NOTTINGHAM
TRENT UNIVERSITY

Case Study: Nottingham Trent University and Talis Aspire

Engaging academic champions to transform resource list practices

The Challenges

- Library only aware of 20% of resource lists; students unable to access course materials
- Convincing senior management to endorse adoption of Talis Aspire
- Training 900 academics to manage resource lists directly

The Outcomes

- Senior management's support facilitates institution-wide adoption
- Champions of Talis Aspire identified within academic departments
- Comprehensive engagement programme transforms resource list practices

Negative feedback from student surveys over a long period of time at Nottingham Trent University pointed to deficiencies in the library's resource list workflows. Students were complaining that resources listed – including those indicated as essential reading – were frequently unavailable in the library. A critical aspect of the library's difficulties lay in its interactions with academics; workflows centred on the processing of resource lists in the library, yet the library was only aware of 20% of the university's resource lists. Many lists were simply passed directly from academic to student, bypassing the library, which was responsible for acquiring any resources not already in stock. The ensuing student complaints revealed a pressing need to engage academics in a more integrated resource list workflow.

An institution-wide change management project

It was clear that the changes needed in the management of resource lists transcended the library and its systems. The library set up a change management project to coordinate all developments, but took an institution-wide view from the outset. Rather than acting as an administrative intermediary, the library would join academics and students to form a three-way partnership in the management of resource lists. Layers of robust stakeholder relationships would form across the university to bring about this cultural change.

A system was needed to underpin these planned changes. A survey of the marketplace identified Talis Aspire as a system that allows academics to manage resource lists directly. It would also be visible to librarians, who would acquire the listed materials and make them available to students in a timely fashion.

As Mike Berrington, Deputy University Librarian (Customer Services) recalls, "These broad benefits gave the Talis Aspire project a high profile across the university. And a presentation to the university's senior management at an early stage in the project gave strong encouragement to the proposal that all 900 teaching staff were to deliver resource lists using Talis Aspire by the 2010/11 academic year." This top-level commitment gave the project the support it needed to remodel resource list management through the roll-out of Talis Aspire across the university.

Identifying champions in the schools

Though guided by a vision of students, academics and librarians working in unison, Mike and his colleagues saw that engagement had to start with the academics – where the resource workflow itself starts. They also recognised that associating the project solely with the library risked hampering the required institutional buy-in.

The project identified the layer of Learning and Teaching Coordinators (LTCs) as the ideal starting point for academic engagement. Each of the university's nine schools has a senior academic who takes on the LTC role of coordinating all university-wide learning and teaching initiatives at departmental level. As Mike recalls, "The project brought all the LTCs fully on board from the outset, taking their advice on how best to roll out Talis Aspire to the entire community of 900 academics. The senior LTC who chairs their meetings was made a full member of the project team and also the Project Board, giving her full involvement in the project's developments, and ensuring his input on roll-out."

The involvement of the LTCs was crucial, in the first instance helping to formulate a template that would provide a consistent student experience across all modules, including standard headings such as 'Essential Reading' and 'Background Reading'. On the advice of the LTCs, a phased approach was taken to training the academics, as Mike explains: "Firstly we prepared presentation materials for our librarians to use with academic staff. We produced a number of Getting Started guides and briefing presentations. The LTCs also helped us to identify key staff – either managers or enthusiasts – within each academic school who would subsequently act as champions."

Rolling out Talis Aspire

In the second phase, Mike and the project team ran a series of drop-in sessions in which large numbers of academic staff were introduced to the Talis Aspire project. "Running in parallel", adds Mike, "we started a one-to-one training programme for all academics. This is one of the biggest pieces of work that our academic liaison team had undertaken for some time, with each liaison librarian training around 80 academic members of staff. In a typical session, the librarian starts by demonstrating Talis Aspire to the academic. The librarian installs the Talis Aspire bookmarklet on the browser if the academic hasn't already done so, and guides the academic through the processes of creating and editing lists on the system. Talis Aspire's intuitive interface means that plenty of time is left over for a more general conversation about resource list management. The librarian offers advice on best practice, whilst ascertaining how frequently the academic updates and manages resource lists. The aim, therefore, is not simply to provide system training, but to raise the standard of resource lists across the university."

These one-to-one sessions are now underway – the library has so far trained around 200 academics and will complete the phase in the autumn term, with a big push in September before the students return. The anticipated outcome, already emerging, is clearer and more consistent production of resource lists. "The resource list workflow has been modified with the agreement of the LTCs," adds Mike. "So now, when a list has been produced or changed substantially, Talis Aspire sends a notification to the relevant liaison librarian, triggering a review prior to the publication of the list on Talis Aspire. It's a form of quality assurance on the list, which has already made quite a difference."

One of the project's key success criteria is the provision of more efficient management of lists by academics, using Talis Aspire. The project is already receiving feedback from early adopters testifying that this requirement is being met. Mike is confident that the workflows will become even more efficient over time: "When academics start making regular updates to existing resource lists, rather than starting them from scratch," he says, "then the efficiencies of Talis Aspire will really kick in." Mike also believes that the role of the academic liaison team will be enhanced stating that "Once the roll-out is complete, we'll have shifted the focus of their work in relation to resource lists in a significant way. They will be working with the academic from the very beginning of the lifecycle of a list, enabling them to perform tasks that are intrinsic to academic liaison. Previously, librarians became involved only after the list had been produced, at which point the librarian's role was largely administrative."

Facing a challenging future

As Nottingham Trent University enters a protracted period of constrained budgets, university priorities will inevitably be disrupted. But Mike emphasises that "Resource lists are inextricably linked to directed student reading, which is a core activity in all universities, especially in those with large numbers of first-year undergraduates. We believe that the library has made a great start using Talis Aspire as a tool in the transformation of resource list practices across the institution that will ultimately make the learning experiences of students at Nottingham Trent University even better."