

# Making moves: lessons from a library migration

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Over three weeks in August 2017 some 475,000 items were moved from Royal Holloway, University of London's three existing locations to our new library in the flagship Emily Wilding Davison Building. That three-week effort was, of course, simply the culmination of extensive preparation and planning.

In the two to three years preceding the migration, existing stock and shelving was measured and audited, new stock layouts planned, collections reviewed, and new locations set up in the LMS. Around 25,000 books were changed from three-day to one-week loan, and about 50,000 identified to form a new High Use Collection, all of which needed labelling and new RFID security settings applied. Stock being moved from depository storage had to be located and made ready for the open shelves. Potentially rare and valuable material on the open shelves was located and assessed for movement to the new rare books store. Tendering specifications were developed, and contractors appointed. Workflows for moving stock and updating records, locations and collections in the LMS were agreed.

Many lessons were learned and reinforced in the course of the project, and these are a few of my personal (and unsystematic) reflections.

### **Models and tools are better than documents, or: data first!**

At one point I was asked to assess the shelving capacity of some of our soon-to-be-vacated library spaces, on the assumption that all the shelves would accommodate journals. These rooms are being renovated and repurposed as study areas, with digitally available print journal stock as 'wallpaper'. I diligently spent some time counting and measuring the bays (of which there were several distinct types), working out the optimum shelving configuration, and calculating the capacity.

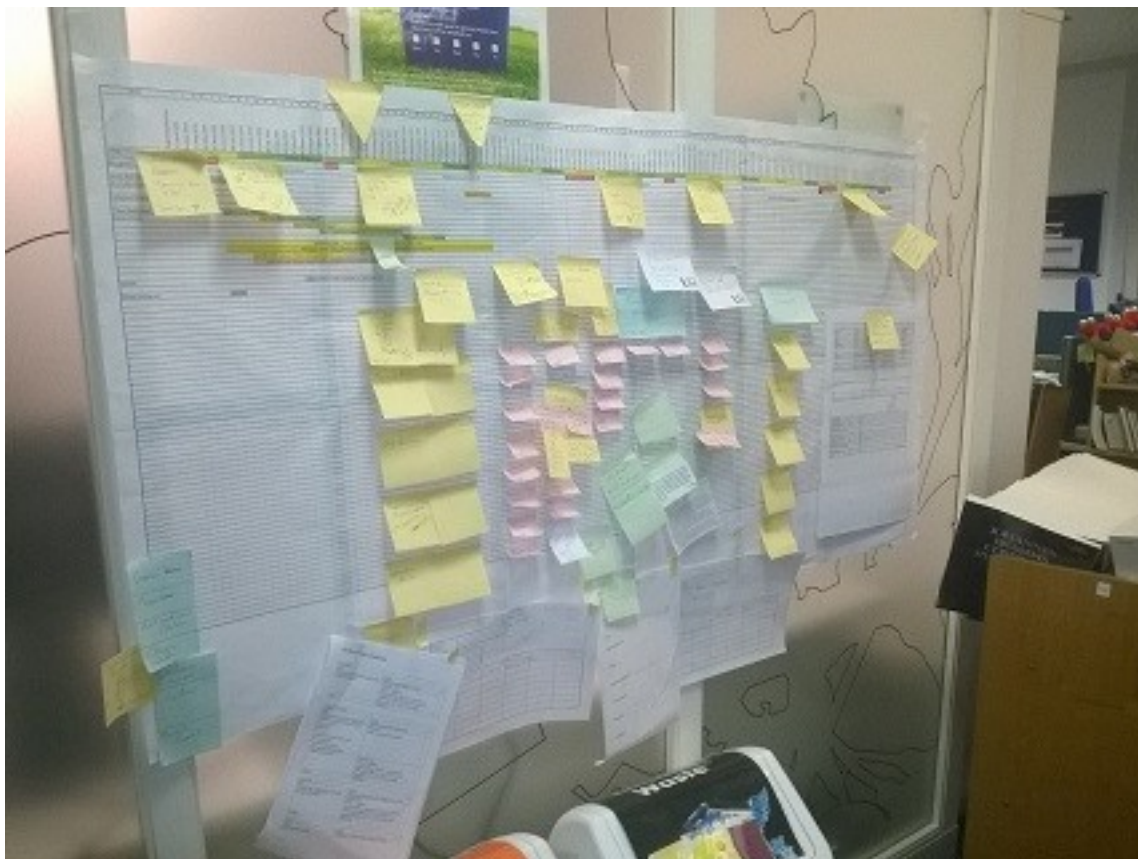
I presented the results in a memo, and thought no more of it . . . until, a few weeks later, I was asked, "What if we pitched the higher shelves for smaller monographs but kept everything else the same?" When I looked up my original workings I hadn't recorded enough detail to make the calculations. So, I spent more time assessing, measuring, and calculating. But this time I did it properly, breaking the shelving measurements down by area, section, type, position, and dimensions. Those figures went into a spreadsheet model where I could recalculate the capacities based on different desired shelf pitchings, and present and filter the totals in pivot table.

It was a bit of extra work, but it paid off a few more weeks later when I was asked "What if we go back to having it all spaced for journals but get rid of the metal shelving in the east section

entirely?" and it only took a few minutes to get the answer. That spreadsheet is still being used today, as the renovations near completion and the contents are being finalised, and I produced all our shelving audits and shelving models for the migration on a similar principle.

So why do I say that models and tools are better than documents? Because models and tools save time, and it is much easier to derive documents from data than it is to extract data from documents!

**It's not your job to think of everything, but is your job to make sure everything(ish) is thought of, or: you don't need to have all the answers, but you do need to ask the questions!**



When managing or coordinating a project it is easy to think that is your job to think of everything – every requirement, every contingency, every variable, every solution. There are two points of note here:

1. It isn't.
2. It's a good job that it isn't because you probably won't be able to.

What you can do is attempt to capture all these things through working with your colleagues and stakeholders, asking questions, staying curious, and not assuming that the solutions to problems will be too difficult or won't exist. Collaborative working was key to all the work leading up to the move to our new library. And by 'collaborative' I don't (just) mean sending emails and sharing documents!

Of particular value were workshops and practical activities, in addition to or instead of meetings. A day spent touring the stacks with our moves manager and project assistant in order to understand the nature of the stock and its layout was invaluable, and much more illuminating and informative than just spending time in a meeting room poring over diagrams and spreadsheets.

Having a clear outcome in mind is key to making meetings more workshop-like and productive. Early in my time on the project I convened a workshop with all the library teams represented and a clear goal: to start with a giant A1 timeline (see picture) depicting the time remaining until the new

library opened and capture as much information as possible about events, patterns, and staff availability that might affect when, where and how we could conduct stock work: changing staffing levels throughout the year, working around exams, reading weeks, and graduation; existing practices and already scheduled projects; the August-July financial year making summer a busy rather than quiet time for colleagues whose input would be required; long lead times on consulting with academics. This was especially useful for me as someone new to HE libraries. These were all things captured through this exercise, and more besides – like which areas were best avoided in summer due to the lack of air conditioning, and which areas could only be worked in when deserted by researchers due to the very creaky floor boards! The data gathered became the background for our project schedule.

So stay curious and keep asking questions. And if you are working on or affected by a project make any concerns, ideas, or inspirations known – don't just assume that the person in charge has thought of it or won't be interested!

### **Just because it's done, doesn't mean you've finished, or: it isn't over till it's over!**

A construction or renovation project will produce a list of snaggings (things not done to the agreed specification and requiring remedial action) and alterations (things done to the agreed specification, but that need to be changed because they are not working as expected).

The same can be expected of any project, no matter how assiduous our attention to planning and control, so we shouldn't assume that once the headline objectives have been achieved that all the work is done. Indeed, it is wise to assume that additional time will be required to get things right once the initial results have been achieved and assessed, and to plan accordingly.

For example, in planning our moves and new layout we had always erred on the side of caution and tended towards over-estimating the space stock would require. This is on the basis that it is preferable to find out upon completion of a move that you have room to spare than to find that there is not enough room and have to start shuffling books back just to fit everything in – or, even worse, not be able to fit it in at all. The flip side of this (our measurements having turned out to be annoyingly accurate!) was, of course, some under-utilised space left once the move was complete. But knowing that this would be a possibility we had already anticipated the need for a project to even out the distribution of stock to allow for new stock to be added throughout.

You can never tell when work that you thought was done will raise its head again – as I write this, nearly a year after the move, I have received a query from a colleague regarding shelf loadings, the availability of reinforcing bars, and acceptable degrees of flexing!

And if I had to say what the most important lesson learned is, it would be how important it is to learn lessons. Projects by their nature are time-limited, and those responsible for them disperse and move on to other things. Documenting what went well, what went less well, and what could have been done differently, and then archiving and disseminating that information provides an invaluable resource for those who come after (and for yourself).

These views are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of UKSG.



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