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Heritage Quay: what will you discover? Transforming the archives of the University of Huddersfield, Yorkshire UK

Abstract

The University of Huddersfield presents a key case study of the transformation of its Archives Service, using the newly-developed Staff/Space/Collections dependency model for archives and the lessons of the UK's Customer Service Excellence (CSE) scheme in order to examine and illustrate service development.

Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and University funding has created new spaces for the audiences and collections of the future, including innovative technology on site to showcase and to explore digitised and digital material. Changes in collecting and collections management and new staff skillsets are developing to meet the needs of the audiences identified through extensive collections based consultation.

Keywords

Introduction

In a recent survey of Australian archival building projects, McCausland states "We are some distance from an entirely online archives world, and existing archives buildings need to continue to serve storage and public functions as well as house the staff that provide the services for these functions"; she clearly identifies the "treasure-house-versus-digital-services-provider tension" which is inherent in the mission of an archives and/or special collections service (McCausland, 2013).

This case study aims to illustrate how the University of Huddersfield Archives is responding to current challenges, many described in recent survey reports from the UK, and the US and Canada (Dooley and Luce, 2010; Dooley et al, 2013). The title uses the strapline of the new brand created for the Service which is intended as a call to action, to intrigue and provoke – but also poses questions to the staff as the service undergoes a period of significant transition following substantial investment by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and by the University.

Wider lessons will be drawn from the Huddersfield experience and a new conceptual framework for service development - the Staff/Space/Collections dependency model – examined, alongside the improvement tool Customer Service Excellence (CSE). Focussing on capital investment in UK archives, Oxborrow-Cowan developed the 'SSC Dependency Model' postulating that three elements are vital to a good [organisation]: relevant, high quality collections; appropriate types of well trained staff; and appropriately designed and sufficient space. The impact of combining these "…stretches well beyond [the organisation's] core audiences and generates a virtuous circle of service, familiarity and reciprocal support" (Oxborrow-Cowan 2012).

The University of Huddersfield's Archives

The Archives is relatively young, created within the University Library in 1991 with the temporary appointment of an half-time Archivist (although collections had been accumulating since the foundation of the University's first predecessor in 1841). A discrete Archives Service developed through custom and practice, supported by small project grants. The permanent post of Archivist was created in 1998 and amalgamated with the Records Manager post in 2010. Para-professional support was added in 2011 bringing the then establishment staff in archives and records management to 2.89 full-time equivalents (ftes).

The Archives Service (hereafter "the Service") mandate is to develop the collections in support of teaching, learning and research for members of the University, external researchers and members of the public, and to lead the management of the University's corporate records. The mission of the Archives is that of its parent unit Computing and Library Services: "Delivering an inspiring information environment for the digital age".

The principal collection strengths are in music, sport, politics, women, education, the arts, nonconformity and industry. The collections have historical, social, artistic/cultural, geographical and educational significance, with music and sport in particular having international importance; most are deposited with the University.

The Heritage Quay project

The University was aware of the gap between actual and potential usage of the collections, not least because of an ongoing commitment to the CSE award (Cabinet Office (UK), 2008): Huddersfield was the UK's first University library to gain CSE (Walsh and Barrett, 2009). CSE aims to make a tangible difference to users by encouraging providers to focus on their individual needs and preferences for services. An application to HLF was accordingly made by the Director of Computing and Library Services in 2011 for exploratory funding to enable more people to use the collections. Using money raised through the National Lottery (established in 1994), HLF gives grants to sustain and transform heritage in the UK and is its largest funder of not-for-profit heritage organisations with total awards in 2013/4 of £408million (HLF 2014).

The project's development phase ran from autumn 2012-spring 2013, with delivery beginning in autumn 2013 and being scheduled to complete late 2017. Total project cost is around £2million funded 80:20 by HLF and the University. The project focuses on the audiences for the collections, enabling new means for learning and engagement, whilst intending to secure the long term future of the collections through conservation, including targeted digitisation based on preservation requirements or increasing access, and cataloguing (University of Huddersfield, 2013).

During the development phase extensive consultation with existing users, potential audiences, partners, staff and other stakeholders was undertaken, chiefly by Janice Tullock Associates on behalf of the Archives. This process began with the collections, identifying thematic communities of interest (rather than locality-based), exploring the potential and demand for use, and activities to enable and extend use. The ten-year strategic plan for the Service, plans for building design and construction up to RIBA stage D (Sinclair 2013), a Collections Conservation Management and Maintenance Plan, and an Activity Plan (required by HLF to describe all the non-capital works of a project) were underpinned by this insight into audiences well beyond the University.

The project's aims are:

> "1. To make it easier for everyone, whatever their level of knowledge, to learn from and engage with the collections in ways that suit them as individuals, families or groups.
> 2. To be a truly interactive service in which the heritage collections become a catalyst for creativity and a living archive, offering a lively interface between our audiences and the academic community.
> 3. To create exciting, enticing and flexible multi-functional physical and digital facilities for learning and engagement.
> 4. To make radical improvements in the conservation and management of the heritage collections so that they have a sustainable future." (University of Huddersfield 2013)

Staff, space and collections (SSC) are fundamental to these aims, and hence the SSC model was chosen as a basis for further development of the Service.

Staff

The establishment staff team has increased in number from 3 individuals to 9 (1.89ftes to 6.8ftes), excluding records management. The post of Assistant Archivist was created in 2013 by the University independently of any project funding, as the new strategic plan made a business case for additional dedicated capacity to support internal teaching and learning.

New skills in audience development, interpretation, primary and secondary level pedagogy and facilitation have been added to the team, drawing on experience from the museum sector. The project-funded posts of Participation & Engagement and Learning & Engagement Officers

undertake the majority of outreach and audience development work, underpinned by the work of the Collections Access Officer along with an additional Collections Access post funded by a smaller grant from the 2013 Cataloguing Grants Programme (The National Archives, 2014).

It is anticipated that this additional capacity in collections processing along with the use of the principles of More Product Less Process (Greene and Meissner, 2005) should see the cataloguing backlog of existing collections eliminated by the project's end (Ince, 2014; University of Huddersfield, 2014); policies for other aspects of processing are being developed (Erway 2012). At project end an estimated equivalent of 0.6fte will be able to be deployed more profitably in serving audiences owing to the incremental reduction in individual item production and response times resulting from improved collections management. Users have commented favourably to date on the improved speed of collections access, with no perceived lack of quality resulting from changes in processing. The range of events and opportunities to explore the collections have also been received positively, supporting the argument of the SSC model that "appropriate types of well trained staff" contribute to the success of the organisation.

Space

At the time of writing Heritage Quay has been open for three months; in the near future the use of the spaces will be evaluated including a planned ethnographic study, a rich research methodology which has not previously been used in a UK archival context (Bryant et al 2009).

The Library originally accommodated the Archives, with some 260m2 of collections storage space with inefficient static shelving ultimately spread across nine individual locations and three floors; none of these spaces met recognised standards (latterly PD5454:2012 "Guide for the storage and exhibition of archival materials"). This presented a range of direct threats to the survival of the collections, and also meant new collections of any size or major additions to existing collections could not be acquired.

Accommodation for users was in shared Library spaces refurbished in 2009, with spatial division from Art and Design library space expressed through distinctive finishes and fittings; the consultation showed that many potential external users were deterred by the Library's turnstiles and by the presence of students in the Library. A tension between the "social" and "communal" models of an academic library (Gayton 2008; Yoo-Lee et al 2013) was evident on a daily basis, particularly over noise, handling of materials and refreshments.

Accordingly the capital elements of the project have been fundamental in ensuring the physical protection of the collections whilst in use but also in achieving its wider objectives. Audience insight and the needs of the collections were key to the design development.

Heritage Quay is reached from the Atrium of the Central Services Building, a distinctive Huddersfield landmark; adjacent student-focussed facilities include the Library, 24/7 computing rooms and Student Central (catering, sports, Students' Union). Heritage Quay and its adjacent circulation spaces occupy a completely refurbished area distinctly branded through its finishes and signage. One enters directly into the "Exploration Space" (230.5m2), multi-functional public spaces which include high-quality showcases presenting themed exhibitions drawn from the collections, as well as two multitouch tables and an interactive gesture wall providing digital highlights; the digital content will change as collections digitisation increases. Whilst multitouch is becoming a feature in new library and archive developments in the UK (eg. the Library of Birmingham and Archives+, part of the redeveloped Central Library in Manchester), Heritage

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Quay's seven-metre wide curved wall driven by human gesture, with surround sound and dynamic collections management system integration, is unique among UK archives, libraries and museums (Wide Sky Design, 2014). The "big curvy screen" is developing a personality of its own, with a dedicated Twitter hashtag and regular repeat visitors already observed.

The gesture wall also provides high-quality projection and sound for presentations, including film screening, and is situated in the "Group Space" which can be enclosed from the Exploration Space using sliding walls. This is used for informal and formal learning activities including regular meetings of local (non-University) groups, and other events including performances; observation reveals that the Exploration and Group Spaces already provide both high-intensive and low-intensive meeting points (Bilandzic and Foch, 2013).

Internal glazing gives views into the secure repositories, quiet study space and main staff office. The intention is to promote awareness among different audiences of the various possibilities for exploring the collections and participating in activities, whilst retaining a measure of privacy and appropriate security. The extent to which the space strikes a balance between the "social" and "communal" models of the library (Gayton, 2008) will be interesting to evaluate.

One of the key barriers to the conservation and effective management of the heritage collections previously was the lack of work space and quarantine space; a large document reception and dedicated processing area (43.5m$_2$) now meets these needs. Finally, three high-density repositories (256m$_2$) now house the collections in PD5454:2012 conditions; Heritage Quay is among the earliest UK services to build repositories to these standards.

Collections

Detailed research into the collections during the development project led to the areas of collection strength described above being articulated. This followed Research Committee approval in 2011 of the first Archives policies on preservation, access and acquisition (University of Huddersfield, 2014ab, d).

During 2012-14 the core staff team undertook an extensive appraisal project. Lack of policy had led particularly to the transfer of modern monographs and incomplete runs of serials from Library stock, some duplicating electronic subscriptions; all such stock was therefore appraised against the new policy criteria, with approx. 70 linear metres being offered to other institutions, offered for sale or recycled through a recognised programme following accepted professional practice.

The strategic decision to focus on unique materials, or materials which are unique in their archival context (eg. published materials forming part of the library of a significant individual or institution) has resulted in a more focussed and relevant collection. Evaluation will show in time the impact on the user community; staff already note anecdotally an improved ability to manage the collections both intellectually and physically.

The new repositories also provide expansion space to resume collecting in the University's areas of collection strength, and a new Collections Development Strategy is in the early stages of implementation. A number of important collections which were previously at risk of loss have either already been transferred or have arrangements in place to secure them.

Whilst mass digitisation is outwith the funding of the current project, targeted digitisation is being undertaken as a preservation strategy for particular formats. Digitisation also supports activities as well as the multimedia content within Heritage Quay and website.

Conclusions: lessons learned

During the first term of opening, Heritage Quay has seen 1,700 visitors (compared with 377 during the same period 2013/4). A large-scale launch event and tours of a new campus facility have naturally contributed to this. However it has been noted that searchroom users spend longer, and the initial work undertaken by the Participation Officers reveals an appetite for exploring the collections which suggests that a lack of marketing, rather than irrelevant collections, may have been a more significant barrier to use than previously thought.

Using the SSC model has enabled an assessment of the direction of travel and a means of examining how these elements combine to have an impact on audiences. Extensive evaluation over the duration of the project will enable the Service to examine and explore the extent to which project outcomes have been met.

Whilst significant investment has been made, with the majority of the project revenue expenditure on activity still to come (conservation, digitisation, cataloguing, and activity programmes), the following general lessons could apply to any service:

1. Developing a detailed knowledge of collections and of existing and potential users is of fundamental importance. At the very least a service may be able to become more relevant to an internal audience as a result.

2. Capacity invested in simple ways of re-presenting collections (eg. using social media to repurpose existing exhibition content), alternative ways of processing, and ways of implementing policies (eg. developing areas of strength) may have an impact greater than the sum of its parts.

3. Any business case for additional human or other resource will rely on work being undertaken on 1 and 2: success breeds success.

4. Space issues may be the most drastic and difficult to tackle – but user insight may also offer "quick wins" (eg. better signage; reducing clutter in the physical environment).

It can be seen from the above that the SSC model also relies on a clear understanding of actual and potential users. User surveys are routine activity for larger parent organisations, and international benchmarking such as LibQUAL+® of course has relevance for individual library-based services (eg. Harbo and Hansen, 2012; Housewright et al, 2012;). However the audiences for archives and special collections are sufficiently specialist to warrant developing direct customer insight, even on a limited scale, in addition to more general studies of user expectations and needs (eg. Yakel and Torres, 2003; Yeo, 2005; Duff et al 2013). Is there a particular gap in the area of audience consultation to be addressed by the archives and special collections community? – whilst considering services to users, neither of the recent surveys undertaken by Research Libraries UK and Online Computer Library Center asked about methods of user consultation (Dooley and Luce, 2010; Dooley et al, 2013); in the UK few HE institutions participate in the regular collective PSQG survey of archives (CIPFA, 2014) and there is no collective equivalent for special collections and/or archives in the Higher Education library domain.

The SSC model was used alongside the CSE approach. CSE identifies the fundamental importance of criterion 1 "Customer Insight": developing an in-depth understanding of users including consulting them, using the results to design and provide services, and monitoring the outcomes. The University of Huddersfield Archives' experience shows that CSE, used in

conjunction with the SSC dependency model, can provide a clear framework for service planning and improvement.

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