

# Sussex Research

## What subject librarians did next

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## Academic

# What subject librarians did next

The University of Sussex has been working for some years now with responsibilities divided by function, rather than subject, having replaced its team of subject librarians with two teams, focusing on teaching and research. **Joanna Ball** spells out the benefit to researchers.



RESEARCH IN THE UK is changing rapidly, with the growth of collaborative and interdisciplinary research teams and a huge increase in the volume of digital research outputs. Researchers are communicating with each other in different ways and there is growing pressure on researchers to demonstrate the impact of their research to the wider community.

Several reports have addressed the impact of these issues on the support provided by libraries. *Researchers' Use of Academic Libraries and Their Services*<sup>1</sup> showed that a significant number of researchers felt that their library was too focused on the teaching and learning needs of their university and not enough on research. Librarians also thought that teaching needs were more important than research needs in driving library policy. Library resources and staffing budgets are already being stretched to their limits. How can academic liaison professionals adapt to meet the research needs of their institutions?

## Research support at Sussex

In 2005, the University of Sussex Library replaced its team of subject librarians with two separate, smaller teams focusing on teaching and research, with the aim of mirroring the strategic direction of the university and its re-invigorated emphasis on research. The subject approach was not seen by senior staff as the most effective use of a very limited staff resource. At the same time, heads of each of the academic departments were asked to appoint a library representative, an academic member of staff who would act as their main liaison with the library.

At the time, this move to a division of responsibilities by function rather than subject went against the trend, although other universities have since appointed members of staff or teams solely focused on meeting the needs of researchers. It was seen by many as a controversial step, coinciding with reviews of the subject specialist role in the libraries at Bangor and the School of Oriental & African Studies.

The Research Liaison Team at Sussex consists of one faculty and two clerical support posts. We act as the main point of contact for all postgraduate and post-doctoral researchers, ensuring that they are supported with the necessary resources and skills to conduct their research. Our work covers three main areas: training and support for researchers; engaging with academics and other units across the university; and collection development. Our sister team, Learning & Teaching Support, is responsible for ensuring that students on taught courses have access to the materials and skills they need, through information literacy sessions, provision of reading list material and management of the library's enquiry service.

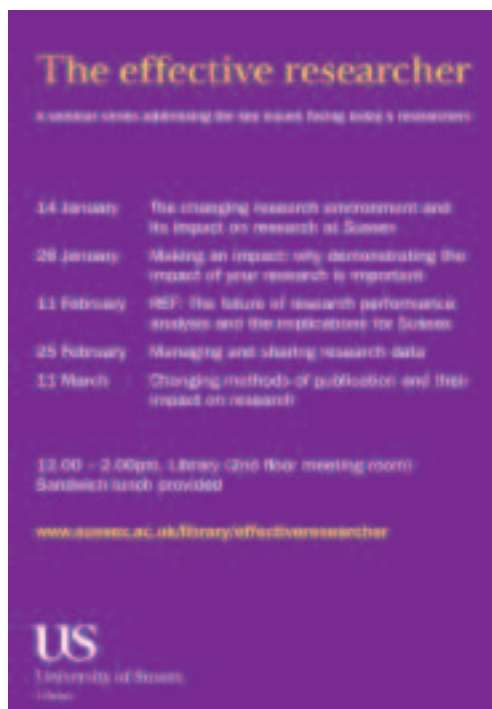
## Supporting the information skills of researchers

Researchers have very different training needs from those of taught-course students and we are able to design training specifically for them, rather than merely adapting undergraduate courses. Our main approach to information skills training takes the form of one-to-one advice sessions, tailor-made for an individual researcher, and covering issues such as the most appropriate resources for a particular subject, formulating an effective search strategy, keeping up to date in a subject area and making use of other libraries and collections. The training takes into account the various stages of research careers and individual levels of experience and expertise, as well as disciplinary differences. We recognise that the researchers themselves are the experts in their subject; the most effective training uses a combination of their subject knowledge and our information skills.

*Mind the Skills Gap: information-handling training for researchers*<sup>2</sup> identified a lack of co-ordination between units within institutions on the training provided for researchers. In addition to our one-to-one consultations, we are involved in university-wide training initiatives for researchers, and work closely with the new Doctoral School at Sussex, the Careers Service and the Teaching &

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There's no doubt that some of our departments regret the loss of 'their' subject librarian and that, as a result, we have had to work harder to build constructive relationships with academic staff.



Poster promoting the library's seminar series for researchers; conducting a 1-2-1 consultation with a researcher

## References

- 1 *Researchers' Use of Academic Libraries and Their Services*. Research Information Network, 2007 ([www.rin.ac.uk/system/files/attachments/Researchers-libraries-services-report.pdf](http://www.rin.ac.uk/system/files/attachments/Researchers-libraries-services-report.pdf)).
- 2 *Research Information Network, 2008*. *Mind the Skills Gap: information handling training for researchers*. Research information network, 2008 ([www.rin.ac.uk/system/files/attachments/Mind-skills-gap-report.pdf](http://www.rin.ac.uk/system/files/attachments/Mind-skills-gap-report.pdf)).
- 3 [www.sussex.ac.uk/library/infoplus/](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/library/infoplus/)

Learning Development Unit to develop and enhance this support. Although we can't yet claim to offer completely seamless provision, it is perhaps easier for us to achieve with our functional, rather than subject-based, approach.

We are also able to take advantage of funding opportunities for supporting researchers in a targeted way. This has included a successful bid for Researcher Development Funding in 2008 to develop an online tool designed for postgraduate and postdoctoral researchers. Along with many other institutions, we have continued to see a rise in the number of part-time and distance researchers, and needed to find a way of reaching those unable to visit the library for a one-to-one session. We employed a doctoral student from the university's Informatics Department to scope what was offered by other institutions, and to design and implement a Sussex-focused tool, based on the content of our one-to-one sessions. The result is infoPlus,<sup>3</sup> which we have spent the last year promoting and embedding in our work. This summer we held focus groups to evaluate its use, which has resulted in further development work. Keeping the resource up to date has now been embedded in the library's publication programme.

As we are not tied down by the demands of undergraduate teaching, we are able to be more flexible in responding to researcher need for training. We're extending our training to support their role as producers (not only seekers) of information, and have recently introduced training sessions on demonstrating and assessing the impact of their research through the use of bibliometric tools.

## Engaging with researchers

Our structure also enables us to engage with academics and units across the university in a consistent and co-ordinated way. Sussex restructured its academic departments last year, creating 12 schools. If we had traditional subject librarians, this would have meant restructuring our support to mirror the new arrangement. However, the functional approach meant that

very little changed within the library. Each of the new schools has its own Director of Research & Knowledge Exchange and Director of Doctoral Studies, with whom we are working hard to build mutually beneficial relationships. A key recommendation of Mind the Skills Gap is that libraries should seek to engage with Vitae, a national organisation responsible for supporting the development of researchers, through its network of regional hubs. We recently worked together with our local South East Hub to design and run a conference at Sussex for librarians on providing innovative support for researchers.

We're constantly looking for new ways to engage with our researchers: the traditional 'show and tell' of new library resources to large groups is not an effective use of their time or ours. We contact all new academic staff to introduce ourselves and offer an appointment to discuss library support for their research, and take every opportunity to meet with researchers at networking events and conferences. Networking with researchers in this informal way is very effective, and always results in follow-up appointments for our one-to-one advice sessions. A key way for us to reach our doctoral researchers is through the university's new Doctoral School. We have also started a Twitter account (separate from the library's main Twitter feed) to keep researchers up to date with training, events and other developments of interest to them.

Another new method of engagement has been a lunchtime seminar series focusing on some of the key issues affecting researchers: the impact agenda; the future of research assessment; open access publishing; and data management and sharing. These were topics on which the Research Liaison Team had received questions and which we felt weren't being addressed elsewhere within the university. The series was an ideal opportunity to raise our profile and to encourage researchers to come into the library building. As the series met several criteria from the Joint Skills Statement (Joint Statement of the UK Research Councils'



Our structure allows us a large degree of flexibility and the opportunity to develop innovative ways of supporting researchers. This would not be possible in a traditional structure, where subject librarians are overwhelmed with the demands of supporting undergraduates.

Training Requirements for Research Students, which has now been replaced by the Researcher Development Framework), we were able to bid for Researcher Development Funding to support it. The series attracted more than 100 participants – either active researchers or colleagues involved in supporting research. It was also a chance for other members of the library team to build relationships with our researchers. This is now part of our annual calendar of events.

Through the seminars we realised there was a general lack of awareness among our research community about the implications of the changes in scholarly communication. Open access can help researchers respond to increasing pressure to demonstrate the impact of their research on both the academic and wider community. To meet this need, we held a series of events for researchers as part of International Open Access week, with contribution from publishers, research funders and academic staff.

*Researchers' Use of Academic Libraries...* showed the fall in the frequency of researchers' personal visits to the library across all disciplines, and in particular in the physical and life sciences. The library building in many institutions is seen as an undergraduate space. In common with several other academic libraries, Sussex has created a designated area exclusively for the use of researchers as part of its ongoing major refurbishment project. The Sussex Research Hive has been designed as a space to bring together the research community across campus for collaboration and networking. Researcher Development Funding has been used to create three scholarships for current doctoral students to encourage use of the area, engage with the research community and to evaluate its first year of opening. We have also attracted external support from Sage Publications, who have made a gift to the library to support the Hive and our innovative approach to engaging with the research community. We are keen to develop this partnership to our mutual benefit over the coming years.

### Developing our research collections

We work closely with our academic departments to identify research interests to inform our collection building. We anticipate new and changing areas of research and advise on the need for new resources. We also oversee the management of our journal collections, both managing the process for the acquisition of new titles and reviewing our existing subscriptions on a subject-by-subject basis in liaison with our departmental library representatives. Covering all disciplines gives the team an impartial overview of all subjects, avoids the risk of partisanship, and makes it easier to acquire major cross-disciplinary journal packages and deals. We also trial, acquire and evaluate electronic resources to support research across all subject areas.

In common with most other HE libraries, we are under increasing space pressure. Our collection management remit also includes withdrawal of older,

low-use material. This is carried out on a rolling programme: in each subject we appoint a doctoral researcher on a part-time temporary basis to liaise with the relevant academic staff. This works well, as the student brings with them their subject expertise as well as established academic networks. The library is also a member of the UK Research Reserve (UKRR), a collaborative project between Hefce and the British Library, which will allow us to free a significant amount of shelf space taken up by low-use print journals. The team identifies, checks and removes material in line with UKRR policy.

Collecting for the research interests of the entire university is challenging, and has been more successful in subjects where we have effective communication with the relevant department. We recently ran a trial of our book supplier's online new-title-alerting service in an effort to further interest our departmental library representatives in collection development. We are very excited by the shift in library acquisitions to patron-driven purchasing, and are currently running a pilot in this area with Coutts e-books. A new faculty-level post of Collection Development Officer has been established within the Research Liaison Team, with the aim of enhancing our services in this area.

### The future of research support

*Researchers' Use of Academic Libraries...* showed that a significant proportion of researchers believe that subject specialist will still be a core role for librarians in 2012. There's no doubt that some of our departments regret the loss of 'their' subject librarian and that, as a result, we have had to work harder to build constructive relationships with academic staff. However, we question whether our lack of subject specialism really does have an impact on service delivery. Many of the subject-specific resources require generic searching skills, and where necessary we can deliver training jointly with a member of academic staff. On the contrary, our structure means there's always someone fighting for the interests of the research community whenever library resources or service provision are considered. We're able to respond quickly according to strategic need and are in a good position to take advantage of emerging roles for librarians, such as supporting researchers with the use of our institutional repository and training them in data management.

Although our limited resources can present us with challenges, our structure allows us a large degree of flexibility and the opportunity to develop innovative ways of supporting researchers. This would not be possible in a traditional structure, where subject librarians are overwhelmed with the demands of supporting undergraduates and are unable to dedicate the required resources and services to their researchers.

The recession presents an opportunity for libraries to rethink how they are delivering support to their users. Could this model provide a solution? **[T]**

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