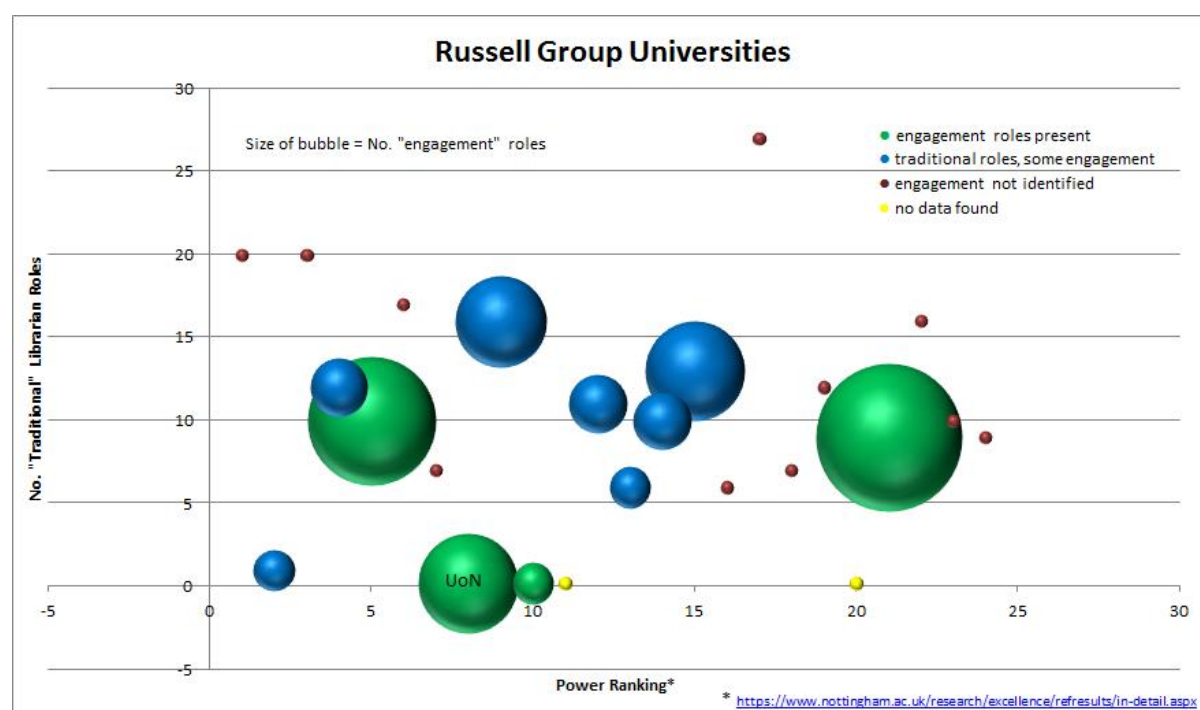
Evaluation and review completes the cycle. In most consulting processes, the consultant would withdraw from the organisation. We, however continue to work with stakeholders in the Library and the Faculties. Evaluation is crucial to improvement and to

continuing our dialogue, so that we know that objectives have been met, lessons learnt, and can work out what comes next.

3.5 Sector Mapping

Around a year after restructuring (October 2015), we investigated the extent to which other research-intensive universities have shifted away from aligning library staff with disciplines, and towards the communication and engagement functions. We visited Library websites of each UK Russell Group institution to answer two questions: viewed through the lens of a student seeking help, how many roles are presented as offering 'subject support' along traditional lines; and, how many library roles carry the term 'engagement' in their job or section title? Figure 5 represents the outcome.

Figure 5: Distribution of subject support and engagement roles across the Russell Group



Each institution is represented by a bubble, the size of which signifies the number of roles explicitly labelled with the term 'engagement'. The x-axis serves to distribute these for ease of interpretation only, by reference to the institution's overall REF2014 Research Power ranking (University of Nottingham, 2014). Distribution along the y-axis denotes the number of roles mapped to particular disciplines. The University of Nottingham is the only named institution.

Various caveats should be borne in mind in association with this exercise. Data was much easier to assemble in relation to the subset of Russell Group libraries that publish an organisational chart and/or a list of library staff roles on their website. In other instances, we had to make some informed inferences about roles. Some roles organisationally aligned with the Library and explicitly labelled 'engagement' actually seem detached from traditional library functions (for example, engagement associated with an institutional museum). These roles were nonetheless included. Finally, the unusually dispersed structure of library provision at Oxford and Cambridge led us to rely on estimates for numbers of subject support staff.

Nevertheless, the outcome is revealing. It discloses a mixed picture of practice across the Russell Group. There seems to be a large divergence (from 0 to 27) in the number of subject-aligned roles promoted to students who visit their library's website in search of support for their discipline. At the same time, roughly half of the libraries in scope now list roles associated with the term 'engagement' on their website. In the case of seven out of twenty-four, what appeared to us to be traditional 'subject support' roles were also found to be tagged as 'engagement'. In this case, both factors are incorporated in Figure 5.

In order to deliver a fuller picture of the how engagement now figures in academic library roles, it would be fruitful to deepen and widen this analysis. One avenue would be to survey a cohort of university libraries to elicit more nuanced data around the

emergence of engagement as a defining characteristic of jobs, and the associated trajectory of subject alignment. Where subject alignment is in retreat, the consequences of loss of deep subject knowledge could be assessed: how are complex enquiries managed, for example, or requests from postgraduate students for intensive one-to-one support with a research project? An alternative approach might be the extent to which roles in other professional service departments mirror the emergence of relationship management functions in libraries. It might also be instructive to expand the spotlight beyond the Russell Group to include more teaching-oriented institutions.

4. Strategic Engagement in Context

4.1 Institutional Communication

We have presented evidence of our own team's journey in establishing a dedicated strategic engagement team, and related it to developments in the sector. We will now aim to relate the theory to how our activities worked on the ground.

The Strategic Engagement Cycle was beneficial in leading us to think more closely about how to gain entry with stakeholders. In Workshop 3, we discussed strategic conversations with senior staff – showing the team's strategic focus by the questions that we asked, and the topics we raised. One early opportunity to do this was presented by a new iteration of the University Strategic Framework planning cycle. We approached Heads of School within each Faculty, and set up conversations in which we identified the topics they intended to focus on in their strategic plan, and flagged up our department's own intentions to help align planning. This communication was valuable in building rapport, and establishing Schools' strategic priorities: both essential for building a partnership.

We are the department's representatives on both Faculty Research and Faculty Teaching Boards, which act as a more formal method of communication with the Faculties. The process of gaining entry to Boards has been faster in some instances than others: partly as equivalent Boards have different policies and approaches. We have found membership of the Boards very useful in gathering strategic information, and identifying opportunities for bridging conversations. Scholarly communication has been a particular topic of discussion at Faculty Research Boards, and we have found value in using our expertise to open doors to and within Boards. Engagement with these stakeholders has given us opportunities to display our expertise, and focus on future systemic change, for example framing conversations about open access in terms of the future of scholarly communications, rather than simply enforcing sector regulations.

However, there is a need for sensitivity in balancing our role as committee members with our role as strategic information gatherers: for example, when confidential topics are discussed, to ensure that we continue to be seen as partners. Feedback from Board chairs has also confirmed the importance of being active members – contributing to discussions and presenting reports – in maintaining our credibility, which is in turn dependent on successful departmental information flows.

Informal conversations add a further dimension to our communication. Corridor conversations with staff from faculties and schools continue to be as important in keeping up to date as more formal boards and meetings. Even formal meetings are topped and tailed by informal conversations which allow for rapid contracting, e.g. 'Can you speak to this topic?' or 'Can I get in touch about an article?'. The value of informal contact holds throughout the engagement cycle: although structured evaluation and feedback is critical to understanding the success of initiatives, it is often the informal comment made by a member of staff which truly demonstrates the value of a service or activity. We have identified a balance to be achieved between gathering and acting upon formal and systematic feedback, and benefitting from the insights that can be gained

from comments made off-the-record or off-the-cuff. It is often only when the two types of information are considered together that it is possible to gain a full picture. Capturing these conversations and sharing them in an appropriate way is a skill we are learning.

4.2 Communication Within Our Department

The team's early activity and attention was consciously directed outwards from our own department. We planned for and strived towards building fruitful strategic relationships with stakeholders in other parts of the University. It is now clear that we need to contract within our own department too. Other new roles within the department shared the label 'engagement', such as 'Senior Archivist (Academic and Public Engagement)' within Manuscripts and Special Collections. Some internal ambiguity around the team's purpose may also have amplified the natural inclination of managers of functional teams in our department to seek to engage on their own behalf with parts of the academic community. This occasionally led to tension. One colleague likened our experiences to the child's game of buzz-wire: a careful balancing act around a circuit, with occasional and unexpected snags at some points of contact. To address this, we invited each member of the Senior Management Team to meet with us informally for lunch, to build rapport and foster dialogue around our cross-sectional remit. We also presented the engagement cycle model to their regular team meeting, and to individual middle manager colleagues, seeking to build mutual understanding and buy-in around this challenging new way of working.

Information sharing within and across our own department has emerged as a touchstone issue. To the extent that engagement roles bridge the Library on one side and academic communities on the other, there needs to be traffic both ways. On occasion, where the process has not worked well, this has left us feeling exposed. Where gaps in communication become apparent, this risks damaging the credibility of engagement

roles in the eyes of academic colleagues – and, by extension, the credibility of the Library as a whole. It is clearly fundamental to an engagement team to clarify what managers of other Library teams need in order for them to succeed, and then to develop activity across the academic community to facilitate this. In parallel to interactions with Faculties and Schools, we have invested progressively more time in seeking out and listening to these internal needs. Furthermore, we have sought to create space for a mutual dialogue: conscious that we also depend on our colleagues' understanding of our needs.

The aim of our new roles was to better link the University and the Library via the engagement cycle. We have identified some challenges, but the benefit of such links are also evident. Our conversations with academics have allowed us to spot where services could be developed or improved. Solutions are often only visible, however, when services are discussed internally. For example, we uncovered what to Library colleagues felt like a small inconvenience – visiting a site library to photocopy a print article – was perceived by academics to be much greater. It felt like a solution might require development of a whole new service but when we engaged with our colleagues internally we were able to identify a parallel service that could be adapted to improve the experience for academics. Inspired by the cycle, we made joint diagnosis of need, action planning and implementation of change low-risk by developing this service as a pilot. This also allowed us to build in opportunities to evaluate and review, and revisit joint diagnosis of needs as necessary. In these early stages, these quick wins have demonstrated a tangible benefit of our new approach.

4.3 Radical or Traditional?

Despite refocusing, reconfiguration and restructuring over many years, the 'subject' word, and its traditional associations and connotations, has been retained. Our new job descriptions retain a preference for a degree in a relevant subject and experience of delivering library services within the subject field of the Faculty (or Faculties). A section

entitled 'Subject Information Consultancy Services' focuses on answering complex enquiries by acquiring and maintaining expertise in advanced information resources. If the 'subject' word was removed, and the librarian role was freed from the traditional associations, connotations and expectations, what would our service look like? How would it fit alongside other professional services, such as research consultancy services offered around information technology?

In response to requests from some parts of the academic community, we have retained further aspects of traditional subject librarian roles at Nottingham. One example is that elements of medical librarianship are required to support academics, clinicians and students active in evidence-based research. The Senior Librarian aligned to the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences continues to provide expertise in systematic literature review techniques. A more prominent example of sustained subject specialism is Law. Prior to reorganisation in 2014, the School of Law argued strongly to retain a distinct Law Librarian role. They highlighted the statement of minimum standards for UK academic law library services, 'A Library for the Modern Law School'. This mandates various precepts for quality provision, including employment of "one person (the Law Librarian) who has formal responsibility for the management of the Law Library" (Libraries Sub-Committee of the Society of Legal Scholars, 2009, p8). As such, it is an important point of reference in any process of reviewing subject liaison roles where Law exists as a discipline. It explicitly accommodates restructuring along functional lines:

Where a library administration is organised on a functional rather than a subject basis, this standard will be met where one person is given responsibility for the co-ordination of functions as they affect the Law Library (Libraries Sub-Committee of the Society of Legal Scholars, 2009, p8.)

Negotiation between the Head of School and Library senior management prompted an extra section to be added to the job description of the Senior Librarian (Social Sciences).

This clarified his continuing responsibility for: purchasing books to support research; taking an overview of the development of the law collection as a whole; and design and delivery of information skills to law students. This has precipitated sensitive negotiation with the managers of other Library teams, whose functions the Law Librarian role cuts across in a way not now matched by any other discipline.

However, the broad focus of our new roles has been on strategic engagement with Faculties and Schools. Within the Library this has included shaping the strategic direction of the service by driving cultural change and knowledge transfer. Within the context of the wider University it has involved a focus on building and maintaining strategic relationships with key stakeholders, including Faculty Pro-Vice-Chancellors, Heads of School, and academic Directors. This is a fundamental change to our activity, and it has far reaching implications for the profession.

5. Conclusion

The Strategic Engagement Cycle provides a new model for librarian communication in higher education. It has transformed our work, moving our team beyond traditional liaison activity to strategic conversations, purposeful interactions and effective relationship building. The comparison that we have carried out indicates that the University of Nottingham has moved further away from the traditional subject librarian role than most Russell Group institutions. Our journey has involved bridging theory and practice, and we have cultivated new ways of working that achieve reorientation throughout the Library. In a complex and unsettled university environment, thriving libraries will embrace strategic and supple new modes of communication.

Acknowledgements

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