

# Relationship management: developments and challenges

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It's been four years since I last wrote an editorial piece for UKSG on relationship management and a lot has happened in that time. I thought now would be a good time to reflect on developments in this area and explore where we are now.

There has been a focus on softer skills in the literature and in relation to employability in general. It has also emerged specifically in libraries as a key skill for the future. For instance, the [2017 SCONUL](#) report argued that:

*“... developing an organisation with the right skills base is a crucial part of securing changes ... those skills that are said to be of critical importance are what might be labelled ‘softer’ skills such as in strategy, relationship management and negotiation rather than ‘technical’ skills.”*

Technical skills of course remain critical in our digital society but they need to align effectively with softer skills. The [2018 Workplace Learning Report](#) identified training for soft skills as the key priority for talent development in organisations today:

*“In the age of automation, maintaining technical fluency across roles will be critical but the pace of change is fueling demand for adaptable, critical thinkers, communicators and leaders. As technology accelerates, soft skills are in high demand to fuel people and business growth.”*

There are a myriad of examples online of the skills now needed in the workplace including an article in [Forbes](#) magazine which outlined six key soft skills for millennials: critical thinking and communication, curiosity and creativity, and responsibility and conflict management.

At York our response to this has been to firstly review the core skills and competencies needed to be an effective academic liaison librarian which we developed in 2016 and to replace these with a set of six enablers for effective engagement.

However, effective engagement is an essential part of not just a liaison librarian's role but many (if not all) roles in academic libraries. Alongside professional knowledge and technical skills, everybody needs to have the 'softer' skills to engage effectively with the many varied user groups that we work with. It is through effective communication, negotiation and collaboration, for



example, that we are able to engage with and support different research and teaching needs in departments. We also need to evidence our reach and impact across the whole university.

In order for staff to develop these soft skills we need to actively support them and empower staff themselves to take ownership of their own development. At York the focus on these enablers has led to examples of real impact across the university. For example, during 2018-2019 we were an active partner in the institution's subject TEF submission with three members of the liaison team facilitating departmental subject TEF submissions (not just the library part). We have also been successful in challenging and changing digital skills teaching across departments through strategic engagement and being results driven.

Our user experience (UX) work continues to go from strength to strength as we find new ways to meaningfully engage our communities in the work we do. This engagement is wider than just our academic liaison team (although they play a vital and large role within this) and most recently has included the implementation of the new user interface for Primo. Our ethos is centred around inclusion and co-creation and our UX activities are key to this success.

We ran a very successful student-led innovation project at the beginning of 2019 (called LibInspo) and many of the ideas this generated have been implemented over the last few months in partnership with students. For example, a new wellbeing space (The Living Room), adding picnic tables to the front lawn of the library, and working on a new student app. We have a strong reputation with our two student's unions as a being a trusted and valued partner.

This is of course not to say that we haven't made mistakes along the way. We have had instances which have forced us to question our approach and rethink how we work with some of our user communities. This year we have focused on our relationship with our academic community, particularly in relation to our physical collections and space. Working openly with transparency and trust has been key for us to ensure we repair and build positive relationships. What started as quite a functional discussion became much more meaningful and the culmination of this work has been re-imagining our own collections and how we articulate and visualise these in the most beneficial way for our academic community. We were able to boil down these open and honest conversations to five principles which we are in the process of sharing back.

Our user communities can be our biggest advocates and supporters if we can utilise and capitalise on these relationships. They want to champion us but they need us to engage with them and help them. At York we want to be bold - we want the university to invest in us and that can only happen if we are able to articulate the importance of what we do and even more importantly have others advocate on behalf of us. It's these stories which are going to be key to ensure that we continue to be viewed positively by our institution and are invested in.

Higher education, and by association academic libraries, face an uncertain future and can become vulnerable. We've seen this repeatedly in public libraries and as a sector we need to be ready for this challenge by articulating and illustrating how we can make a difference. This is the theme of the 3rd Relationship Management in HE libraries conference: Engagement for Impact which takes place on the 4-5 November at Newcastle University. I hope you can make it, connect and tell your story.

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



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