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Supporting Researchers' Information Needs: The Experience of the Manchester Metropolitan University Library

Introduction

Academic libraries have long had a commitment to supporting the research activities of their institutions. Subject librarians plus interlibrary loans and technical services staff all play a part in the acquisition of resources and the provision of services for the benefit of researchers as well as for undergraduate populations -- some of whom may in fact be involved in research projects. However, particularly for those institutions with large numbers of undergraduates and comparatively small numbers of researchers, supporting all of the specialist information needs of research staff and research students has not always been feasible. The constraints of limited and indeed dwindling financial resources have necessitated a concentration on the provision of services that support the information needs of the majority. This has not necessarily been to the complete detriment of researchers, as both researchers and undergraduates can benefit from common resources and services.

Nonetheless, two surveys by Social and Community Planning Research conducted in 1989 and 1995 revealed growing dissatisfaction with library services on the part of UK academic researchers. The inability of library budgets to keep pace with journal and book price inflation was leading, in the view of the respondents, to serious deterioration of library collections. Interlibrary loan services, desktop document delivery services and the increasing availability of electronic resources as a substitute for print collections within their own institutions compensated to some degree. However, roughly one-quarter of the respondents maintained that unsatisfactory library services had impacted negatively on their own research or on research in their subject area.¹

Various HEFCE initiatives have been devised in order to improve access to quality research materials and to enhance the level of support provided for academic research. These initiatives include the Collaborative Research Initiative (CollIR); the Research Support Libraries Programme

(RSLP); and the Research Support Libraries Group (RSLG). The latter, in particular, is a long-term initiative with a mandate

to make recommendations to the HE Funding Bodies, the British Library and the national libraries of Scotland and Wales on a national strategic framework and mechanisms for promoting collaboration in, and integration of the development and provision of library collections, their long-term management, and services to support research.²

The establishment of the Research Assessment Exercise in 1986 highlighted the importance to the UK economy of research activity within higher education and pointed to the need to increase both efficiency and productivity. Although subject to some negative criticism, the series of Research Assessment Exercises (1986, 1992, 1996 and 2001) have brought about significant changes in perception and practice. The guide to the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise argues that

in the period since the first RAE in 1986 the effectiveness and productivity of the UK research base has increased substantially. UK researchers are now among the most productive and the number of times their work is read and used by other academics per million pounds is the highest in the world.³

At least until the most recent Research Assessment Exercise, the attainment of high ratings brought not only prestige but, equally importantly, financial benefit to those institutions that performed well. The financial incentive to improve performance stimulated those institutions with a lower research profile to encourage research activity and to improve research practices.

One response to the Research Assessment Exercise was the recognition by academic libraries of both the need to demonstrate visible commitment to the promotion of research activities within their institutions and the possibility of acquiring additional funding to do so. The years following the first Research Assessment Exercise in 1988 have witnessed the development in UK Higher Education of increased numbers of library posts conceived with the sole purpose of improving services to researchers. This paper provides a brief overview of the situation throughout the UK

and then concentrates in detail on the practical experience of one institution, the Manchester Metropolitan University.

Supporting Researchers' Information Needs in the UK

Created in November 2000 in response to a perceived need for better communication between librarians involved in research support, JISCmail's LIS-ResearchSupport electronic discussion list currently numbers 250 members.⁴ The membership is drawn predominately from UK academic libraries – both in higher and further education. There are also members representing the research councils (notably, the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council), government agencies, and industry.

An appeal was posted to LIS-ResearchSupport in March 2002 for details of members' job titles, the date of establishment of the posts, and their roles and responsibilities. Responses were requested specifically from librarians within UK Higher Education. The replies, coupled with data from an earlier survey of research support within UK academic libraries conducted by Joan Drage of Luton University⁵, reveal a multiplicity of creative responses to the challenge of supporting research. Although a common factor is the uniqueness of the post within each institution, there is no standard approach. Some posts are funded by the library's general budget; others, through various types of HEFCE research funding. Some posts are part-time, others full-time. Many are temporary contracts, funded for two years at a time. Some have only the one role: supporting researchers' information needs. Others juggle the role of supporting research with another function; for example, that of a subject specialist. Responsibilities likewise vary considerably from institution to institution.

At Salford University, for example, the job title is "Research Co-ordinator", a post created in 1999, funded by the library budget and with responsibilities for supporting academics in their preparations for the Research Assessment Exercise; representing the library at various research committees; and supporting subject staff in their work with researchers. The London School of

Economics created the post of “Research Support Librarian” in 2000. This is a two-year contract, funded by the Research Libraries Support Programme and dedicated, at least initially, to the development of a strategy for improving library services to researchers. At University College Worcester, the post of “Research Support Co-ordinator” was created in 1998. This is a part-time post, largely dedicated to liaison work with the research community and to the teaching of information literacy to research students and their supervisors. Kingston University Library established the post of “Research Support Librarian” in 2001. This is a two-year contract, funded by the University’s research budget and with responsibility for dealing with all research issues, including user education, research queries and preparation for the Research Assessment Exercise.

At the Manchester Metropolitan University, the main focus of this paper, the job title is “Research Support Librarian”, a post first created in 1995 and funded by HEFCE research funding. In the seven years since the creation of the post, the roles and responsibilities have been subject to constant re-evaluation and have evolved in an effort to more effectively meet the information needs of the university’s researchers. As in other academic institutions, the goal is to identify, develop and deliver services that improve the level of support provided to the university’s research community, both staff and students.

Supporting Researchers’ Information Needs at the Manchester Metropolitan University

Background

The Manchester Metropolitan University is a large multi-site institution, with seven campuses and seven site libraries albeit only one administration and one budget. Most of the campuses are located within a few miles of one another in the Manchester city centre but two are located some distance away in the Cheshire countryside at Crewe and Alsager. The number of full-time equivalent students is approximately 25,000, making the Manchester Metropolitan University one of the largest universities in the United Kingdom in terms of student numbers. Many of the

students, including postgraduates, are part-time and distance learners and bring with them special information needs – most notably the need for remote access to library services.

The Manchester Metropolitan University is a “new university” and, like many other former polytechnics, it does not have the longstanding tradition of research that one would expect to find in the older “red brick” universities. Nevertheless, some faculties have a longer history than others. The highly regarded Faculty of Art & Design, for example, evolved from the Manchester College of Art, which was established in the mid-nineteenth century. In more recent years, research centres have been created in several departments and now include the Centre for Research in Library & Information Management, the Centre for Social Research on Health and Substance Abuse, Arts for Health, the Manchester Institute for Popular Culture and the Atmospheric Research & Information Centre. In the 1996 Research Assessment Exercise, Units of Assessment which did particularly well included Sport & Related Subjects; Computing Science; Economics & Econometrics; the History of Art, Architecture & Design; and Art & Design. The 2001 Research Assessment Exercise led to a 5* rating for the Department of Exercise & Sport Science plus promotion to a 4 rating for Environmental Sciences, Metallurgy & Materials, English Language & Literature, Library & Information Science, Art & Design, and Education.

The University's Research Development Unit has the specific responsibility of increasing the Manchester Metropolitan University's research and consultancy activity. The Head of the Research Development Unit administers the funding for research provided to the Manchester Metropolitan University by HEFCE and it is from this budget, rather than the library budget, that the post of the Research Support Librarian is supported. Nonetheless the management of the Library's share of the funding is left entirely to the Library. There has been no interference from the Research Development Unit concerning either how the money or how the Research Support Librarian's time is spent -- although understandably every pound and every activity must support research directly. On an annual basis the Deputy Librarian and the Research Support Librarian meet with the head of the Research Development Unit to table an annual report of the Research

Support Librarian's activities, to account for how research funds were spent and to present plans for the coming year.

Introduction of the Research Support Librarian, 1995

The post of the Research Support Librarian was created in 1995 as part of a University-wide strategy to promote, develop and support research. The University Librarian, Professor Colin Harris, made a successful bid to the University's Senior Management and the Research Development Unit in order to obtain extra funding for library services specifically for this purpose. Initial funding was granted for a two-year period. This has been renewed albeit on a limited-term basis and there is now a guarantee of research funding until July 2002.

From the beginning, research funding was made available both for staffing and, of equal importance, for the acquisition of library materials identified as of specific relevance to researchers. Initially two posts for Research Support Librarians were established, one to serve researchers at the Manchester campuses and the other with responsibility for researchers at Crewe and Alsager. The latter post was cut in 1997 and the responsibility for service to all researchers was transferred to the Manchester-based Research Support Librarian. New posts were also created to provide extra clerical support for interlibrary loans, a service that had been identified as heavily used by researchers.

Given the novelty of the post, at the outset it was difficult to define the exact responsibilities of the Research Support Librarian. One important consideration was to avoid the duplication of any work already being undertaken. For example, the idea of developing a database of current research being conducted within the University was abandoned when it was ascertained that the Research Development Unit already maintained such a database.

One of the most important of the initial tasks -- and one that eventually resulted in a clearer definition of the role of the Research Support Librarian -- was basic fact-finding. As a first step, between 1995 and 1996, the Research Support Librarians arranged meetings with research staff

and, from their discussions, compiled lists of suggestions for new resources, new services, and improvements to existing services. Evidence suggested that, in many cases, the Library already provided the desired resources and services but somehow the message had not filtered through to the researchers. As a result, these meetings served to heighten the profile of the Library within each department and to promote awareness of existing library services.

Fact-finding also extended beyond the walls of the University. The Research Support Librarians visited other university libraries and institutions such as the British Library in order to identify the types of services and resources provided and to determine which were available to external researchers. This information was subsequently fed back to subject librarians and researchers via a page on the Library website.

Additional responsibilities in those early years included assisting subject librarians with user education and marketing, particularly relating to newly acquired web-based electronic resources such as the BIDS ISI Citation Indexes and Uncover. It must be remembered that at this stage, the Internet was a comparatively new innovation in UK Higher Education and subject staff welcomed the extra support at a time when they, too, were novices. User education took the form of workshops and demonstrations as well as the preparation of user guides and publications aimed at researchers. The Research Support Librarian also took on the responsibility for training researchers in the use of Papyrus, the DOS-based bibliographic software package to which the University had acquired an institutional licence.

Surveys of Researchers' Information Needs

Despite the value of information gleaned from discussions with researchers, it became apparent that a more structured and measurable method of identifying researchers' information needs was required. In 1996 a survey of researchers' information needs was conducted using specialist survey software, LIBRA. The Research Support Librarians did not do this independently but worked with the Library's LIBRA working party, a group of librarians drawn from several sites with

the responsibility for carrying out user surveys within the Library. Small focus groups of researchers were used to identify key areas of concern. Responses from the focus groups were used to develop pairs of statements for the LIBRA questionnaire. 2500 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to all academic staff and to students registered for an MPhil or PhD, both full-time and part-time. Roughly 500 completed questionnaires were returned, representing an acceptable response rate of 20%.

The results served to define the focus of the Research Support Librarian's responsibilities from this point on. It became patently apparent that the key concern of most researchers was enhanced access to electronic resources -- and notably to electronic resources available off-campus. Singled out as a priority by over 46% of all researchers was access to electronic journals and the ability to download articles to their desktops. Other key priorities included the ability to place interlibrary loan requests electronically; electronic access to contents pages of journals; greater access to electronic indexes and texts; and access to all Library services from home.

The 1996 survey also provided detailed information about researchers' lack of awareness of library services. Over 40% were unaware that library staff prepared user guides and help-sheets. Nearly 35% did not know of the existence of the Library website. Thirty-three percent did not know of the availability of web-based UK university library catalogues. And 32% had never heard of the Research Support Librarian. All very humbling but a salutary lesson! The simple provision of services, however good, however relevant, does not mean that the target audience will embrace them. Marketing and promotion must be included in the equation.

As a result of the survey, the main tasks of the Research Support Librarian concentrated on the development and promotion of web-based electronic resources within the Manchester Metropolitan University Library. This shift in focus coupled with the growing demands of acting as local Athens administrator and providing helpdesk services for electronic resources necessitated the abandonment of some responsibilities – for example, acting as the principle library contact for

researchers and attending all Research Committee meetings. In the words of the then Research Support Librarian:

The way forward seemed to be for the subject librarians to become the first point of contact for researchers, as they would have the in-depth knowledge of the particular services available in their subject area. The Research Support Librarian, on the other hand, would be able to concentrate on developing expertise in some of the multi-disciplinary resources, which would be relevant to most researchers.⁶

The restoration of the subject librarians as the first point of contact proved to be a popular move as, prior to the creation of the Research Support Librarian posts, most subject librarians had already developed excellent rapport with academic researchers and found it frustrating to have the Research Support Librarian imposed as a go-between. Additionally, researchers found it confusing to be referred to the Research Support Librarian for some purposes and to subject librarians for others.

In order to facilitate communication with other staff working in related areas, the Research Support Librarian moved in 1997 from an office at a site library into the office of the Electronic Services Development Team in the main library on the All Saints Campus. Although continuing to report directly to the Deputy Librarian, the Research Support Librarian became an informal member and acting deputy of this small team, whose mandate is to identify and develop all aspects of electronic services provision within the Library.

Before committing the Research Support Librarian fully to electronic resources development and in order to satisfy the Head of the Research Development Unit that research funds were spent appropriately, a short follow-up survey was conducted by the LIBRA Working Party in 1998. The intent was to determine if the new arrangements were meeting the demands of the researchers and again to gauge their level of awareness and usage of services. Only 250 researchers, selected by the Head of the Research Development Unit, were surveyed. The response rate was higher than for the first survey, with just over 27% of the questionnaires returned. The findings did not contradict the results of the previous survey and highlighted that continued and rapid investment in remotely accessible electronic resources was highly desirable. Additionally, the

respondents revealed that they wanted more than standard bibliographic services. As priorities they identified access to full-text services and products with add-on options such as desktop document delivery and current awareness services. Depressingly, there was further evidence that the Library's efforts to promote existing services were still in need of improvement. The good news was that more than 80% of the respondents had now used the Library website. The bad news was that over 60% still had not used electronic journals and indeed 20% had never even heard of them -- despite most of the responses coming from subject areas where electronic journals were commonly available. Sixty-five percent had not used any of the user guides and help-sheets produced by the Library.

The Current Responsibilities of the Research Support Librarian

Electronic Resources Development

As the results of the second survey were being tabulated, the then Research Support Librarian was promoted to the post of Library Services Manager at the Crewe Site Library and the Deputy Art & Design Librarian was seconded as the new Research Support Librarian, with a mandate to develop web-based electronic resources on an accelerated basis. The Library's senior management felt that a concentrated effort was needed to identify and acquire, not just out of the research budget but also out of the Library's general budget, as many web-based electronic resources as were relevant and affordable. Existing subscriptions to print and CD-ROM format abstracts and indexes were to be upgraded, where possible, to web versions and new resources were to be identified. Bearing in mind the results of the 1998 survey of researchers' information needs, the plan was to diversify and move beyond the provision of bibliographic databases alone. Web-based access was preferred to CD-ROM as the latter did not allow for off-campus access.

Within a year, the Library moved from subscribing to approximately one dozen web-based products to providing nearly 100 electronic resources, with the Library website acting as a gateway. Heeding the demands of researchers, the new resources included not only additional bibliographic databases but also

- Full-text electronic journal and newspaper services (for example, subscription services such as ScienceDirect plus free linked-to-print services such as CatchWord)
- Current awareness services (for example, subscription services such as BOPCAS -- the British Official Publications Current Awareness Service -- as well as the now freely available BLinside web)
- Specialist subject resources (for example, Beilstein/Crossfire, and EDINA Digimap)
- Funding sources (the Community of Science, purchased at the specific request of the Research Development Unit)
- Bibliometric data (Journal Citation Reports)
- Web-based mediated online search services (STN and DialogClassic, previously available via a modem and telephone link)

Also purchased were two administrative resources, invisible to the researcher, but designed to enhance access and reliability. These were ISI Linkage, which allows links from Web of Science citations to some of the full-text electronic journals held by the Library and NetMechanic's HTML Toolbox, which automatically checks the Library website for invalid hypertext links.

Although finances now restrict the scale of future development, the co-ordination of electronic resources development continues to be a major part of the Research Support Librarian's job and involves everything from the identification of new or alternative electronic resources of potential value to the University to the delicate and often complex task of negotiating the license agreements. The latter is done in conjunction with the University's legal experts in order to ensure that unacceptable conditions are identified, rejected and, where possible, renegotiated.

Following the initial explosion of acquisitions, emphasis has shifted to the rationalisation of existing resources rather than on continued new acquisition. Using management information statistics generated by suppliers of electronic services, the Research Support Librarian works to identify under-utilised resources. Where available, the numbers of logins and searches for all electronic resources are gathered in November, January and March of each academic year – months that

have been identified as representative of periods of high and low activity. The results give an idea of which resources are being used to an acceptable degree and which are being used at levels so low as to call into question their value within the institution. Initially, the information is disseminated to relevant Subject Librarians in order to identify reasons for the under-utilisation. Is the product redundant? Have research interests changed? Then cancellation may be the appropriate response. On the other hand, it may be that unexpected technical problems have been the cause of under-utilisation. Or it may be that more active marketing and promotion are required. In such cases, a stay of execution is granted and both Subject Librarians and the Research Support Librarian work together to promote the product more widely.

Communication with Library Staff and Researchers

The rapid acquisition of so many new web-based resources was exhilarating and even enviable but it did pose serious problems. Adapting to such a large number of new resources within the course of a single academic year was a potential source of confusion and stress, not just to the research community but also to Library staff, who were expected to learn how to use the resources competently; to write help-sheets for users; to incorporate the new resources into user education programs; and to provide user support -- in short, to become the instant "experts". It was extremely important that Subject Librarians were kept informed of developments and were involved in all decisions about which new resources were acquired. It was equally crucial that they had a say in the matter and retained a degree of control. As there were a few initial expressions of concern about the unreliability of the web and about both the suitability and the stability of electronic resources, it was evident that another key responsibility of the Research Support Librarian should be communication – not just with researchers but also with Library staff.

Keeping Library staff informed of developments has proved fairly straightforward. There were already many established channels of communication, ranging from regular formal meetings to an electronic in-house discussion list, lib-matters. Any announcements of new resources, changes to existing resources and other news can be posted to lib-matters and immediately reach each and

every member of Library staff. In addition, regular visits to each site library to talk with Library staff about local needs and problems as well as research activities helped to overcome the barrier imposed by working at some distance from one another. These meetings plus participation in various library working parties have helped to establish a productive two-way flow of information between Subject Librarians and the Research Support Librarian.

Informing researchers of developments proved more problematic. Subject Librarians agreed to highlight the new services in their user education programs, meetings, and informal encounters with research staff and students. Even so the Research Support Librarian felt the need to develop a method of reaching researchers directly, systematically and regularly. The Research Development Unit provided the e-mail addresses of the research co-ordinators for each Unit of Assessment but e-mailing these individuals each time there was a new development in their discipline proved haphazard and ineffective. Following discussion with researchers, a more methodical method of communication was identified -- one intended not only to communicate announcements of new services but also to educate researchers about Library services in general and to stimulate a two-way flow of information.

The result is the e-mail-based *Researchers' Weekly Bulletin*, which is distributed each Friday during term time and once a month during the summer. Copies are sent to research co-ordinators for further dissemination to academic staff and research students in their Units of Assessment. As well, some researchers have asked to receive the *Bulletin* directly with the result that there are currently over 350 names on the distribution list, including academic staff, research students and Subject Librarians. Both the current issue and a one-year archive of back issues are also available in HTML on the Library's website⁷. The creation of an electronic version of the *Bulletin* has resulted in an unexpected audience. In recent months, readers from as far away as South Africa and the USA have contacted the Research Support Librarian with favourable comments.

The content of each issue typically includes

- Announcements of new subscriptions to electronic resources and of new full-text electronic journals
- Announcements of free peer-reviewed electronic journals and scholarly electronic books
- News of useful free websites
- A "Spotlight" on an existing electronic resource
- News of enhancements or changes to existing electronic resources
- Tips for making effective use of particular services
- Information about the availability of new or updated help-sheets and Library guides
- Offers to speak with departments about electronic resources for researchers
- Announcements of conferences and workshops
- Announcements of new statistical data

The content is derived from diverse sources, including electronic discussion lists; e-mails and leaflets from suppliers of resources; electronic services such as The Scout Report⁸, The Internet Resources Newsletter⁹, BUBL Link Updates¹⁰, The Free Online Scholarship Newsletter¹¹, ResearchBuzz¹² and AcademicInfo¹³ plus news items from *The Guardian's* weekly *Online Supplement* and the Library Association's *Library Technology Supplement*. The "What's New" pages of the various hubs of the Resource Discovery Network also provide important content. Information is repeatedly solicited from library staff and researchers -- and there are now a small number of regular contributors.

The publication of the fiftieth issue (20 April 2001) seemed an appropriate point at which to assess readers' reception of the *Researchers' Weekly Bulletin*. A short web-based questionnaire was made available using Zope software and the URL announced only in the e-mail version of the *Bulletin*. This was done in order to limit the survey to members of the University's own research community and to prevent the results from being skewed by responses from external readers. Researchers were asked to identify themselves as academics or students and to specify which content they found most and least pertinent. They were also asked if any of the information

provided by the *Researchers' Weekly Bulletin* had impacted positively on their own research. A deadline of 27 May 2001 was set by which point 55 responses had been received, a response rate of approximately 18% (based on the number of names on the distribution list). Twenty-five per cent of the respondents identified themselves as research students, with the remaining 75% comprised of research co-ordinators and other academic researchers.

Their responses were extremely positive. Forty respondents – nearly 73% of the total – indicated that the *Researchers' Weekly Bulletin* had indeed supported their research activities. Perhaps not in a direct way, some pointed out, but by increasing their awareness of available library services and resources and informing them of research-related developments of which they might not otherwise have been notified. A greater proportion of academic staff than students believed that the *Bulletin* had helped with their research. One academic researcher remarked that being informed of the electronic availability of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sources such as *The Belfast Newsletter* and *The Statistical Account of Scotland* had been of particular help and added “I would not have found these unaided”.

When asked to identify which content was most pertinent, both academics and research students alike singled out announcements of new electronic journals and other electronic resources, including free websites and full-text documents. Of least interest was news from other libraries – for example, announcements about disruptions to opening hours – and the “Spotlight” on existing electronic resources available at the Manchester Metropolitan University. Even so, 38% of the respondents maintained that news from other libraries was relevant and 42% found the “Spotlight” a useful feature.

In response to the query, “Is your subject area adequately covered?” only 30% replied in the negative. The invitation to suggest subjects in need of improved coverage led to a list of more than 50 topics, many of which were indeed already included on a regular basis in the *Bulletin*, suggesting that an individual's notion of “adequate coverage” may be based on perception rather

than reality. Nonetheless, the list of suggestions was taken seriously and efforts have been made to incorporate more materials in these areas.

When asked if the *Researchers' Weekly Bulletin* should continue to be published, 54 readers representing 98% of the respondents replied in the affirmative, suggesting that the publication was indeed filling a gap in the market and meeting at least some of the information needs of the University's researchers. There was one non-response and no negative responses. Comments included "a valuable, indeed essential, service", "really, totally useful" and "on no account should discontinuing the *Bulletin* even be considered".

A small number of calls for papers were announced in the *Researchers' Weekly Bulletin* but the results of the survey suggested that the majority of the University's academic researchers did not find these of relevance -- possibly because there were existing networks to provide them with this sort of information. Research students, on the other hand, indicated that calls for papers were beneficial -- possibly because they had yet to build networks and were particularly eager for a first publication. Eighty-five percent of responses from research students identified calls for journal articles as of use and 77% felt that calls for conference papers were helpful. As a result of the academics' comments, calls for papers were removed from the *Researchers' Weekly Bulletin* and a spin-off e-mail based publication, simply entitled *Calls for Papers* is now published every second week during term time. The inaugural issue (12 July 2001) was disseminated to everyone on the *Researchers' Weekly Bulletin* distribution list with a request that those who did not want to continue to receive it should contact the Research Support Librarian in order to have their names deleted. To date, less than a dozen have done so, suggesting that academic researchers do in fact find the service useful.

Like the *Bulletin*, *Calls for Papers* is distributed to Research Co-ordinators for further dissemination and directly to individual researchers. Owing to the particularly ephemeral nature of its content, a web version is not created. Each issue consists of approximately eight calls for

journal articles and eight calls for conference papers. Information provided is brief: the title of the journal, name of conference plus location and date, submission deadline and, where available, links to external websites with full details. Bearing in mind the wide range of research interests within the University, an effort is made to make the subject coverage as diverse as possible. The content is derived from a variety of sources including publishers' websites; electronic discussion lists; services such as Papersinvited.com¹⁴ and the University of Pennsylvania English Department's Calls for Papers¹⁵; and contributions from researchers and Subject Librarians.

The Library website is another important means of communicating with researchers. A Services for Researchers web page¹⁶ has been developed as a gateway, aimed at informing researchers of relevant Library services and resources available via the website. Among the details provided are contact information for the Research Support Librarian; links to all Library publications targetted at researchers; information about and links to special information resources including the Researchers' Weekly Bulletin; and access and borrowing rights at other Manchester academic libraries. Elsewhere on the Library website is a section labelled Subjects and Categories, which includes classes of material identified as being of particular interest to researchers. These include archives, bibliographic citation sources, conference proceedings, current awareness services, e-print and preprint services, forthcoming conferences, funding sources, patents, and statistical information. Hypertext links have been added to any subscribed services within these categories. Additionally, the Research Support Librarian actively seeks out free high-quality web-based resources to include in these categories, using many of the same sources as consulted for the *Researchers' Weekly Bulletin*.

User Education

Making virtual contact with researchers works well up to a point but it remains important for the Research Support Librarian to make contact in person. Various events within the University – for example, the University's Open Learning Forum organised by the Educational Services Unit and the annual Research Day of the Department of Applied Community Studies -- have been useful

means of meeting researchers, discussing their information needs and promoting electronic resources informally. Even more important is the delivery of user education.

The Research Support Librarian regularly contributes to user education sessions organised by Subject Librarians, for the most part to demonstrate specialist electronic resources such as the Community of Science and current awareness services. Additionally, the Research Support Librarian has arranged user education sessions independently although, out of courtesy, the relevant Subject Librarian has always been informed. In some cases, the Subject Librarian is content for the Research Support Librarian to deal directly with the Department and wants no involvement at all. In other cases, the Subject Librarian prefers to monitor the presentation, not necessarily to participate formally but merely to learn about the services available to researchers and to be on hand in case questions relating to other library resources and services arise. There are also cases where the Subject Librarian wants to do a double-act. As with all team-teaching, sometimes this is highly successful, sometimes less so. On occasion researchers who might be expected to be reasonably familiar with the basic subject databases have confessed to total ignorance. In cases like this, flexibility and the ability to extemporise are paramount. It can be more important to defer to the Subject Librarian who can then speak about the basics rather than to persist with the planned programme. For all sessions, informative handouts are provided to all participants. In this way, even if time and circumstances militate against following the prepared text, researchers are still informed of the existence of pertinent specialist resources and have the Research Support Librarian's contact details should they want further information.

The University as a whole is concerned about the improvement and standardisation of the training provided both to its research supervisors and its research students. The 2001-2002 academic year witnessed the development of a Research Supervisors' Training Course, which called on expertise from within many areas of the university and included sessions on personnel issues, research ethics, funding sources and writing for publication. The Research Support Librarian was invited to give a 45-minute presentation on library services. Given the brevity of the allocated

time, the presentation on 26 September 2001 to the first group of 30 research supervisors was devised first and foremost as a marketing exercise aimed at heightening the participants' awareness of the wealth of resources provided by the library and, in particular, highlighting the existence of the "invisible" electronic library. Although only 7 feedback questionnaires were returned to the organisers, the feedback was extremely positive. The library presentation was rated as good by 3 respondents and excellent by 4. Comments on the presentation included "excellent value and would have usefully been expanded".

Accordingly, the presentation to the next group of research supervisors on 27 March 2002 was modified and slightly extended so that it became both a marketing exercise and a technical training session. In addition to spotlighting the wealth of electronic materials available, basic technical advice on how to make effective use of electronic resources – for example, how to develop a search strategy and the use of Boolean operators – was incorporated. At the time of writing, formal feedback from participants was not yet available.

In response to new requirements of the research councils, the University is also in the process of developing a Postgraduate Generic Training Programme in order to ensure that research students in all disciplines achieve competency in core skills – such as research ethics, qualitative and quantitative methods, data analysis and many of the topics included in the Research Supervisors' Training Course. Once again, a pool of expertise from throughout the University has been invited to participate. The Research Support Librarian, working with the Electronic Services Development Team Services Manager, has submitted a proposal for an expanded contribution from the Library, consisting of three components: a general introduction to Library services; using electronic resources effectively; and citing references and using bibliographic software. These sessions are not intended to replace the specialist training sessions provided by Subject Librarians but in fact, should free them from having to cover basic information and will allow more time to be devoted to hands-on training in the use of electronic resources of relevance to their subject areas.

The preparation of library guides and publications aimed at researchers is a natural by-product of both the communication and user education roles of the Research Support Librarian. Among those currently provided are an introductory guide to library services for researchers; a leaflet about current awareness services; help-sheets on Papyrus and EndNote 5, bibliographic software for which University has acquired site licences; and a help-sheet on the Community of Science. Additionally, the Research Support Librarian helped to co-author the 2000-2001 *Library Handbook* and the 2001-2002 *Off-Site Library Services Handbook*.

User education for Library staff also falls within the remit of the Research Support Librarian and again this relates primarily to keeping them informed of new electronic resources beyond the standard subject databases with which they are expected to developed familiarity. As Subject Librarians and other staff deal with research staff and students on a daily basis, they must be kept up-to-date in order to guarantee high levels of service. Consequently, the Research Support Librarian participates regularly in the Library's ongoing Staff Development Program. Presentations to staff have included updates on electronic resource developments; an introductory workshop on web resources for support staff; and sessions for professional staff on electronic current awareness services. Proposed presentations include EndNote 5 and the Community of Science, which have been identified as being unfamiliar to many Subject Librarians.

Special Projects

In addition to the responsibilities described above, the Research Support Librarian also becomes involved from time to time in special short-term projects which impact upon the services provided to researchers. For example, the Research Support Librarian developed the Library website's Electronic Books page¹⁷ which includes both freely available full-text materials (for example, publications of the National Academy Press and United Nations University Press) and the small but growing number of electronic books to which the University has access by subscription (such as the Manchester University Press titles available through Medieval Sources Online). Future

maintenance of this page has been devolved to another member of the Electronic Services Development Team.

Current projects include piloting the transfer of the electronic resources helpdesk service from the Electronic Services Development Team to Library Support Services and an exploration of the issues involved in abandoning print journals in favour of electronic-only. Work on both projects is ongoing and at this stage there is little to report.

The Future

"I never think of the future," Albert Einstein is said to have observed. "It comes soon enough."¹⁸ Given the negative news about reduced levels of research funding following the latest Research Assessment Exercise, it is impossible to predict with any certainty the future of the Research Support Librarian at the Manchester Metropolitan University or indeed of similar posts throughout the UK. If the availability of funding vanishes, then such posts and any accompanying acquisitions budgets are in danger of disappearing when current funding ends – in the case of the Manchester Metropolitan University, in July 2002. Some responsibilities of the Manchester Metropolitan University Library's Research Support Librarian – for example, user education and the maintenance of research-related Library web pages -- might be transferred with relative ease to Subject Librarians and members of the Electronic Resources Development Team. Other functions, however, would not be absorbed quite so easily into the workloads of other Library staff. Popular services such as the *Researchers' Weekly Bulletin* and *Calls for Papers* would more than likely cease publication.

Whatever may unfold, the experience of the Manchester Metropolitan University Library and other UK academic libraries demonstrates that there are many creative solutions to the challenge of supporting research. Common to all is the recognition of the need to establish effective ongoing channels of communication between library and researchers in order to determine researchers' changing information needs and to keep researchers informed of developments to library services

and resources. The presence of a designated member of library staff, such as the Research Support Librarian, with a responsibility for the co-ordination of communication and the development of services is advantageous.

Such work is incremental and demands time, imagination, patience and persistence. Just as Kellogg's did not gain its stature in the marketplace by advertising Corn Flakes just the once, neither can academic libraries effectively support researchers' information needs without continual effort and constant reiteration.

Mary Kelman Harrison (BA, MLS, MA, ALA)
Research Support Librarian
The Manchester Metropolitan University

And

Fiona Hughes (BAHons, M Lib, ALA)
Library Services Manager, Crewe Site Library
The Manchester Metropolitan University

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NOTES:

¹ Bob Eren. How recent developments in university libraries affect research. *Library Management*, 17 (8), pp. 5-16.

² HEFCE (July 2001) *Research Support Libraries Group Terms of Reference*. [Online] (URL <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Research/libraries/tor.htm>)

³ RAE (2001). *Guide to the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise*, p. 2. [Online] (URL <http://www.rae.ac.uk/Pubs/other/raeguide.pdf>)

⁴ LIS-ResearchSupport Discussion List: (URL <http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/LIS-RESEARCHSUPPORT.html>)

⁵ Joan Drage (2000) Unpublished document.

- ⁶Fiona Hughes (2001) Unpublished document on file.
- ⁷ Researchers' Weekly Bulletin [Online] (URL <http://www.mmu.ac.uk/services/library/info/research.html#rwb>)
- ⁸ The Scout Report [Online] (URL <http://scout.cs.wisc.edu/>)
- ⁹The Internet Resources Newsletter [Online] (URL <http://www.hw.ac.uk/libWWW/irn/irn.html>)
- ¹⁰BUBL LINK Updates [Online] (URL <http://www.bubl.ac.uk/link/updates/current.html>)
- ¹¹Free Online Scholarship Newsletter [Online] (URL <http://www.topica.com/lists/suber-fos/read>)
- ¹²ResearchBuzz [Online] (URL <http://www.researchbuzz.com/news/>)
- ¹³AcademicInfo [Online] (URL <http://www.academicinfo.net/>)
- ¹⁴PapersInvited.com [Online] (URL <http://www.papersinvited.com/>)
- ¹⁵University of Pennsylvania Calls for Papers [Online] (URL <http://www.english.upenn.edu/CFP/>)
- ¹⁶Services for Researchers [Online] (URL <http://www.mmu.ac.uk/services/library/info/research.html>)
- ¹⁷ Electronic Books [Online] (URL <http://www.mmu.ac.uk/services/library/eresource/ebooks.html>)
- ¹⁸ Words of Wisdom from Albert Einstein [Online] (URL <http://stripe.colorado.edu/~judy/einstein/advice.html>)