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A collaborative approach

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James Kay, University of Derby

HE/FE institutions are increasingly user focused and must meet the challenge of providing high quality services which meet the demands of its users to provide access to more varied resources in a rapidly changing technological environment. This is balanced against the increasing costs of resources and a political- and sector-wide institutional need to better account for and spend library budgets.

Library and information practitioners have new opportunities to explore the possibilities of evidence-based decision making though usage analysis, and whether this has the potential to provide a clearer picture of how effectively library resources are used. Assisted by statistical and decision-based tools, librarians already have access to a range of comprehensive information in advance of purchase/renewal periods and could save considerable time and money in their institutions' decision-making processes.

Current challenges

The demand for electronic resources in the HE/FE sectors has arguably never been greater. Students demand access to a variety of resources, including (but not limited to) electronic journals, subject-specific databases, archives and indexes. Academics expect their students to research widely and utilise different resources in their studies. Libraries must respond in kind to these demands, managing user expectations while anticipating the challenges ahead.

In an ever-changing e-environment, there are new (and recurring) issues and implications for electronic resources. The challenge for librarians and information professionals is to adapt sufficiently to the current e-environment and to anticipate changes and developments that will affect libraries in the near future. The key challenges are listed below:

- *Pricing models/collections/packages*: in the current economic climate, libraries increasingly need to balance their budgets and negotiate with suppliers for a better deal. This can be achieved in partnership with institutional consortia, external partners, publishing agents (EBSCO/Swets) and informal collaborations (see 'Understanding needs, developing practices' below for more information).

- *Usage data/statistics*: from COUNTER statistics to Jisc Decisions tools, libraries have a wealth of statistical information available to make informed decisions. Encouraging 'out of the box' thinking would allow librarians to focus less on their individual collections and more on the whole library collection.

- *Access provision and licensing*: with HE/FE institutions expanding their operations (and an increasingly global approach favoured by some universities), the library should anticipate how this will affect the provision of e-resources across multiple campuses. Some institutions already incorporate a mixture of HE/FE students while others, such as the University of Nottingham, operate across three international campus sites. Libraries should allow adequate provision of e-resources and ensure that all students (irrespective of location) are covered sufficiently within the terms and conditions of academic licences.

- *Access delivery and authentication*: library users expect instantaneous access to e-resources with minimal restriction. The library must ensure that consistent levels of access with appropriate authentication and security measures are properly in place.

Understanding needs, developing practices

Libraries (as institutions) have often been reluctant to discuss the concept of shared practice as it could be seen to undermine their individual identity and distinctiveness from their competitors. Understanding the common needs of all parties will help to develop shared practice in partnership with charities, agents, suppliers and our regional partners in HE/FE, ensuring continued excellence in the services we provide.

External partners/charities

Many HE/FE institutions receive support from charitable bodies. Jisc is a charity with different functions, although its primary objective remains in supporting the advancement of education and research in the UK as this brief summary states:

> Working together across the higher education, further education and skills sectors, Jisc provides trusted advice and support, reduces sector costs across shared network, digital content, IT services and procurement negotiations, ensuring the sector stays ahead of the game with research and development for the future.

Jisc Collections (a division of Jisc) ". . . supports the procurement of digital content for education and research in the UK", providing services to libraries but influenced by its partners. Specific initiatives include the NESLi2 project, summarised below:

> NESLi2 is our national initiative for licensing online journals on behalf of the higher and further education and research communities in the UK. NESLi2 was established in 2004 as a successor to earlier consortial initiatives that emerged with the arrival of online journals in the mid-1990s.

Although not strictly a consortia, Jisc provide an important example of external support to HE/FE institutions in negotiating better deals for e-resources while retaining links with academic libraries through their Electronic Information Resources Working Group.

Institutional consortia

Library and information professionals from many HE/FE institutions already collaborate together in consortium partnerships operating within regional and cross-regional boundaries. The NEYAL (North East and Yorkshire Academic Libraries) group of libraries is one such example, with 23 universities represented across the north of England. Its aims are stated as such:

> *The objective of NEYAL is to secure library purchasing agreements in accordance with university and European Union (EU) purchasing requirements which offer best value to Consortium members and meet the Consortium's specifications.*

Similarly, the SDLC (Scottish Digital Library Consortium) aims to deliver a better deal for academic libraries north of the border, with a particular focus on library management systems and resource discovery tools.

Other regional groups such as EMALINK (East Midlands Library Information Network) favour more informal collaborations centred on seminars, group discussion and networking (their most recent event focusing on developments in open access journals attracted a lot of useful discussion and debate).

It is abundantly clear that shared practice is a useful practice. Far from revealing trade secrets or diluting institutional identities, it can become a proactive, collaborative effort for the benefit of our institutions and ultimately, for our users.

External suppliers

With libraries having to re-think their purchasing strategies (and begin to justify investment in resources through evidence-based decisions), suppliers' partnerships and business models with HE/FE institutions must develop accordingly. There is an opportunity for both parties to change the conversation and embrace a new dialogue based on evidence-based research, with suppliers increasingly tailoring products to the learning, teaching and research needs of individual institutions.

Future directions

It is clear that the future of resources provision lies in having a clear strategic vision where advanced planning and decision making enables better results in the long run. We have the opportunity to anticipate changes in resource provision, working with suppliers to influence and negotiate deals and to make informed decisions based on evidence of usage, affordability and access rather than resources being purchased simply because of tradition or prestige.

By using a collaborative approach, we can shift the focus away from specific collection-led decisions and see the bigger picture, understanding how to work more efficiently with fewer resources, providing easier access through discovery tools and data mining processes, managing budgets more efficiently and above all, viewing library resources as the whole entity rather than separate parts.

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