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Abstract

A Community of Practice approach to delivering research support services in a post-92 higher education institution: a reflective case study

The need for research support in UK universities is growing at a fast pace and a number of different professional and academic units within universities are involved in the process.

This case study takes place in a post-92 higher education institution and discusses the benefit of utilising a cross-university Community of Practice (CoP) approach to delivering research support services. It takes a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews to ascertain the personal experiences of community members.

The article's key findings for successful implementation include a common sense of purpose; a shared concern or passion about the research agenda; a sense of community and belonging; trust; a safe environment; and senior management support. Added benefit is demonstrated by enhanced staff knowledge, increased job satisfaction and profile raising of the Library and Learning Service. The findings can help libraries in similar positions to use collaborative initiatives to develop research support services.

Keywords

collaboration; community of practice; knowledge management; researchers; university libraries

Main text

Introduction

The need for research support in UK universities is growing at a fast pace and a number of different professional and academic units within universities are involved in the process, bringing different skills, knowledge and abilities. However, academic organisations often take a silo'd approach to service delivery and hierarchical and organisational barriers can present obstacles to a cross-university approach to supporting university research objectives.

This case study is set in a post-92 higher education institution, traditionally founded on learning and teaching. Recently, research has been growing within the university and continues to grow apace. This is set within the context of the increasing importance of university funding for research activities, much of which now derives from the UK Government's Research Excellent Framework (REF), introduced in 2015. The REF aims to judge the quality of research in the UK and apportions a differential share of research funding according to the outcomes of the exercise. (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2016). A number of new initiatives have been introduced for the next REF, due to take place around 2021, including the requirement for journal articles and conference papers to be available in an open access (OA) format. UK universities also rely on funding from research councils, charities and other organisations that have mandates for OA publishing and the archiving and sharing of research data (Tate, 2015). Libraries within the UK academic sector are increasingly being asked to provide support to ensure compliancy in these two areas.

Within Library and Learning Services (LLS) at De Montfort University (DMU) it was recognised that the mechanisms to support research were not yet fully developed, and a

dedicated research support team was not part of the directorate's structure. Therefore, a collaborative working solution was adopted to capitalise on the different knowledge and capacity within relevant university directorates. Starting very much as a small working group supporting OA publishing, further ideas for initiatives were suggested and a Community of Practice (CoP) began to emerge.

This article describes how a CoP approach to research support has evolved and examines the experiences of its members. Outlining the benefits of this approach, it discusses the factors enabling a CoP to flourish, considers barriers to success and suggests how the relevant directorates move forward to capitalise on the initiative. Lessons learned are provided for institutions in comparable positions who may wish to adopt a similar approach within research support.

Our CoP model

Our CoP model started to emerge when LLS and the Research, Business and Innovation Directorate (RBI) realised the need to expand our OA advocacy work. We were aware that OA publishing in the university repository was limited and there was a general lack of awareness of HEFCE and funder requirements. A repository manager was already in post within LLS and the RBI had appointed a REF officer. Both role holders agreed that working collaboratively and together with academic liaison librarians would be beneficial, leading to the introduction of a Research Support Improvement Group (RSIG) to act as a focus for cross-directorate activities. OA advocacy and development of online guidance was set in motion, at which point the group informally discussed the provision of additional research support. These ideas developed over time and several initiatives were introduced, including:

OA support

Development of a libguide (libguides.library.dmu.ac.uk/openaccess) providing OA support and a mailbox account, alongside a timetable of generic and school/department specific advocacy sessions.

“Elevenses”

Launch of a regular series of short informal workshops on key research topic areas, delivered to both research students and staff.

Annual research conference

Organisation of a “research life-cycle” one day conference, funded by the Graduate School, including presentations and workshops on research data management (RDM), research impact and visibility, funding and bidding, reference management, and an external keynote speaker.

Thesis drop-ins

Delivery of a monthly drop-in service to assist PhD students with literature searching and writing skills for their thesis.

Writing group for research students

Creation of a small, informal group meeting on a monthly basis to discuss topics related to writing at doctoral level and providing peer-to-peer writing feedback.

A core group of staff were involved in these initiatives, but other professional service staff were then drawn from within the RBI, the Centre for Learning and Study Support (CLaSS) and the Centre for Enhanced Learning through Technology (CELT). Although not apparent at first, a CoP was developing organically, consisting of an informal collective of staff members committed to supporting the research agenda. These members all felt a sense of community and trust within the group and demonstrated a desire to share good practice across directorates and the university. The CoP has remained informal and members have become

involved, more or less, depending on the relevance of the activities to their own work and the expertise they can bring to the community.

Methodology

This paper takes a reflective case study approach to determine whether a CoP is an effective way to develop and deliver research support services in a higher education setting. A qualitative approach has been used, with the authors deliberately wishing to capture the experiences of CoP members, the perceptions of their learning gain, and investigate whether a CoP approach could improve the support provided to researchers. The authors acknowledge that the case study is small and findings cannot necessarily be generalised, but seek to offer observations that similar institutions could use in their own approach to research support.

Semi-structured interviews were held with eight key members of the CoP, including: LLS members (team manager, two academic liaison librarians, and repository manager); a member of CLaSS; a member of CELT; and two members from RBI. Interviews consisted of nine questions with discussions lasting approximately half an hour. Thematic analysis was used to identify key findings from interview data.

Literature Review

The concept of Communities of Practice (CoP) originated in the 1990s from anthropological research and the concept has subsequently been developed in a range of organisational contexts, including learning theory and knowledge sharing. Lave and Wenger describe a CoP as “a system of relationships between people, activities, and the world; developing with time, and in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice.” (Lave &

Wenger, 1991, p. 98). Wenger-Trayner subsequently built on this model, establishing CoPs as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 1). They offer three main CoP characteristics: a shared domain of interest, a community that interacts and learns from each other, and the development of shared practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

Henrich and Attebury describe CoPs as fitting within a management philosophy that regards employees as self-motivated and willing to learn, sharing a “...passion about the topic on which community members focus their efforts” (Henrich & Attebury, 2010, p. 162). The importance of a sense of community is recognised as a key factor in enabling CoPs to flourish, together with the value that members place on participating and gaining a sense of integration and fulfilment of needs (Nistor, Daxecker, Stanciu, & Diekamp, 2015). The level of participation in a CoP will vary across all participants with (Lave & Wenger, 1991) arguing that some members perform a central role, are involved in more activities and have greater responsibility, whilst others perform a more peripheral role. This is familiar to those in the library profession as groups of professional practice in both the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) and the American Library Association (ALA) operate in this way (Allan, 2009).

A sense of trust is also discussed as important to the success of a CoP, with fear of criticism as a barrier to effective communication (Ardichvili, Page, & Wentling, 2003). Henrich (2010) goes on to state that one of the benefits of a CoP approach is for individuals to gain confidence from a shared community and enjoy increased job satisfaction. The idea of a supportive network is further explored in the literature in terms of sharing good practice

within a CoP (Ruikar, Koskela, & Sexton, 2009). Allan (2009) notes that a CoP can provide task in hand benefits (shared workload), social benefits (support and like-minded individuals), and career benefits (development of confidence and expertise). This can lead to the more effective delivery of any number of services or activities with shared benefits for participants.

However, the literature suggests that a number of organisational requirements are necessary for a CoP to succeed. Organisational culture and structures can play a large part in providing an environment conducive to nurturing and developing self-directed initiatives (Ruikar et al., 2009). Informal CoPs can facilitate better open communication, with formalisation often affecting autonomy. As such, Aljuwaiber, Chase, & Chase (2016) argue that top management can see CoPs as threatening and can stifle the initiative of the community. The part played by organisational culture is discussed further by Amin and Roberts, who, using the healthcare sector as an example of a professional CoP, contend that “bridging the boundaries between different groups...is essential for the efficient exchange of information and for the dissemination of innovation” (Amin & Roberts, 2008, p. 360). They however indicate that a professional CoP may encounter institutional restrictions and the ‘protectionist role’ of professional associations (Amin & Roberts, 2008). Within higher education, Henrich and Attebury point out the nature of a professional culture itself can mitigate against shared learning and activity. They argue that “... perhaps too, higher education settings are not the places where collaborative models can be successful, given the amount of competition for research grants and publications” (Henrich & Attebury, 2010, p. 163). The literature however also points to the benefit of cross-institutional boundaries, with Whitchurch (2008) describing a concept of bounded, cross-boundary and unbounded professionals to explore the concept of a ‘third space’. She argues that through working collaboratively on projects,

professional services and academic staff in higher education can create a third space, which is neither purely academic nor purely administrative/managerial. Members “see the building of communicative relationships and networks as more significant than the observance of organisational boundaries, so much so that third space work may occur in spite of, rather than because of, formal structures” (Whitchurch, 2008, p. 386).

A search of the literature demonstrates acceptance of the concept and adoption of CoPs in academic circles and higher education libraries with a student support focus. However, there is very little literature that examines a CoP approach to research support. Corral (2014) identifies an increase in library support for researchers and that boundary-spanning policies, for example around OA and RDM, have generated cross-departmental structural arrangements. She describes these as “steering/working groups bringing institutional stakeholders together to facilitate compliance with funder requirements” (Corral, 2014, p. 36). However, she notes a lack of recognition of the library’s supporting role amongst researchers and a lack of awareness that libraries can be a partner in research. At the University of Idaho, Henrich and Attebury describe the use of CoPs in the academic library in bringing together librarians from diverse positions to “raise awareness of how current ideas, projects and research related to each serve the larger organization as a whole”. (Henrich & Attebury, 2010, p. 161). They suggest that job satisfaction stemming from the development of problem solving abilities, sharing expertise, developing trust and a professional reputation can all be gained from belonging to a CoP (Henrich & Attebury, 2010).

Discussion

This case study evaluates the effectiveness of a CoP approach to the delivery of research support to the academic community in a post-1992 university. The authors decided to use the

approach of interviewing members of the CoP to understand their experience of being involved in a CoP. It was perceived that a qualitative, discursive method would allow for the feelings and experiences of individuals to be captured and facilitated rich and informative discussions on how to take a CoP approach forward in the future.

Motivations to involvement in a CoP

The literature points to the necessity of members having a common sense of purpose, a shared concern or passion about a topic and motivated by community interest. Results from the interviews support this assertion, with all members of the CoP in agreement that they all had some stake in research support and were committed to developing this within the university. They recognised that knowledge differed between individuals and between professional units within the university and that, “no one department can know everything a researcher needs to know.” They welcomed the accumulation of knowledge from different experts to enable a more holistic offer to researchers. Members all agreed that the informal CoP worked well and attributed this success to their shared interest, mutual support and sense of community. One practitioner stated, “I think it works really well at the moment but I’m aware that this is mainly down to individuals making it work and wanting it to happen”.

Sense of community

Success also depends on practitioners having a sense of community and a feeling that the CoP fulfils their needs. Reflections from the interviews corroborate this assertion with all practitioners stating that they felt active participants and had a strong feeling of belonging in the community. Practitioners do not always have to play a central role in the CoP for it to be successful and this was borne out in the reflections with practitioners assigning themselves a wide variety of roles, including: leader, facilitator, overseer, organiser, creator of content,

deliverer, and presenter. None of these roles had been allocated within the group but adopted organically by members, with an acceptance that some members were happy to be more involved in some activities than others, depending on their knowledge and experience.

Trust and sharing of good practice

A sense of trust is also discussed as important to the success of a CoP. Reflections from the interviews validate the importance of trust, with one respondent explaining he had been able to gain knowledge and felt comfortable to question this knowledge. Reflections from another member of the group commented that working in the CoP had resulted in him being taken out of his comfort zone, having had little contact with research staff up to this point, but that he had found this process invigorating. He stated that without the CoP activities or support from the group, he may have had less reason or confidence to tackle these activities and he very much saw the CoP as offering him a development opportunity within his role. Others discussed the confidence that they had gained from the shared community, with one member stating that she had entered her role with little knowledge of OA, and that she had felt quite isolated. She had found the CoP particularly rewarding in being able to gain knowledge and expertise within a safe environment. Members also highlighted the usefulness of learning from others' expertise, gaining knowledge from different agencies working within the university, and bringing this expertise together. There was an acknowledgement that "not everyone is going to have the right expertise or knowledge for every task or activity" and that it seemed "sensible to bring all our collective strengths and knowledge together" to provide a cohesive service.

Members also recognised the importance of sharing good practice for the good of the service overall. For example, one interviewee stated that if research support "is only delivered in

one department, you don't find out how other things work in other parts of the university". A number of interviewees based in the library suggested that the CoP approach had provided them with a much greater knowledge of how the RBI worked and how services could work together cohesively. They recognised that the CoP could help in bridging the gap between formal structures and facilitate improved communication.

A number of practitioners also described the opportunities that the shared approach had presented. On a personal level, the CoP had allowed practitioners to present to slightly different audiences through the research conference and "elevenses". Additionally, a number of comments focused on the opportunities that the shared activities had provided for raising the profile of the library, by "advocating the library's work and services to a broad audience, reaching people (e.g. research staff) who wouldn't necessarily have come to us", and providing opportunities to "share and cascade knowledge of academic librarians." It was also clear from non-library practitioner's responses that they had gained a better understanding of the support the library could provide, with one respondent stating that she had "learned that the library is a huge resource for supporting researchers. Perhaps we don't make enough use of it. I make more use of it now than before".

Organisational requirements

The literature suggests a number of organisational requirements are needed to ensure a CoP can flourish. Practitioners acknowledged this could be challenging. A number of respondents pointed to the silo and sometimes territorial nature of university working, commenting on the difficulties of different professional units having distinct cohorts to support, i.e. research staff versus research students. Some respondents felt that this was frustrating as a number of initiatives would be equally useful irrespective of status of the end-

user. This could be attributed to how professional units are funded and could be considered to be one of the main barriers to creating a more cohesive research support service. A library respondent considered the library to be well placed within a CoP stating, “we are cohort neutral with a mission to support all users”. This supports the idea of a ‘third space’ (Whitchurch, 2008) that can work across hierarchical and organisational boundaries.

However, one respondent suggested sharing across departments could be potentially problematic, stating “if the collaboration happens outside of your department, there can be issues with others having their own agenda and getting everyone’s standpoint in any message can get complicated and misunderstood”. Another respondent indicated that there is a risk of “duplication and standing on people’s toes and that it is harder to control some activities when people are outside of the office”. However, this same respondent indicated that “perhaps losing control offers opportunities for changing thinking or practices that may have become entrenched or habit”.

The literature argues that top management can see CoPs as threatening and can stifle initiatives. However, in this case study, respondents indicated that the CoP had been able to flourish due to the support received from relevant managers. They recognised that this support was important, with one practitioner commenting on “the fact that our senior managers are not prescriptive and allow this to free-flow and are supportive of new initiatives [which] has enabled the CoP to be successful.”

However, some practitioners raised the challenge of finding time and space to commit to the CoP. They called for top-level acceptance and encouragement by management for CoPs to be seen as a new way of working and to become part of the culture rather than an additional

task. One participant stated that “one of the main things needed is more time, or the acceptance of the value of sharing practice and knowledge across several teams on a regular basis – thus allowing the CoP to grow and develop”.

This posed the question of whether the CoP should be formalised. The literature suggests that informal CoPs facilitate communication that is more open and that formalising can affect autonomy. Overwhelmingly, the practitioners did not feel that formalisation would enhance the CoP and could in fact stifle some of the creativity and initiatives, resulting in the group becoming just another meeting or committee.

However, respondents acknowledged that there are challenges of an informal community. One respondent stated that people involved will learn new information and take on new tasks, but knowledge and skills may then be lost if they leave the organisation or their role changes. Another practitioner commented that the reason the CoP had been successful was that people wanted to be involved and shared a common purpose, but this brings a reliance on the good will of certain people. Another respondent suggested that there is a danger that the CoP could become stale, that “with the same groupings, you could get stuck in doing things in a particular way”. One practitioner argued for a more formal approach to be taken for more strategic activities, to ensure the right people are on board, particularly relating to compliance and areas with IT requirements or infrastructure needs. More formal work, such as projects, could, as at DMU, be orchestrated through the institution’s project management architecture.

Impact of the CoP

Practitioners viewed the CoP as successful in helping to support research and without the collaborative approach, the services they now provided may not have happened in such a

cohesive way. One respondent reinforced this view, stating that “it seems sensible to bring all our collective strengths/knowledge together and also avoid duplication and confusion where some groups are perhaps not aware of the latest developments”. A key theme from the interviews centres on practitioners developing a broader understanding of the issues facing researchers, with one practitioner stating that the CoP approach “allows more understanding in your own work and understanding of why people do things in certain ways.” Another practitioner suggested that “when working in the library, you don’t realise the pressures they [researchers] are under. I now have more empathy with academics and can understand things from their point of view. Something that seems straightforward to us, I can now understand why it might be difficult or take time”. It could be argued that sharing of knowledge and experience from different areas of the university has enabled better understanding of the researcher, which can improve the support and services provided by each area.

Examination of services introduced by the CoP to date suggests their success is attributable to the collaborative effort involved. For example, the library alone could have delivered its short informal “elevenses” sessions and the research conference. However, engaging other teams within the university enabled a variety of different topics to be delivered and brought different approaches to themes. One CoP practitioner drew attention to the fact that “researchers see we got together to help them and therefore feel supported”. This cohesive support is summed up by the feedback from one of the conference attendees who stated “combining the research journey, impact, publishing all in one day in one event – amazing!”

Writing group events and theses drop-ins similarly benefited from a collaborative approach. Common queries from drop-ins tended to revolve around the literature review and a joint

approach to delivery of these drop-ins enabled additional support on academic writing, literature searching, and evaluation techniques to be provided.

OA awareness also increased dramatically during the period of the CoP. A survey sent in May 2016 showed that levels of awareness of the post-2014 REF requirements had increased from 45% in October 2015 to 84%. Similarly, compliance with the RCUK OA requirements had increased from 41% in September 2015 to 94% in September 2016. Whilst we cannot necessarily correlate this with the introduction of the CoP, it is clear that both LLS and the RBI were able to draw on their disparate expertise and utilise different networks to provide a joined up approach to OA compliance.

Conclusions

The study has demonstrated that for a CoP to be effective, several key elements need to be put in place, including: a common sense of purpose; a shared concern or passion about the research agenda; a sense of community and belonging; trust and a safe environment. The study has also shown that benefit can be obtained personally from a CoP by developing staff knowledge and understanding of researchers and their needs, and increased job satisfaction. The needs of researchers are varied and the results of the study show that no one department can know everything a researcher needs to know and a CoP approach can provide a holistic approach to support.

The study has also highlighted the benefit of a CoP approach for library profiling amongst its researchers, who traditionally may not have viewed the library as a partner. Library staff have gained a wider network and benefited from opportunities to reach out to new audiences.

Senior management support also comes through as a key determining factor in the success of the CoP, by allowing the community to be creative and free flowing and by supporting its initiatives and providing a 'safe' environment. The study highlighted the usefulness of the library in providing a 'third space' (Whitchurch, 2008), being cohort neutral and performing a broker role in bringing together different aspects of research support and helping to break down institutional barriers.

A key element of CoPs is that they are informal and success depends on the commitment and interests of members. The study provided a clear message that the informal nature was important and that formalising the CoP may have a detrimental effect to its continued success. However, members did highlight the challenge of creating time and space to work together collaboratively and how the CoP could be sustainable long-term and whether more strategic initiatives, particularly around compliance areas may need to have a more formalised approach.

The team are capitalising on the success so far and will continue with the CoP approach to develop and deliver research support. Several plans are in place for the future including: running a second conference in 2017; developing more "elevenes" sessions; continuing to work jointly on OA initiatives; supporting the REF; and producing advice and guidance relating to RDM. The CoP model has further reaching opportunities for how universities support initiatives that involve departments or teams across the institution, for example, support for: learning and teaching activities; induction provision; international students; collaborative partnerships; disability provision; project management; or leadership development.

This paper has confirmed that a CoP approach can be an effective way to deliver research services within a HE setting, particularly where libraries do not have a dedicated research support team. The findings can help libraries in a similar position develop their research support in conjunction with other professional services within the university and understand the essential requirements to ensure a successful research support CoP.

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