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Destroying the silo: how breaking down barriers can lead to proactive and co-operative researcher support

In this article we evidence some of the opportunities which the Research Excellence Framework (REF) open access agenda has created for closer collaboration between the Library Research Support Team and the Research Office at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU). Drawing on personal reflections and shared experiences, we suggest that this new co-operative spirit has yielded three important outcomes. First, it has allowed for the dismantling of research support silos and forms of duplication. Second, it has enhanced the visibility and profile of research within academic departments and across the University as a whole. Thirdly, it has enabled relationships and engagement to be developed beyond our institution, allowing us to learn from others. This leads us to further suggest that in the context of research support within an institution, the library should take an active role to engage with collaborative forms of research support.

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New team, new service

Our own Research Support Team was created as a direct result of the open access (OA) requirements for the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021. (REF is the system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions.) The REF required an adherence to an OA repository set-up and a focus on impact, collaboration and public engagement. Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) is a medium-size university with a very active research community. As with many other universities, previously LJMU had principally supported researchers via academic liaison librarians. To meet the increasing research support demand, our small team (which consists of 2.2 full-time equivalent posts, including a Research Support Manager, an Open Access and Digital Scholarship Librarian and a Research Support Librarian) came into existence in August 2015, and members of the team immediately had to be strategic about how we went about supporting the research needs of the University.

Although there were job descriptions and mentions of research support within our Library service's plan, ostensibly our aim was to support academics and researchers throughout the entire research lifecycle. In that sense, the scope of what we could do was vast; the tricky bit was trying to narrow down our focus within our limited personnel resources.

Background to collaboration

Collaborating to meet university and strategic initiatives and goals is not a new concept, most certainly not with libraries. There are many examples of libraries that have public/university partnerships, collection management and consortia. Libraries thrive at partnerships and working together, with 'evidence of the willingness or our profession to network, collaborate and share in order to develop services that meet the needs of our users'.[1] What is particular to research support, however, is the need to teach 'various literacies'[2] and for 'research librarians … to try and understand, and address, the disparate support needs of their respective research communities'.[3] Effectiveness in this context means being able to actively support and work alongside academics, researchers and PhD students through the deployment of general and specialist library skills. These skills can be measured out in terms of research knowledge, technical skills and softer, more person-centred skills (e.g. patience and mutuality). As with other projects that demand extensive time and effort, it is important to capitalize on a 'commitment to work across units and divisions to deliver a better solution'.[4]

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Finding our purpose

As a team, we started to crystallize our purpose when we looked beyond our own service and experiences of designing and delivering research support. We recognized the potential of working with other University partners when Katherine presented a discussion on Research Cafés[5] at our Professional Services conference, and the Researcher Development Advisor from Research and Innovation Support (RIS) was in attendance. As part of her own role, she focused on developing training and support for researchers. After the session she approached Katherine because she had identified possible overlaps in the work of the two teams but also the potential for collaboration and sharing. At the same time, the University appointed a new Researcher Development Manager within the Doctoral Academy (DA). The Researcher Development Manager was tasked with a similar role to that of the Researcher Development Advisor/Research Support Team, with the point of departure being an explicit focus on the training and development needs of PhD students.

> 'an opportunity to capitalize on our shared intelligence and individual strengths … to deliver a more meaningful, better co-ordinated research support experience'

It quickly became apparent that we shared a commonality of purpose, namely promoting and supporting research excellence. The Research Support Team in the Library shared the remit of both RIS and the DA: to support *all* researchers. Through the simple expedient of talking and sharing experiences, we collectively came to the realization that we were often undertaking and/or planning complementary activities. Similarly, we came to view that this lack of co-ordination and effective communication was unnecessary and unsustainable. In that sense, it provided an opportunity to capitalize on our shared intelligence and individual strengths, so as to deliver a more meaningful, better co-ordinated research support experience for academics, researchers and postgraduate researchers alike.

Working together

We saw this initial, slightly informal conversation as a starting point for working more effectively together. Consequently, we began to communicate with RIS and the DA via e-mail and regular catch-up meetings in an effort to foster awareness and avoid duplication. We also gave careful consideration to the question: who else within the University has a similar remit in 'promoting and supporting research excellence'? And, relatedly: how could we best go about identifying and developing a relationship with them?

To begin with, we decided to take a proactive stance. This meant, for example, inviting ourselves and/or signing up to events and meetings we thought might be of interest and relevance (e.g. faculty research days, department events listed on LJMU's staff intranet, Eventbrite, staff talks and lectures.) Moreover, we discovered that one of our faculties was holding a research day, so we asked if it would be possible for us to attend the event. This provided us with a platform from which to further promote the Library and form new relationships and research networks. As it so happened, they held a 'marketplace' over lunchtime. The marketplace brought together a diverse range of individuals and teams with different skills and experiences with the overall aim of facilitating discussion, learning and collaboration. We took up a stand, adapted a quiz from another event, and offered a prize. Importantly, this gave us a talking point – a USP (unique selling point), if you will – and enabled us to position ourselves as a potential resource and research partner. As a result of this, we have been invited to each subsequent conference. We continue to have a visible presence at the marketplace and, as our relationship with the faculty has grown, we have also been asked to present on predatory publishing.

Another tactic was using our new-found (and now regular) contacts to get us invited to meetings, which, in fact, worked both ways. For example, we suggested meetings to our respective colleagues and they would recommend and invite us to others. A particularly fruitful example of this tactic was with International Women's Day (IWD). Our colleague from DA was invited to help organize the University's event and she subsequently invited us, enabling the Library service to be pivotal to the organization and the event itself. As a result, we made new contacts amongst female researchers, increased our overall visibility and started to receive invitations to take part in or live-tweet with other events. Assisting with these types of events involves very little effort on our part and we reap large rewards in terms of exposure and awareness of the Library.

> 'we have developed a shared, centralized calendar of events with our colleagues in RIS and the DA'

Moving forward, we have developed a shared, centralized calendar of events with our colleagues in RIS and the DA. We have also started to offer sessions as part of each other's respective training programmes. For example, we have run sessions as part of the ACTivator researcher programme and DA training on subjects like metrics, publishing and data management. Within this, we are also trying to meet more regularly with other colleagues who support researchers, either from central teams or within faculties. This allows us to discuss planning joint activities as well as keeping abreast of developments within their respective areas.

Benefits of collaboration

The positives of working jointly with others mean that you learn and benefit from their knowledge and experience. You are also able to promote the training and support they deliver, too. This joined-up approach also benefits those you are trying to support, as they do not have to look to a myriad places for help; they can get sustained support and know-how if they come to one team, as each team is aware of and promotes each other.

> 'the Library is recognized more widely as part of the research process'

We have benefited from joint sessions with RIS and DA that are not badged and/or hosted within the Library. Delivering library research support sessions as part of a wider researcher/PhD training programme means that the Library is recognized more widely as part of the research process, by both the researchers themselves and other research support staff across the institution. For example, our sessions on publishing that are advertised and facilitated as 'researcher events' are better attended than one-off Library training events.

Collaboration has also led to involvement in other events, conferences and workshops and quite simply, has broadened our horizons by introducing us to a wider community of people and events. Having that personal introduction can make a vast difference when asking

individuals to present or take part in a panel discussion, for example. We feel strongly that the benefits of collaboration outweigh the time and effort exerted. Taking part in events and working with others at conferences can lead to useful networking opportunities, which can then be brought into play in connection with future development activities.

Beyond the institution

LJMU is a member of various consortia with other libraries, such as the North West Academic Libraries[6] (NoWAL) and the Northern Collaboration,[7] and we have attended events hosted by these organizations. When we started out, we wanted to make use of contacts and expertise from other institutions to create our own events, too. Other benefits of hosting ourselves meant that we did not have to travel (which, with caring responsibilities, is an important practical consideration) and we were able to invite people whose work we wanted to know more about. Building on those premises, we hosted our first exchange of experience about research support with NoWAL. In terms of speakers, we invited people we had seen on Twitter, met at other events and heard about, as well as our own colleagues. As this first event on general research support was well received, we held a second event on bibliometrics and brought representatives from research support from around the region. Later that same year, we were introduced to the newly appointed Scholarly Communications Librarian at the University of Liverpool, which prompted some joint working within our city. Our first joint event with them was also a NoWAL event, this time on the theme of open research.

'the benefits of collaboration outweigh the time and effort exerted'

After this successful event, we met in October/November 2018 and discussed the idea of hosting a joint week of events during Open Data Week in February 2019. Expanding on the theme of open data to open research in general, we branded it Love Open Week[8] and scheduled a planned week of activities. We held a joint Love Open Research Café with speakers from both Universities, which was open to the public. The turnout for the event was excellent, with around 40 PhD students and staff from both institutions as well as member of the public in attendance. There was an interesting mix of speakers and an engaged audience that asked relevant and curious questions. At the Everyman Theatre, we held a joint screening of the film Paywall,[9] which discusses the costs and challenges with scholarly publications, followed by a panel discussion. To build on a cross-dialogue and discussion, our panel included the University of Liverpool's Head of Research Support, a PhD student and a researcher from LJMU, and the Director of Liverpool University Press, and was chaired by our Associate Director. Across the week during lunchtimes, we held a number of database awareness events at both campuses, which involved liaising with other librarians and departments.

The Love Open Week events involved a variety of stakeholders representing both Universities. The success of the collaborative partnership has resulted in us organizing a joint Research Café as part of the University of Liverpool's Impact Week and a visit from the Knowledge Exchange Unit later in the year. We are running Love Open Week again in 2020 to coincide with Open Data Week, with more events and activities.

Barriers

We are really pleased with what has been achieved through our collaborative working, but it is important to acknowledge that there have been obstacles along the way.

'place emphasis on the positive relationships you have built up'

The first important thing to consider is that there will always be people who do not see the benefit of working with you and, having experienced this, you may have to face this fact and move on. This can be difficult if the people concerned are key stakeholders, but there may be a way around the situation or you may just have to change your plans. It is imperative that you focus on the people who *will* work with you. If you can place emphasis on the positive relationships you have built up and not on a perceived barrier, you may find some success.

The other thing to consider is that sometimes when working with others you may need to compromise in order to meet everyone's needs. For example, when working on Love Open Week our preference would have been to hold a Research Café over lunch in one of our own buildings, as we do at LJMU. However, as the University of Liverpool's DA had offered to host and pay for drinks and cakes, the event really needed to be held in the afternoon on their campus. This was still branded as a joint event with speakers and attendees from both institutions. The key here is to be flexible as the benefits of holding the event outweighed any potential barrier.

A creative way to overcome a barrier is to adjust your thinking and reassess. For example, last year the University held a prestigious event for International Women's Day and, for various reasons, this year a similar event was not planned. We felt that something should be done about this but were not able to organize an event of the same scale. Instead, we took a different approach, and along with our colleagues in the DA, we arranged a lunch-time Research Café promoting the work of our Postgraduate Researchers, the remit being research by women, for women or about women.

Another way to overcome a barrier is to invite yourself to events or meetings and take any strategic opportunities that come your way. For example, Katherine was invited to give a quick, five-minute talk about research support as she walked into the first DA conference (that she had invited herself to). As a result, we have been involved in the DA conference in every subsequent year and are now seen as an integral part of the day. It is vital to recognize that small opportunities to network and liaise can pay dividends later. Taking that small opportunity can lead someone to seek out your service at a later point.

> 'small opportunities to network and liaise can pay dividends later'

Conclusion

The advent of the REF 2021 OA policy opened up opportunities to work across teams within the institution, which provided the impetus to seek other ways we could work collaboratively to support researchers. By identifying others that share a similar purpose, we were able to develop relationships which led to interesting and fruitful collaborations, across the University and beyond. Doing this saves times and effort but also provides more purposeful and meaningful research support, more widely. Collaboration across teams utilizes the skills of individuals to produce a coherent message to those you are trying to reach. Whilst there can be barriers at times, these are often not insurmountable and with adjustment you can still have a positive outcome.

Abbreviations and Acronyms
A list of the abbreviations and acronyms used in this and other *Insight*s 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 authors are both employed by Liverpool John Moores University.

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