

Tough data-driven decisions and radical thinking: how Middlesbrough College's LRC survived austerity

When other libraries had their budgets cut, Middlesbrough College's Learning Resources Centre (LRC) enjoyed a stable (yet not increasing) budget with minor cuts from 2015–2017. For 2017–2018, the LRC was required to save 50% of its non-pay budget. The cuts were not unexpected, but so much in one go was a severe shock. As a matter of good practice, we were already making data-driven decisions for all our resources and were trying to get the best deals we could. It was time for consolidation, tougher decisions and, possibly, some radical thinking. At the beginning of 2017 this process started, and is now reaping rewards. This article will set out how decisions on making the necessary budget cuts were made, what was done to make the reduced budget go further (whilst maintaining the high quality of services) and the results of the exercise. The author presented this work at the UKSG E-resources for Further Education event in November 2018.

Keywords

Budget reductions; e-resources; suppliers; FE libraries; data-driven; acquisitions

Introduction

As with other further education (FE) colleges, Middlesbrough College has had major budget reductions since the UK Government's austerity measures began in 2008. However, unlike many colleges that had reductions year on year, Middlesbrough College's reductions came over two or three years starting out as a light touch, then becoming very drastic.

The Learning Resources Centre's (LRC's) overall budget is split into eight areas:

- journals
- general books (level three – A level or equivalent and below)
- higher-level books (level four – first-year degree and above)
- workforce development
- careers
- e-resources
- general materials
- stationery.

The general books budget is the largest, followed by the e-resources budget. Over the years, we have asked for this to be addressed so that the budget for e-resources would become the largest part. This did not happen until the 2017–2018 budget, which was also the first hugely reduced budget we had.



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2 Prior to the budget cuts, the LRC had started to use data-driven decision-making when spending its budget. For any e-resources package and journals subscription, the usage statistics were reviewed before renewals took place. This led to many resources being cancelled, especially the physical journal subscriptions. Regarding book purchases, the number of issues, the stock level and alternatives were reviewed before buying extra or new copies of titles. The e-resources were also sometimes bought from alternative budgets e.g. the Philip Allen Archive was paid for from the journals not the e-resources budget, even though it is an electronic subscription. This precedent was set by our e-books being purchased from our book budgets. At the end of the academic year, any remaining money in the budgets would be used up by stockpiling stationery, buying extra copies of the most popular texts and buying fiction, which at the time was not a priority as there was less emphasis on English and literacy.

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Budget reductions

In 2015–2016 there was one in-year budget reduction and in 2016–2017, there were two in-year budget reductions. These were insignificant to the LRC as it had continued to have a legacy budget from the time when Middlesbrough College had four sites, with some budgets having much more money in them than was needed. We had previously tried to get the budgets reduced to a more sensible figure, and had in some instances failed. The budget we were allocated had remained static for several years, reducing only in real terms due to the economic climate. This was at a time when other colleges were having their budgets cut and/or frozen. In early 2017 budget reductions for 2017–2018 were announced, and for the LRC this represented a 50% reduction from the 2016–2017 post in-year reduction budget. Drastic action was therefore called for to both manage and consolidate this drastic reduction in the budget.

To reduce the budget by 50%, we looked at what we usually spent before using up budgets and then reduced the budgets by that amount. Subscriptions to databases where the topic was not wide enough to benefit more than one academic area were not renewed, and we also let the subscription to a paid e-book collection lapse. Our physical journal subscriptions were cut even further. We had been trying to encourage journal usage by various promotions and were keeping usage statistics, but these showed that this had not made any difference to most of the journals. The Philip Allan Archive was one of the subscription database casualties. We had been buying paper copies of this archive (which are much cheaper) and we do have some paper copy archives in our store cupboard. These, though, are not as comprehensive as the electronic archive. We checked our stationery stockpiles to see what we had enough of and only bought extra supplies of things we needed. Additionally, we had discovered that we were actually subsidizing the stationery we were buying to sell to students (from our stationery budget). The sales money was going into a central College fund and not directly coming back into the LRC budget. Therefore, it was decided that we would stop buying stationery to sell until the matter was resolved.

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Despite all of this, we still had not met the 50% reduction, and so the book budgets were then cut further. This brought us closer to the target but did not quite meet it and we ended up shaving bits off all budgets except the e-resources budget, which we knew we needed to keep as buoyant as possible, until our target was met.

Consolidation

To consolidate and mitigate the situation, we rewrote our acquisitions policy, tried to make more of both our paid-for and free resources, undertook a massive journal promotion and tried to get more value for money from our suppliers.

Acquisitions policy

The acquisitions policy was rewritten to incorporate and formalize what we were already doing. It prioritized buying brand new titles over both updated versions of titles already held (with some exceptions, e.g. law) and extra copies, and it set out that we would keep more old editions (again with some exceptions). The department loan scheme was also withdrawn. This was a scheme where, subject to Head of Directorate approval, the LRC would buy a copy of a text for the lecturers to keep in their directorate to use for lesson planning. It had been introduced to stop teachers taking LRC stock out and using the loan copy as their own personal copy, leaving the students without copies to borrow. The withdrawal of the scheme meant we needed to tighten up overdue loan procedures for staff, as we thought we would end up with our original problem of staff not returning books.

In addition to our normal overdue loan procedure, we now contact staff individually if their LRC books have been issued for more than 120 days (roughly one term) to ask them to return their books and remind them that if they need the book more permanently, their Directorate will need to buy a copy for them. When reviewing this in July 2018, there were ten members of staff who had had books out for more than 120 days, which was a dramatic reduction from July 2017 when this figure was around 49 staff.

Paid-for resources

We revisited what was available through our Credo Reference subscription, making sure that the titles we chose were all relevant to the College curriculum and where necessary UK based. The subscription we had was for 100 titles (from 820 at the time; now there are 906). Shortly after we had chosen our 100 titles, Credo Reference announced that anyone on this level of subscription would be freely upgraded to 200 titles, so this fortunately enabled us to add another 100.

In addition to this, Credo Reference had added a faceted search functionality, which we made use of and set about customizing as much as possible, especially with UK-based information. At the time, we had a discovery solution in good faith: we had not paid for it and were very conscious that with the budget reductions and all the capital spend going towards creating a better network infrastructure, we would have to relinquish this. Credo Reference's faceted search was probably going to have to replace it. In the end, we were offered another free year of the discovery solution as compensation for an inaccessibility issue we had whereby for most of the academic year, a paid subscription product supplied by the same company had not worked.

We uploaded machine-readable (MARC) records for titles on Credo Reference and Britannica E-stax to our catalogue and put links to individual Issues Online titles, of which we also have paper versions. We should have done this earlier, and it had been on our to-do list, yet we had never previously managed to fit it in. Initial usage figures increased, but have since fallen. They are, though, still higher than before we did this exercise, as shown in Table 1.

Package	Statistic type	Year		
		2015–2016	2016–2017	2017–2018
Credo Reference	COUNTER Book Report 2	314	1050	532
Britannica E-stax	COUNTER Book Report 2	0	239	217
Issues Online	Login total – IP address and Shibboleth	86	200	108

Table 1. Usage statistics for paid-for resources

It was also discovered that Carel Press' Factfile came with an e-version, which we have post-cancellation access to. The e-version is not as accessible as e-books on other platforms as there is limited functionality. In order to overcome this, a spreadsheet was created listing titles and topics in each edition. This is available for staff and students to consult. Factfile has no statistics functionality, therefore usage is undeterminable.

Free resources

There were free resources that we had lost track of for various reasons, mainly because they were not used and then there were changes to/within the subscription which we did not act on at the time. We decided to look into our access and start promoting these resources, as they constituted valuable content that we should be using. The main resources were Jisc MediaHub (now MediaPlus) and British Library: Archival Sound Recordings (now Sounds). The usage statistics for MediaPlus increased from 0 in 2015–2016, up to 1 in 2016–2017 and then to 313 in 2017–2018 (COUNTER Database 1 reports). The increase may be attributed to MediaPlus being searched via our discovery system. We currently have only OpenAthens usage figures for 2017–2018 for Sounds – 51 hits – and we will be watching with interest to see whether or not this increases.

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We also added to our subscriptions to free resources by signing up to BFI InView, 19th Century British Pamphlets, Journal Usage Statistics Portal (JUSP) and Knowledge Base+ (KB+). BFI InView and 19th Century British Pamphlets both align to curriculum areas. First-year usage statistics were 65 (OpenAthens) for BFI InView and 56 (COUNTER Database 1 reports) for 19th Century British Pamphlets.

We signed up to JUSP and KB+ in order to help us track and manage our resources more effectively. JUSP is used by us the most, as it saves time when collecting statistics. So far, we have had our current (at the time) and past subscriptions added to KB+. We now need to get to grips with how to use it effectively and have it updated with the new databases we have since subscribed to. We also need to sort out our post-cancellation access and add this information to it.

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We started to promote open access (OA) resources after creating a page for them on Canvas, our virtual learning environment (VLE). We had Canvas for about a year and had not managed to populate it to the extent we wanted. A link to this page has now been included in the higher education (HE) module specifications template, along with others we created at the same time relating to information skills.

Additionally, we created catalogue records for resources we had previously only had links to on Blackboard (our former VLE), such as the Health and Safety Executive and Office for National Statistics, as we wanted students to find these resources yet did not want to clutter Canvas with too much information. Catalogue records were also created with links for journals that had gone either solely online (and became free or partially free), like *Community Care* and *Nursing Times*, or for which we have paper versions that can also be accessed online, such as *Firefighter* and *Society Now*.

Regarding books, we took up an offer that had been e-mailed from How2Become publishers, who specialize in careers books. Their offer was for free careers books up to the value of £300, in return for publicizing their product. They provided us with a list of what was available, the titles were checked against the current stock and, from the remaining titles, £300 worth were chosen. We made a display of them and used social media to promote the books and display.

Our fiction section, especially youth fiction, has become increasingly popular due to English teachers sending their classes to borrow books from there. The LRC staff's knowledge of youth fiction is limited, as we had been expected to prioritize texts supporting our vocational curriculum. To try to increase knowledge, I joined the Youth Libraries Group: a specialist interest group attached to the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), of which I am a member. Within the e-mails they send out documenting new publications, the publishers often run free book prize draws for the group. Where the prize draw is for a book considered a useful addition to stock, we will participate in it. We won £60 worth of books in 2017–2018 and will continue to enter the draws.

Journals

There was a lot of work undertaken to get the most out of our remaining journal stock. We immediately decided to keep all back copies, rather than discarding after three to five years, which was our normal practice. We have a store cupboard large enough to accommodate this stock in the short term. Again, the catalogue records were strengthened in this case to include information on back copies and the addition of more keywords.

We revisited e-mail alerts to make sure that we were getting them for all the e-journals we had. Our current awareness policy was altered so that the assistant receiving the paper journals would scan the table of contents and forward it to the Curriculum Liaison Assistant, who then forwarded it on to their area. This change was necessary because sometimes the Curriculum Liaison Assistant missed the arrival of new journals. We need to continue to expand on this work. We have recently purchased new e-journal packages as circumstances have changed. (Having ended our partnership with a local university, we are now eligible for a new pot of money available through HE funding.)

We started a 'journal of the month' promotion to try to encourage use, and we looked through back issues of journals to create a bibliographic list of relevant content relating to known enquiries. (We record our enquiries, which is something that seems to be unusual in FE). LRC staff can now recommend more journal articles as they are familiar with the content, or can quickly check the bibliographic list to give recommendations. For the regular enquiries, we would like to set up topic boxes to give an overview to the students of what resources we have available. The usage figures for journals have marginally increased, and back copies are beginning to get used, whereas before they were rarely requested.

'We started a "journal of the month" promotion to try to encourage use'

Suppliers

We negotiated for better discounts and the abolition of hosting fees with mixed success. For our main suppliers, we worked with our representatives to find the best discount model for us. We also set up accounts with new suppliers, e.g. ProQuest, where it had been suggested we might get more discount in some areas. We are yet to put this to the test because we have not tried out our new suppliers. The volume of HE work we have had to do, due to the partnership ending, has left us no time to learn the new supplier systems. We made use of special offers and discounts, such as free servicing provided by Browns Books for Students throughout November and December, and we changed suppliers for some journals where we could get better prices elsewhere. Some of our suppliers have now withdrawn their e-book hosting fees.

A patron-driven acquisition (PDA)/demand-driven acquisition (DDA) account was set up with EBSCO. Titles included were e-books on reading lists – to buy either the book or e-book would cost well over £100. One of the four titles included on our PDA was triggered, through a student using the e-book from our discovery solution. We had set aside enough of the budget to pay for all four and in May, when it was getting towards the end of our financial year, we suspended the PDA to free up the money to buy extra copies of popular titles. The PDA was reinstated in September ready for the new students.

Results and summary

The results of this exercise have been that:

- we have formalized data-driven decisions that we were already using by including them in our acquisitions policy
- books borrowed by tutors are more likely to be returned promptly than previously, through contacting staff individually where their books have been issued for more than 120 days
- our databases showed an initial increase in usage, though this has since declined, with usage currently still higher than before this exercise

- journal usage has only marginally increased
- we have saved money through making use of offers
- we have introduced PDA/DDA
- we have less non-fiction requested by teachers, which has freed money for student recommended fiction to be bought
- our e-book usage increased by 358% (COUNTER Book Reports 2)
- our combined book and e-book usage has increased by 93.5%.

In summary, the acquisitions policy has been updated to formally incorporate the data-driven decisions that were already being made. There has been a tightening of overdue loan procedures, which has significantly reduced long-term staff borrowing. Promotions to increase usage of paid-for and free e-resources and journals have yielded mixed results. There has been an increase in free resource subscriptions to support curriculum areas and e-resource management. OA resources have been promoted to support curriculum areas, and catalogue records have been enhanced to facilitate easier discoverability. Special offers and promotions have been taken up to maximize value, and a new purchasing model was successfully introduced. More fiction, a growing area for us, has been bought and usage statistics have increased.

'the acquisitions policy has been updated to formally incorporate the data-driven decisions'

For the future, we need to try out our new suppliers and see how their services compare to the service offered by our current suppliers. We also need to update and learn how to use KB+ and find out what we have post-cancellation access to, so this information can be added. To continue promoting journals and their usage by revisiting the e-mail alerts and current awareness to incorporate new subscriptions is also on our agenda. We need to find ways to benchmark usage figures (other than those already available to us through JUSP) to ensure value for money. Finally, we need to develop topic boxes around known enquiries, so we have a comprehensive list of resources to recommend to students.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insights* articles can be accessed here – click on the URL below and then select the 'full list of industry A&As' link: <http://www.uksg.org/publications#aa>.

Competing interests

The author has declared no competing interests.

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