Getting communications right

**Brief description of the paper**
This paper reviews the types of communication which Information Services is involved with. The paper identifies the 2-way nature of communication, the channels used. The paper identifies that while communication normally works, there are some occasions when it does not, and that we should learn the lessons from these failures. Library Committee is asked for advice on how to improve communications.

**Action requested**
Discussion of and advice on how to improve communication to feed into IS communication strategy.

**Resource implications**
Resource issues are not addressed in the paper, but there are significant resource issues when communication is not carried out effectively.

**Risk Assessment**
Risk issues are not covered in the paper, but as with resource, there are risks when communication is not carried out effectively.

**Equality and Diversity**
Does the paper have equality and diversity implications?
Not directly, but there are issues in ensuring that communication channels are appropriate for all those receiving the messages.

**Freedom of Information**
Can this paper be included in open business? Yes

**Originator of the paper**
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Getting communications right

Communications is very important for library activities. There is little that anyone in Information Services or the Library does which does not require communication. Some recent incidents have made us review our communication channels to ensure that they are working as well as they should. Library Committee, College Library Committees and EUSA are invited to work in partnership with us to ensure that our communication processes are as robust as they can be.

Clear communication has to be at the heart of all our process. There are several types of communication relevant to this paper:

- **Communications from** the Library to provide information to users, e.g.
  - to provide direct help to solve a problem (e.g. with using ejournals)
  - to announce a new development (e.g. new opening hours)
  - to provide information on some unplanned event such as downtime or emergency changes in opening hours
- **Communication from** the Library to consult with users about a new service, e.g.
  - the implementation of the new resource discovery system, the service to support the Library Annexe, developments in the Research Publications Service, new opening hours
- **Communication to** the Library about a problem, or feedback to help us develop a service
- **Communication within** Information Services. This is not strictly relevant to this paper, and some notes on this are included in a footnote, so that the Committee understands the complexity of this issue.¹

Communication is a two way process and messages needs to be both shared and received. It is not possible for us to communicate directly with all 40,000 people in the University’s community, but sometimes it feels as if there may be 40,000 individual views. We have to use formal and representative channels, and are dependent on these channels being understood and working correctly. The channels include helpline, committees with their representational structure, the liaison and consultancy teams, and web and email dissemination.

The medium or media chosen must be appropriate to the message and the audience. At different times we use different channels, eg:

- face-to-face discussions
- presentations/discussions at meetings including library committees
- liaison librarians and consultancy team consultations
- IS Helpline for individual queries/responses

¹ Information Services has a communications group, which is leading on an IS communications strategy, considering these issues in relationship to library, IT and elearning issues. Clear, effective and timely sharing of information within Information Services is particularly important for us to get right. We are a large, complex multi-domain organisation, with teams scattered through the University. There are often several teams involved with specific issues and we are working to ensure that cross-team communication is as clear, accurate and helpful as it can be, so that end result delivers clarity for users. We want to ensure that feedback from users is properly received and disseminated within Information Services to enable appropriate teams to respond in the short term, and understand the requirements for service developments in the longer term.
IS website for announcements, self-help and general information  
production of regular reports (eg MLRP, Research Publications Service)  
plasma screens  
emails to individuals or groups  
social networking tools such as Twitter and Facebook

Each of these channels has different requirements and different significance for each group, and we need to be aware of the benefits and disadvantages of each for particular messages.

In common with many large organisations, our communication processes work reasonably well for most circumstances. But sometimes they fail, and it is always important to learn lessons about when there is a failure in communication. Recently we have noted that failures occur:

- When messages are not clear or consistent or not understood by the target audience, for example because they use inappropriate language or jargon
- When messages are not passed on through expected channels, or become less clear as they are passed on, or there is a delay in passing the message on
- When it is not clear if the message is intended for consultation or intended to inform users about what is happening, and users may use the message for information to reopen the discussion and question the decision
- When the consultation about an activity is separated by a long period of time from the implementation, so that people have forgotten than a decision was made
- When different parts of Information Services are involved resulting in mixed or inconsistent messages.

We would be pleased for Library Committee, College Library Committees and EUSA to discuss how we can further improve our communications strategy. It would be particularly useful to consider the following issues:

- How can we ensure that the formal and representative channels for communication, which will vary by College and School, and with EUSA are working effectively? Are there channels which Library/Information Services are not plugged into, and which we could use?
- How can we ensure that users understand when we are consulting and when we are informing?
- How can we ensure that we get timely and appropriate advice when we are consulting with users?
- How can we ensure that the feedback we do get is representative of widely held views?
- Which channels are best for fast communication when this is needed (we understand that this requires multiple channels)?

Sheila Cannell on behalf of library senior managers in Library & Collections and User Services Division  
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