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Maximising impact: scaling-up UX activities (and how to manage all that data!)

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In Spring 2016, the Relationship Management Team at York launched a new project entitled 'Understanding Academics'. The project aimed to understand more about the research and teaching activities of academics at York and to ensure that the 'academic voice' was built into Library service developments and improvements. The Library has focussed heavily on supporting the student experience over the last few years (pressure of responding to the NSS!) so it was felt time to focus on the needs of academics and understand more about the reality of life as an academic today.

The project centred around the use of specific ethnographic methodologies and in particular two UX techniques: cognitive mapping followed by semi-structured interviews. The cognitive maps were based on either research or teaching activities, depending on who was being interviewed. Academics were asked to do one of the following:

- Draw a map of your research process. Show each of the key stages, along with the systems or tools you need to make them work, and how they link together.
- Map your process for preparing and delivering a new or existing module. Show each of the key stages, along with the systems or tools you need to make them work, and how they link together.

The project was ambitious in scale: 97 interviews using UX methodologies were carried out by Academic Liaison Librarians (ALLs) across all three faculties at York, in addition to 45 interviews using more traditional interview techniques. All academic departments took part in the project. There was some initial scepticism on the part of some academics about the use of cognitive maps; however they ended up being pleasantly surprised at how useful the maps were in setting out research or teaching processes and articulating key activities, concerns and aspirations.

Our biggest challenge was how to tackle such a large-scale UX project and, in particular, how to process and analyse the sheer volume of data emerging from the project. Ultimately we wanted to ensure that all of the data collected translated into a series of defined, practical, impactful recommendations and actions to improve the Library experience of academics.

In order to help us process, analyse and manage the data, we designed a 5-stage methodology as follows:

Stage 1 - conduct and write up the ethnography

The ALLs conducted interviews over a two month period and we asked for permission to record the interviews (all the academics agreed to this). We then gave the ALLs a further month in which to write up the interviews. Different ALLs took different approaches to this: some transcribed the interviews fully, others wrote very full notes. The key at this stage was to capture as much as possible in the academics' own words rather than putting our own interpretation on what was said. There is debate in the community about the value of transcription but I found it enormously helpful to read people's ideas and opinions in their own words for this particular project. We ended up with a huge set of interview notes to do something with, literally hundreds of pages of commentary but all potentially useful.

Stage 2 - coding and analysis

We decided to use qualitative analysis tools to help us structure the data which would then help us analyse the data. We employed a temporary member of staff with a PhD and lots of experience of handling data which proved invaluable. She trained herself up on the NVivo tool and then started working through the data, developing a set of codes with which to organise the data. As she was going through the data, she made a note of some key comparators (faculty, department, researcher/teacher) which allowed for some interesting analysis of trends across the University. All information was carefully anonymised. In total, the information from the interviews was structured into 24 overarching themes (e.g. Teaching, Digital Tools and Social Media use, Collaborations, Research, Working Spaces etc.) and many sub-themes underneath that. This whole coding process took around two months to complete.

Stage 3 - assigning themes for analysis and recommendations

Once all the information had been organised into themes, it became clear that the rest of the team would need to help with the analysis as there was a lot to get through. Due to some issues with the ways in which the information had been coded in NVivo (some duplication of information across themes, for example), I needed to read through everything myself to have a clear overview of all the data. I took all the key themes and assigned specific ones to key individuals and teams in Relationship Management with specific expertise, particularly some of the research issues (which went to the Research Support Team) and issues around digital skills (which went to the Teaching and Learning Team), although I ended up doing the bulk of the analysis myself due to time constraints across the rest of the team. I produced a Gantt chart showing what themes needed to be analysed, who was analysing them and by when. We were working to two very specific deadlines: publication of the interim report in January 2017 and the final report in June 2017.

Stage 4 - outcomes and recommendations

Our priority was to start producing and publicising recommendations as soon as possible rather than waiting until the end of the project. We wanted to start making changes where we could and tell people what we were doing so that they could immediately understand the benefits of the project. The first thing that I did was to ask ALLs to identify 'quick wins' that had come out of the interviews: things that academics had asked for or had commented on

which we could quickly and easily fix. These 'quick wins' included: changing the use of the Library's research hotel rooms so that they are now accessible to all staff and not just research staff; organising support from the Writing Centre for particular modules in which students are needing to improve their writing skills; bidding for specific new subscriptions; and setting up a new initiative called 'Inspiring Users' which encourages Library staff to get involved in a range of new activities to inspire and support users. Following the 'quick wins' we then analysed the rest of the data, organising it into two main areas:

- Practical recommendations for each of the themes
- Evidence-based synthesis of what it means to be an academic at York: summary of how academics go about their research and teaching, what are their **motivations**, **frustrations** and **aspirations**. This will be used as a basis for building personas which is one of the final outcomes of the project.

It took the entire autumn term for me to go through everything, identify an initial set of practical recommendations, agree these internally in the Library and then promote these out to the community. The rest of the analysis was carried out in the spring term by the rest of the team.

Stage 5 - distribution and dissemination

The interim report was published in January 2017 with initial recommendations and the evidence-based synthesis. Some of the key recommendations were:

- Changes to the flexible loans system for academics, giving them longer to return recalled items and being less stringent with fines;
- List of requirements for the new reading list system which is being replaced this summer;
- Changes to our annual subscriptions review procedures;
- Support with providing textbooks to students on the right platforms;
- Support with bibliometrics and copyright issues;
- Comms out to academics about key library messages.

The report was sent out to all participants plus key leaders at the University including the Pro Vice Chancellor for Teaching and Learning, and we received a lot of comments and positive feedback. The final report was written in June and will be circulated shortly with a whole new set of recommendations to take forward around research support and digital literacy skills support in particular. A presentation to Library staff was also given in June, focussing on the evidence-based synthesis to facilitate better understanding of academics.

Key lessons learnt

We learnt a huge amount in this project, not just about academics, but about actually undertaking this kind of ethnographic project and how to deal with all the data generated. Some key highlights to reflect on:

1. It was a hugely valuable exercise - pretty much without exception, and despite some initial scepticism around the methodologies used, all academics enjoyed taking part and were pleased that the Library were taking such an interest in their work and their opinions. It was a real opportunity for us to develop our relationships with academics and to improve services for them.
2. It takes time - a lot of it! You definitely need buy-in from the senior management team and they need to see the value and impact of the work that you're doing and a tangible return on their investment. What did the project actually achieve?
3. Use qualitative analysis tools - but be aware that coding can reflect one person's initial interpretation so, if I was doing this again, I would discuss the coding more collectively and get more people's thoughts on a final set of codes to use. Also we had quite a lot of duplication of text across different themes which meant that you did need one person with oversight of all the data to see where the duplication was occurring.
4. Share the gain, share the pain - get everyone involved in the analysis, use expertise in the team to analyse particular areas e.g. research support.
5. Keep momentum going - share results as you go along and make improvements when you can rather than waiting for some big grand finale.

Concluding thoughts

In twenty years of working in libraries, this has been the single best project that I've been involved with. It's been endlessly fascinating to open this window into the world of academics and to think about how we, as a library service, can support them in ways that they actually need to be supported based on what they have said to us, and not just what we think they need. For me personally, it was such a privilege to have time talking to real experts about their research and I learnt a massive amount too, including a whole load of stuff about mathematical theory which, for someone who struggled with GCSE maths, was really quite enlightening. Who knew maths could be so fun?!

We have written several blog posts on the project on our Lib-Innovation blog and are aiming to publish the findings of the project over the coming months. Keep an eye on the blog for more updates: <http://libinnovation.blogspot.co.uk/>