

Come on in, the water's lovely : The Move to Higher Education - A Personal View

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A number of librarians up and down the country continue to be affected by the merging of Colleges of Nursing with Higher Education Institutions. Call me naive, but I did not realise the level of concern that still exists. So I thought it might be useful if I outlined the largely positive effects that the merger affecting my own institution has had on the library service.

Background

I qualified as a librarian in 1982. My first job was as librarian for Basildon and Thurrock School of Nursing, in South Essex. I was the first qualified librarian they had. My predecessor was unqualified, part-time and was expected to manage three libraries single handed. How things have changed.

In 1990 (if my memory serves me right), Basildon & Thurrock merged with Southend School of Nursing to form South Essex Department of Nursing and Midwifery Education. At the same time Mid Essex and West Essex Schools also merged. The libraries of the two old schools merged into a single service, and I was asked to undertake the role of Learning Resources Manager. I was never sure if I was asked to undertake this role because of my expertise, or because I could "manage" a service with few staff, and little money.

The two Essex departments were associated with Anglia Higher Education College, a link similar to those that many colleges of nursing have forged in recent years for the running of Project 2000 courses. During this period library resources staff from both Departments and the College got together to discuss any co-operative ventures that could be made. These discussions proved invaluable once it was clear that full merger was to take place in 1992.

In October 1992, after several delays, full merger into the new Anglia Polytechnic took place. The library was merged with the Polytechnic Library Service, which forms part of the Faculty of Educational Services. This was important, since at last the library was to be run by librarians, rather than by nurse teachers, who were to join the Faculty of Health and Social Work. As the only professional librarian in the two old Departments, I was asked to take on the role of Faculty Librarian. Anglia already had one Faculty Librarian for Health and Social Work, but since we planned to keep operating all the libraries we ran on health service sites, it was thought that there was more than enough work for two.

So now, despite the fact that I am still sitting at the same desk that I sat at in 1982, I am a member of the senior management team of one of Britain's newest and fastest growing universities. So, for those of you who will soon be joining me as an academic librarian rather than an NHS librarian, what are the advantages and disadvantages of this change?

I must acknowledge that all mergers, and all University library structures, are different, and that hopefully not many of you are "managing" to run the number of libraries I had without professional support. Following discussions with librarians from Colleges throughout the Country, I believe that Anglia's policy of keeping nurse education centres rather than centralising on main sites is unusual.

Accountability

My line manager is the University Librarian, and although I work with the teaching staff who previously managed my budget, I don't work for them. I no longer have to pick up all those other jobs that I used to do simply because there was no one else to do them, such as moving furniture, or printing handouts.

Academic v Support staff

Professional librarians in universities are accepted as professionals, with many on academic rather than support staff contracts. In the Health Service, I was on an administrative grade, resulting in many teaching staff linking me with the secretaries and clerical staff rather than with themselves. After two years I feel this has changed, with academic staff appreciating the role of library staff.

Staffing

Staffing levels, based on the COfHE guidelines, have been implemented, with a professional librarian employed to manage each of the nursing libraries. Library opening hours have been extended beyond the traditional 8.30 - 4.30, with staffing levels similarly expanded to guarantee that the library is staffed during opening hours.

Financial Resources

For the first time I have a devolved budget of my own. The minimum budget is worked out on a F.T.E. basis and is therefore guaranteed. Additional funding has been negotiated from the Faculty of Health and Social Work, both for stock and for special projects such as the connection of the nursing libraries to the University Library Management System (Dynix).

Representation

Faculty Librarians are automatically invited to join all course management committees. Many course development teams also have library representation, with a Faculty Librarian usually attending course validations. This should ensure that courses that are run are adequately resourced.

A Faculty Librarian also attends other major Health and Social Work committees such as Faculty Board, and Faculty Academic Standards Committee.

Our professional expertise is often requested by the Health and Social Work Dean, and her senior management team. A business plan was requested from the library, in which we proposed major reorganisation of the service. Our proposals were accepted with very little alteration.

Staff Development

A staff development budget exists for library staff; we are not competing with teaching staff for funds. I am currently completing an MA with the University of North London, for which I receive support. The University also runs a number of staff development courses and workshops which all staff can attend. This has meant that the staff development needs of library assistants are not ignored. Staff development interviews (appraisal or IPR in

health service language) are carried out each year, and as a result of the management structure, and of the availability of a budget, these seem to really work.



Prospects

Being part of a larger organisation, I have had the chance to participate in a number of University wide projects, and nationally funded research, which I would never have had the chance to participate in whilst working for the NHS.

My dual role as Faculty Librarian and site manager for four of our six nursing libraries, has given me management experience (dealing with staff issues, planning new libraries, etc.) which other Faculty Librarians may never get the chance to gain. As a result, I should have better prospects of career development in the future.

Dependence/Independence

Having worked on my own for so many years, in isolation from the rest of the library community, I find it a great advantage to be part of a larger library system. However it must be said that I am able to keep a certain amount of independence whilst the university continues to run the nursing libraries on Health Service sites. For example, Dynix allows for alternative classmarks, I have therefore been able to continue using NLM classification, whilst the rest of the University uses Dewey. However a consensus on interpretation of NLM has had to be reached between those sites using NLM. I am not sure how I would have reacted to having to work full-time in one of the main libraries.

Conclusions

My own experience of the move into higher education is a positive one, although I acknowledge that the move might be traumatic for many library staff working in Colleges of Nursing, especially if a reduction or loss of educational contracts has led to redundancies. However, my overriding message for those who make it is that I'm sure the end result will be successful.

(The comments and opinions given in this article are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the University.)