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# A new ERA? Marketing and delivering a user- education event for academic staff



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## **BACKGROUND TO ERA EVENTS AT UCE BIRMINGHAM**

Since 2001, our academic support team has organised electronic resources awareness events (ERAs) at Kenrick Library, targeted specifically at academic staff. The implicit aims of these events have been to increase academics' awareness and understanding of library-provided electronic resources and to encourage the cascading of awareness and understanding onto their students.

The format of ERA events has varied from a programme of informal drop-in sessions, held over the course of a day, to a single long lunchtime or a series of specific sessions held from 12 to 2pm over a week. Typically, the total number of attendees over the course of an entire week-long event has been very low (31 in 2004, 30 in 2005) in terms of the potential audience of 700+ staff. It was increasingly felt by library staff that the efforts outweighed the benefits.

The team agreed that, for late 2006, a fresh approach was needed to improve the market penetration of the ERA event. An open invitation already sent to heads of schools, offering individual programmes tailored to the specific needs of their academic staff, had met with no response. The team believed what was needed was a more focused programme, following some of the pat-

terns of earlier years' events, while re-invigorating the format.

#### **INNOVATIONS INTRODUCED AND THE NEW FORMAT**

##### **The project manager**

We had recently introduced a new initiative to designate a member of the academic support team as a functional project manager on larger shared tasks. For the ERA event for late 2006 this duty fell to the author, and involved leading the preparation and delivery of the event in partnership with our electronic services librarian. In addition to this innovation in the organisation of ERA, several other elements of the event were approached afresh.

##### **Target audiences**

While the annual ERA event has historically been considered our main vehicle for user-education of academics and staff in other central services, we also wanted to make library staff's CPD (Continuing Professional Development) an objective of the event, opening up the invitation to encourage the participation of library assistants and pre-professional staff and to allow for cross-training of professionals who staff enquiry and reference service points.

#### **FORMAT AND CONTENT OF THE SESSIONS AND SELECTION OF VENUE**

##### **Format**

We offered a scheduled programme of more structured sessions and demonstrations focusing on particular services and subject areas. This programmed approach would also maximise library staff's time, requiring only one or (at most) two hours' time from each presenter, in addition to the continued presence and support of the project manager and electronic services librarian. A full schedule of the demonstrations and presenters was provided in an invitation (pictured) so that potential attendees could arrange to speak to a named member of library staff or attend a session of particular interest to them.

##### **Content**

We wanted to make this year's event a must-see for as many staff as possible, so we asked presenters to emphasise alerts, RSS and other current awareness features, to ensure that 'old hands' who were familiar with the basic functionality of the services would not only get a refresher but also learn something new. The December timing of the event also provided us with another avenue

of communication for our imminent switchover from Classic ATHENS to ATHENS DA.

We decided on a mix of the familiar:

- *TalisList* and our own digital library, UCEEL, as well as a session advising academic staff on using electronic materials under the Copyright Licensing Agency (CLA) digital licence
- key subject-specific databases – where we have a great deal of knowledge readily available through our academic support team, such as Westlaw, Ovid's suite of services, ABI/Inform and our databases for the property, construction and planning area

alongside the less familiar:

- multi-disciplinary services such as Web of Science, zetoc and our reference services, Oxford Reference Online and xreferplus which, because of their cross-disciplinary nature, tend to be less frequently demonstrated to staff and students.

##### **A neutral venue**

Although the Perry Barr campus is not large, we had experienced a resistance from academic staff to leave their buildings and visit the Kenrick Library to attend events. We therefore booked a neutral venue – the staff and student development department's flexible learning centre. This is an attractive new suite in a faculty building with interactive whiteboard, small round tables and a complement of wireless laptops for trainees.

#### **TIMING AND PUBLICITY FOR THE EVENT**

Over the years, the scheduling of ERA events has been moved around the academic calendar to try to cater for the largest possible numbers of attendees, but it has proved difficult to identify whether the optimum timing for such an event is during term-time (when staff are on campus, but may well be too busy with students) or vacations (when some staff are absent, but those remaining to prepare classes or conduct research will have reduced contact time). The event was scheduled on weekdays 12–2pm from Thursday 14 to Wednesday 20 December, overlapping the last week of autumn term and the start of the winter vacation.

With regard to publicity, mass e-mailing of staff felt impersonal and unwelcoming. In the past, responses had increased when printed flyers or



Feedback followed the pattern of previous years: attendees responded very favourably to the sessions, reporting them 'a useful introduction/update' to electronic resources; 24 respondents (96%) felt that the event had expanded their knowledge of library services. As in previous years, those who had attended appreciated contact with library staff and their expertise, coming away with high opinions of the event: 36% gave it the top score of 10 out of 10; 48% gave it a 9; the remaining 16% rated it an 8. Similar high scores were reported for the range of resources, the way they were demonstrated and the extents to which attendees' expectations were met. When asked to identify one thing that they would follow up or use at work, attendees reportedly found value across the whole range of the sessions offered, encouraging us that we had selected the session content correctly.

No positive impact from the mailing and gifts alone could be identified in terms of raising numbers of attendees. More respondents reported that they had found out about the event via their faculty librarian (40%) or e-mail (28%) than via the mailshot and gifts (16%) – although the e-mails were sent out *prior* to their receiving their 'gift bag' and invitation. In addition:

- 68% said e-mail was one way they would like to be kept informed about new library services, while 28% saw their faculty librarian as another means of communication.
- 20% included web pages as one means of finding out about new library services.
- 20% felt that internal print mail – which would include our mailshot – was another way they would like to receive details of new library services.

Despite our disappointment with the low attendance figures, the small numbers of attendees were seen by attendees as a strength: 'Small groups, so you can look at areas which are specific to your needs' provided the opportunity 'to ask questions' and offered 'good support'. Indeed the small numbers resulted in the creation of an informal, sociable, user-oriented setting: 'Friendly staff had 'tailored the course to meet specific needs of audience'.

#### **DAWN OF A NEW ERA?**

While the marketing side of the project was felt to be successful in raising the profile of the library's services, the user-education objectives of the event were only achieved on a very small scale. Infor-

mal feedback suggested that academic staff were engaged by the innovative publicity but the low number of attendees suggests that they remained unconvinced that attendance was important. Our main conclusions are as follows:

#### **Publicity**

While the final publicity materials were recognised as being of a very high standard, the process of commissioning designs, getting quotes, having envelopes and invitations produced and gift packs assembled was time- and staff-intensive. Delays in design and production meant that the mailshot was an all-consuming business. We made a decision to send an interim e-mail to all staff ('Watch your post-tray ... for the full programme and details of how to book your place'), so that they were primed for the arrival of the print publicity and their gifts. Though the planning for this December event began back in July, even longer lead-times in the planning process would be recommended for future events involving third-party-produced publicity materials. We considered sending supplementary publicity in the form of daily e-mails during the week the event was running, though feelings were that they might be perceived as 'nuisance' e-mails. Daily e-mails should be considered for future events, but with one eye on making them appear as friendly and non-coercive as possible.

#### **Changes to the event**

While we had made changes to the organisation, format and timing of the event, none of these factors made a significant impact in terms of numbers of attendees over that of previous years, which had involved relatively smaller-scale efforts. Perhaps a more fundamental question needs to be answered: 'Is an objective of delivering user-education to large numbers of academic staff a valid objective?' Should we continue offering user-education to academic staff or would resources be better deployed delivering to other audiences? A larger-scale survey of academic staff across UCE Birmingham may be needed to identify the perceived needs for user education across the body of academic staff as a whole.

#### **Hooking into 'mandatory' academic activities**

Despite the considerable efforts taken, many academic staff chose not to attend, possibly because they did not perceive the programme as contributing to the success of their core activities of teaching and research, nor to the two mandatory programs rolling out across the university: delivering courses via the Virtual Learning Environment (Moodle) and providing personal development

planning (PDP) frameworks for students. Future user-education events need to state explicitly, both in the publicity and during the sessions, the ways in which electronic services can be directly integrated into the delivery of high-quality PDP and Moodle courses. Equally, our programmes need to be integrated into institution-wide VLE/PDP support events and structures such as 'Moodle week' to form a true partnership between the VLE and the library's electronic resources in the future.

*With thanks to Enid Pryce-Jones (deputy director of library & learning resources) and Mark Brown (electronic services librarian).*

#### **REFERENCE**

- 1 [http://library.uce.ac.uk/ERA\\_mailshot.pdf](http://library.uce.ac.uk/ERA_mailshot.pdf)