Tools to develop effective research support in an academic library: a case study

Helen Young, Peter Lund and Graham Walton
1 Loughborough University Library, UK.

Abstract: As Research Support is becoming an increasingly topical issue within academic libraries in the UK, this paper examines two different surveys that Loughborough University Library undertook to assess the effectiveness of its research support. The first was a benchmarking survey amongst 1994 Group universities, which produced quantitative data to enable the Library to identify its relative strengths and weaknesses and plan for the future. The second was a more inward looking survey which examined the information needs of a sample of research centres. This produced a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data. The paper discusses the strengths and weaknesses of both methods and how the results were carried forward into operational plans.

Keywords: Academic libraries, Research support, Qualitative data, Quantitative data, Case study, Library services, Benchmarking, User surveys.

1. Introduction
In April 2007, the Research Information Network (RIN) and Consortium of University Research Libraries (CURL) published their joint report into Researchers’ use of academic libraries and their services (2007). This national study raised the profile of research support currently offered within University libraries, whilst identifying the challenges for librarians and researchers in ensuring that this support is effective. Whilst a national survey is a very useful tool to provide a map of the landscape of research support in UK academia, it cannot provide an individual institution with all that it needs to know about the relevance of its own current services or how it should develop them in the future. Institutions range in size, resources and ethos. It is for this reason that Loughborough University Library undertook two projects to aid the development of its own research support services. The first was a benchmarking survey within the 1994 Group of universities conducted by the Research Support Team, whilst the second was a survey into the use of library services by research centres within the University itself and was one of the Library’s annual research oriented studies. This paper details the methods used in these surveys, their strengths and weaknesses and provides examples of how the results have been used to enhance research support at Loughborough.

2. Benchmarking Survey
Before the Library decided exactly how it wanted to develop its research support services, it decided to discover what institutions of a similar size and outlook were offering their researchers. This would enable the identification of any services that needed be developed to be on a par with these institutions or to surpass them. The quantitative data that such a benchmarking survey would produce would have strengths, as it would be quick to obtain and to analyse, whilst the main weakness would be that it would not be possible to assess how valued or used the services might be. However, it could identify the institutions to be contacted to discover more about particular services.
The key to the survey’s success was to ensure that the institutions that were benchmarked were like-minded institutions. This decision was helped by the fact that Loughborough is part of the 1994 Group of universities which was “established to promote excellence in research and teaching.” (2009 1994 Group). In the summer of 2008, when the study was undertaken, there were nineteen institutions in this group, which was felt to be a practical number of potential respondents, as well as providing a reasonable range of comparators.

Having decided who would be surveyed, the data collection method was determined. Given the potential range of research support services and number of respondents, it was felt that a questionnaire was the only practical tool. We knew from our own experience that respondents would not want to spend a long time filling in a questionnaire. We also did not want to ask questions to elicit data that was already available easily elsewhere. It was decided that data that could be drawn from the annual Society of College, National and University Library statistics (2007 SCONUL) should be analysed separately. It was not easy to find data about services offered to researchers, however, and so this was the area on which the questionnaire concentrated.

To ensure that the questions would have some resonance with the potential respondents, the web pages of both 1994 Group libraries and some Russell Group libraries (2009 Russell Group) were scanned to inform us of the services that could be offered. These included those that might be considered core services, such as inter-library loans, as well as ‘niche’ services, such as delivery of items to departments. One of the aims of the survey was to ascertain exactly how far spread such services were. The areas surveyed were: obtaining materials; mediated searching of databases; special collections; electronic reference; reference management; training; dedicated research space; support for the Research Assessment Exercise; management of research outputs; support for e-research; and a final open question on any areas not covered by the questionnaire.

With the content determined, the data collection tool had to be user-friendly. The Library had used UCCASS open source software (2009 UCCASS) for the construction of online surveys previously and it seemed ideal for our purpose, as it provided a web-based form for both the construction and the completion of the questionnaire, as well producing data for export to Excel for analysis. The majority of the questions were ‘tick box’ answers, so that it would be quick to complete and straightforward to analyse. The questionnaire was piloted by colleagues at University of Stirling and Loughborough to check the clarity of the wording and for any technical hitches. Once it had been amended, the link to the questionnaire was distributed by the University Librarian via a closed mailing list. It was felt that the endorsement of the Librarian would increase the response rate. The questionnaire was distributed during August for completion by the first week in September. It was hoped that this traditionally ‘quiet’ time in universities would ensure a good response.

By the end of a slightly extended deadline, we received fourteen responses, a response rate of approximately 79%. It was felt that the timing of distribution and physical method of delivery had been successful. Unfortunately the start of Loughborough University’s first semester began at the end of September, which meant there was only a very short time to analyse the data, because of preparations for the busiest period of the academic year. As there were just
two people working on the survey, the data analysis was more constrained than was originally planned and stretched well into the autumn term, with the report and recommendations completed at the beginning of December. In retrospect it would have been wiser to have distributed the questionnaire in the equally quiet May/June period, with the report and recommendations published in September, as this would have allowed the analysis and report writing to take place during the less pressured summer months.

The results of the survey (2008 Lund and Young) enabled the Library to discover the services that were being currently offered by other institutions within the 1994 Group. The Library was reassured that Loughborough was offering a similar range of support compared with others in the Group across all of the areas surveyed. The survey enabled us to identify that we were not allocating as much funding as the majority of respondents to electronic reference products, which moved their importance up our purchasing agenda. It also identified areas for further investigation, such as the deposit of data within institutional repositories and the possibility of the electronic submission of interlibrary loan forms. However, even though the majority of other respondents were offering the latter, advice from our copyright expert suggested that it would not be sensible for Loughborough to adopt the system of electronic signatures.

It was also possible to use the analysis of SCONUL electronic journal statistics to demonstrate that Loughborough was not spending as much as some of its most noteworthy competitors on electronic journal subscriptions. A presentation of the survey results to the Library Committee exercised the Committee enough to request increased funding for the Library budget to enable increased purchasing in this area. It is a moot point as to whether the funds that were subsequently forthcoming can be attributed solely to the survey results, but it did provide more evidence to support the argument.

The exercise has proved useful enough to consider repeating it to see how service provision changes over time and to keep ensuring that Loughborough is, at least, providing comparable services with others in the 1994 Group. However, the questions would be refined to look more towards the future. The original survey could not provide a sense of how research support services were likely to develop in the different organisations and so it did not really provide any fresh ideas. One way to develop this might be to include some libraries that are not in the 1994 Group but which are renowned for their research support. It would also be very helpful to discover the usage of the services offered. For example, to know how many PhD students or academic or research staff are being trained within other institutions, not just which courses are being run. Whilst some institutions might struggle to answer such questions, any responses would provide some insight into the success of the services.

A list of recommendations for Loughborough to take forward into future operational plans was drawn up as a result of the survey and so it has influenced the direction of the Library. For example, it is currently organising focus groups, to discover the importance of research space for PhD students, to help assess whether the Library or the University as whole should be providing more segregated areas for researchers. The recommendations are also being translated into measurable targets for research support. However, whilst the
benchmarking survey informed us that we are currently offering similar services to other institutions, it was not a tool to provide any insight into what was needed by our own researchers, and for this reason that we turned our spotlight onto the research centres at Loughborough for the next survey.

### 3. Research Centres Survey

The aim of the survey into the use of the University Library by research centres and research institutes at Loughborough University (2009 Lund, Walton and Young) was to discover more about how the University’s research community used information and the Library. Whilst the Library has Academic Librarians whose role is to liaise with departments to ensure that staff and students know about and can use information resources effectively, there was concern that the Research Centres and Institutes of the University were not being as well served, as they could be physically separate from academic departments and therefore are not necessarily so closely networked with the Library. However, their work is essential to a research intensive university, like Loughborough, and it was important to analyse their use of Library services and discover if they simply knew about them.

A team of three worked on the project which started in March 2008 with the publication of the report planned for the end of September 2008. As there were eight research institutes and thirty-nine research centres across the different faculties of the University, a stratified sample was selected for the survey, as there was not the time or resources to survey every one. Two research centres from each of the three faculties were selected to ensure that there was a spread of disciplines and size. It was also decided at an early stage to survey administrative staff, as well as academic staff and research associates. We wanted to find how information needs varied amongst the different roles and whether administrative staff might be being used as information brokers. Rather than just have one method to survey the sample, a variety was chosen to provide both quantitative and qualitative data. The first phase was to discover how many people in the selected centres were borrowing the Library stock or using the inter-library loan service. This quantitative data was obtained from the library management system, ALEPH, and immediately indicated that usage of both services was not high by the vast majority of research centre staff in the sample.

The second phase was to discover which resources the staff were using; whether they were provided by the Library or not; and whether they were using any of the other research support services or knew about them. All of the staff in the six research centres, we had chosen, were surveyed. There were eighty-nine individuals within the sample and so the only practical method for data collection was a questionnaire. As UCCASS survey software had proved effective in the benchmarking survey, it was used again. Mainly tick box questions were used, to make the questionnaire quick to complete and provide data that could be analysed easily. However, as it was also important to obtain qualitative data to try to provide greater understanding of the reasons behind the statistics, there were free-text areas provided. The survey was piloted by a separate research centre, the Library and Information Statistics Unit, to check that the questionnaire was understandable and easy to complete. The areas covered by the questionnaire included: how often different types of information were used; where information was located; training needs; and use of library research support services at Loughborough and elsewhere.
The construction and revision of the questionnaire took longer than the benchmarking survey as there were more questions and a broader mix of types. This unfortunately meant that it was distributed in June rather than April/May, as had been originally planned. It was distributed via individual, personal emails, which was time-consuming but it was hoped that a personal touch would increase the response rate. There were 47 responses (52%) which included all of the sample centres and types of staff. Individuals were asked to include their name, centre and the type of role they had, so that potential interview candidates for the final stage of the survey could be identified, as well as enabling us to check that there was a mixture of respondents.

The final phase of the survey was to look even deeper into the types of information sources used by individuals in their work and to tease out how they currently used Library services or might want services to develop. The potential interviewees were selected from those who had completed the questionnaire. Their individual staff web pages were checked to see how experienced as researchers or members of staff they were, so that there was a mixture of experience, as well as a variety of roles. There were ten interviews altogether, which included individuals from all of the six research centres. A template for the interviews was constructed so that they all followed a similar structure and covered similar points. This also enabled the data to be collated effectively within key themes. The main sections of the interview included: the individual’s use of books and journals (of whatever format); their perceptions and use of Library systems and services; and what the Library could do to help their research or work in the research centre. The interviewer took notes rather than taping the interview, which made the data collection less reliable than transcription but there was not time for this to take place. The interviews were held over the summer vacation, although research trips and holidays meant that this part of the data collection took longer than anticipated with some of the interviews not taking place until late September. This meant that once again data analysis and report writing took place during the busiest time of the year. The report was not published until early 2009, three months later than anticipated.

The research centres survey allowed the Library to deepen its knowledge about how research centres currently use information and library services, as well as providing ideas for the future. It demonstrated where the Library and its resources sat within their research world and, as had been suspected, for many people in the sample, it often had an invisible role, if it had a role at all. It was quite sobering but important to know. However, a weakness with the survey was the size of its sample. Eighty-nine individuals out of the total number of 1042 research and teaching staff (2008 Loughborough University) is only 0.09%. Whilst 1042 is not the total number research centre staff, it is the total number of staff that the Library’s research support services should be reaching. The sample had to be small to be manageable but it means that care had to be taken not to rely solely on the conclusions for service development. However, despite this, it has provided some evidence to support ideas for new services and developments that could be investigated. For example, there is evidence that some staff do not know about Library services that could be very helpful to them, such as Academic Librarians. Some of the interviewees appreciated learning of their existence during the interview process and have used them since, which suggests that marketing these services more effectively
could be productive both for the Library and the individuals concerned. The Library has recently instigated a campaign to include Academic Librarian contact details on all departmental web pages to increase their visibility beyond the Library. The interviews suggested that researchers do not need information at all times in a project and so publicity and services should be targeted at key points in a project, such as at the beginning when researchers could finding their way into a new subject area, or when they are preparing a bid.

All three phases of data collection were successful in providing the information sought and they complemented each other well. In retrospect, the depth of certain questions in the questionnaire could have been improved to have obtained more insight into which ‘websites’ and which ‘electronic Library services’ were being used. However, such questions had been consciously sacrificed to ensure that the questionnaire was not too long, in case it became too off-putting to complete. The questions were followed up in the interviews but as interviewees equated to less than a quarter of our respondents, we are uneasy about drawing firm conclusions without further investigations. The research centres survey was a very valuable experience but was ambitious in the time scale. A study using the three different phases could, however, be repeated for just one specific research centre or academic department to learn more about its individual information needs and use of the Library.

4. Conclusion
Both the benchmarking survey and the research centres survey were very valuable tools to discover more about what academic libraries currently offer researchers and how researchers use their services and other information resources. Both surveys provided Loughborough University Library with information that it had not known and is now using to improve its services to current and future researchers. Different methods were tested and proved to have both strengths and weaknesses. The benchmarking survey provided sound results as it was based on a large enough sample to provide trustworthy quantitative results. The qualitative data that was obtained from the small sample in the research centres survey provided the Library with very valuable insight into what it is like to be a researcher. The empathy that this latter type of data produced will be extremely helpful in the construction of future services for this group of Library user (or potential user), admittedly with a little more research to check that it is not unique. The key point for both surveys is that they have both been used to improve Library services to researchers. Whilst no completely new services have been developed as yet, services are being enhanced, such as the improved publicity for academic librarians and extra researcher only training sessions. It is doubtful that either of these initiatives would have taken place without the results of the surveys to prompt them. More changes will come and so the time and effort involved in both projects has been worthwhile and will continue to benefit both researchers and Loughborough University Library itself.

References


