

SHORT TERM SCIENTIFIC MISSION (STSM) – SCIENTIFIC REPORT

The STSM applicant submits this report for approval to the STSM coordinator

Action number: CA15221

STSM title: *Identifying best practice in a centralised model for advancing teaching, learning, writing and research.*

STSM start and end date: 15/14/2018 to 21/04/2018

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BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF THE STSM

NUI Galway [NUIG] is a research-led and research-intensive university located in the west of Ireland. It is currently ranked in the top 250 universities worldwide. NUIG “adopted a new academic structure in 2008, combining over 60 disciplines into five Colleges and 16 Schools. This structure has promoted interdisciplinarity and blurred the subject divisions on which a large part of the Library’s staffing was based ... The change in organisational structure has been radical, rather than incremental. More than half of the Library staff members have changed role or line manager following the creation of teams in early 2016 ... A new Research and Learning team has broken down the division between staffing for teaching and learning, and research, which the previous structure had raised” (Cox, 2016, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13614533.2017.1316748>). It was through this Research and Learning team that my STSM was arranged.

The purpose of my STSM was to ascertain best practice by examining a university Library as a space that currently embodies centralised support for teaching, learning, writing and research. The aim was to determine the shared purposes, processes, knowledge, values and skills of such centralised support mechanisms. The ultimate objective is to prompt the reworking of current institutional supports in higher education across Europe, to make them more valuable and far reaching.

DESCRIPTION OF WORK CARRIED OUT DURING THE STSM

During my visit to the Library in NUI Galway, I conducted 13 individual interviews and two group interviews with staff who had a variety of roles and responsibilities, supporting either teaching, learning, writing and research, or a combination thereof.

I also attended a seminar organised by the Academic Writing Centre to gauge internal developments, during which I also observed stimulating presentations on academic writing from a range of international speakers. Furthermore, I joined an institutional working group on academic skills, which sought to have a joined up, multimodal approach to skills development.

The warm welcome, care and hospitality I received during my visit to NUI Galway was exemplary. I commend the Library staff for their dedication, diligence and professionalism.

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESULTS OBTAINED

1. Factors that have helped develop staff knowledge, values and skills.

- a) On-the-job experience has been fundamental to staff professional development.
- Job diligence. Several staff commented that their job was constantly challenging and therefore they were driven to find solutions, which increased their knowledge and skills.
 - Networking with colleagues internally has frequently led to inspiration or the acquiring of bespoke knowledge.
- b) Training in-house and externally is actively encouraged. Through routine liaison, line management have created interest in training and development. For example:
- By supporting staff to undertake courses which equip them with meta-level skills, such as specialist training, leadership courses, and postgraduate research degrees.
 - By funding participation in conferences germane to staff expertise.
- c) External links have helped to gauge the potential for future development.
- Personal development networks have promoted networking and keeping up-to-date with developments, particularly via social media.
 - International networks have helped organise events / conferences.
 - Liaison with different universities and roles.
 - Membership of professional bodies, such as knowledge gained from reading and contributing to relevant journals, discussion lists etc.
- d) A recurring theme was how staff felt empowered by macro management. For example:
- The potential given to shape their role helped create a degree autonomy and ownership, thereby stimulating knowledge gain.
 - The encouragement of creativity and innovation.

2. What has made staff successful, effective and productive in their job?

- a) Self-motivation and resilience.
- The personal drive for productivity and success; for example, finding solutions to diminishing staff numbers through automation and outsourcing.
 - Strategic ownership of job role.
 - Variety of day-to-day tasks.
 - Being fairly paid. Fee concessions for courses.
 - Abiding interest in and a sense of pride in their work.
 - Desire for social justice was an intrinsic motivator for staff wanting to see students flourish.
- b) Physical space.
- Most staff have their own office which has stimulated concentration, valued staff wellbeing and afforded privacy.
 - Facilities - location of Library at centre of campus.
- c) Evidence-base.
- Acting upon feedback from evaluations and responding to demand.
 - Seeing the differences that their work has made.
 - Internal reporting mechanics, such as an annual report highlighting output.
- d) Bimonthly team meetings.
- A performance management system is not currently operational, however the input from line management has been reported as positive and encouraged staff to use their initiative.

- e) Advocacy regarding the value of the Library services provided is important to communicate throughout the university.
- f) Technological change and advancement has led to greater efficiency.

3. Ways that synergy and collaboration between staff is facilitated.

a) Efficiency.

- The economic climate and subsequent reductions in staffing have facilitated collaboration through targeted priorities.
- Although some staff reported that grouping in teams has led to less contact with colleagues, the consensus was that concentration of staff into designated areas has cultivated greater interaction and cooperation. Staff mobility among teams is readily encouraged.

b) Proximity.

- The front-facing nature of services provided has established a core user base.
- The high visibility of centralised support, such as the Library/IT and Academic Skills helpdesks, has increased signposting to colleagues and shaped a culture of teamwork and partnership.
- The physical centrality of the Library has been conducive to arranging frequent events, lectures, seminars, exhibition openings and conferences. This acts as a visitor attraction and encourages the dissemination and creation of knowledge.
- The location of a Research Institute within in same building as the Library has advanced the positioning of the Library as a partner with the academic community, and thus led to greater collaboration.

c) Shared values.

- Providing a good service was the main driver for building relationships with university staff. The passion for service excellence was palpable.
- Personal relationships have been built up with repeat stakeholders, but there was a healthy recognition that relationships change as people and structures change, therefore reaching out to new contacts is important.
- A sense of community has been established through informal communication, which is encouraged to be direct, face-to-face and as relaxed as possible.
- Senior management were deemed to be very approachable and supportive.

d) Expediency.

- Relationships built via contacts already established from previous jobs was reported to provide a base for collaboration.
- Internal partnership has often been formal, such as School/departmental meetings, working groups and internal committees, but helped raise awareness across the university.
- Institutional reviews have often prompted the revisiting of provision and ensuing interaction with colleagues.
- External connections have been established through working with other institutions through involvement in government-funded joint initiatives.
- There was recognition that partnership has often been ad hoc, such as by word of mouth.
- The importance and value of promotion was discernible; for example, quarterly bulletins and weekly information to fellow staff have helped strengthen relationships.
- Integration with academic departments, such as the Academic Champions scheme, has helped support collaboration.

4. The main strengths of the Library as a space for the centralised support of teaching, learning, writing and research.

a) Reputation

- The main strength of Library is the users; a culture of helpfulness has been fostered. The good reputation amongst students and academic staff is tangible, as is the customer-orientated ethos.
- The Library 'brand' has been built through the quality delivery of services.

b) Modernity.

- Embracing change, broadening existing coverage and embracing new methodologies, specifically the implementation and use of technology.
- The saturation of electronic resources has led to less footfall, which has in turn made service delivery more manageable.
- Resourcing and being able to tap into Library infrastructure is a material asset.

c) Location.

- The presence of the Academic Writing Centre and the Academic Skills team within the Library permits a synchronisation of services to staff and students.
- The Library is a one-stop-shop for researchers.
- Divisions were broken down to make teams and create synergies between them. The proximity of space and people within the Library building is manifest.
- However, the 1970s building is a limiter of what can be done. A new purpose-built facility could transform students' learning experiences.

d) Communication and feedback.

- Updates are provided on projects cross-divisions.
- The centralised ticketing service is more transparent and efficient, whereby queries are not lost and it helps with monitoring. However, it can be considered impersonal.
- Listening to users is ubiquitous, such as strategy committees meeting with user committees, and the LibQUAL+ survey to the student population helping shape operational plans.
- A collective intelligence gathering exercise illustrates the value of staff feedback, for example, professional development has been strategically aligned via initiatives such as diversity training.

5. Tools, resources, strategies and innovative approaches that have contributed to these strengths.

a) Being adaptive and responsive.

- Innovation is actively encouraged, for example, the trendy MakerSpace in the Library is a space for engaged teaching and learning, where students can be creative, collaborate, share, develop ideas, and innovate. The provision of this space within the Library building has helped attract footfall and established the Library as being progressive, by diversifying their service provision. The staff willingness to take risks was apparent.
- Opportunities for integration are actively explored, such as housing the Academic Writing Centre and Disability Assistance Technology Service. The non-territorial approach of the Library is to be extolled.
- The facility for staff and students to avail of a 'live chat' online service to handle queries, has been innovative and amplified accessibility.
- Offering extended opening hours during term.
- Developing new modules on information skills and academic writing, integrating with student programmes of study.

- Opening up services to non-traditional users, such as outreach work to second level students.

b) Human Resources.

- The Library has an established a reputation for being friendly and welcoming, able to put their service users at ease.
- There is a determination to enable students to achieve or surpass their aspirations.
- Several staff I interviewed emphasised how the personality and flexibility of Library management has contributed to the strengths of service provided.
- Applications for professional development funding are usually approved, which serves to upskill personnel and bring added value to the services offered.

c) Technology.

- The Blackboard VLE has been a useful tool to increasing learning gain for teaching components of the Library's function.
- The introduction of demonstration videos reduced the volume of support requested. This has enabled resources to be redirected and prioritised to meet emerging requirements.
- The deployment of emerging UX (User eXperience) methodologies to undertake regular observations of user behaviour has been a valuable qualitative tool used to bring together ethnography, usability, and space and service design.
- The recruitment of staff with digital literacy expertise has accelerated the Library's technological development.

d) Connectivity.

- The introduction of Library support and exposure to students at an early point of their learning has equipped the Library being fundamental to the student experience.
- Embedded teaching within students' timetables has proven to be very effective. Several staff commented that the most successful teaching and research support they have been able to offer has come about as a result of close collaboration with academic staff.
- Senior university management often deliberately innovate, based on purpose and evidence-base.

6. Potential improvements that could be made to providing centralised support.

- Collaborative working spaces for students.
- More updating of furniture.
- Creating a more informal environment, based on the model of a Learning Commons.
- Additional exhibitions, such as marking World Book Day.
- Build on existing access, to create more opportunities for public engagement.
- Provide extra services via digitisation.
- Increased investment in a faster network.
- Regular cost/value analysis via proactive risk monitoring.
- More routine engagement from academic staff to circumvent prompting.
- Additional specialised roles could lead to greater focus and value-added service, for example, benefitting staff in developing expertise and the students whom they support.
- The evaluation of staff reward, recognition and appraisal.
- To carefully navigate the designation of split roles, as some staff reported an increase to workload, whilst others enjoyed thrived on the new opportunities provided.
- A fresh commitment from senior university management to teaching and learning, in order to enrich the student experience. This could include incentives to reward teaching, as well as research.
- Continued support for staff training, development and wellbeing.

I learned much from my visit to the Library in NUIG and readily welcome the possibility future collaboration.