

Using a blog to showcase the library

The Maynooth University Library Quality Review



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Introduction

This article recounts Maynooth University (MU) Library's experience of using a blog to showcase library activity as part of a library quality review. Such reviews, established under the 1997 Irish Universities Act, are now an integral part of the Irish Higher Education system. Maynooth University Library undertook quality reviews in 2004, 2010 and 2015. As part of the 2015 review, the two authors of this article produced a blog, which formed part of the submission to the peer reviewers.

Elements of the quality review process

The library quality review involved the preparation of an internal self-assessment report (SAR), a site visit by two external reviewers, the production of a peer review report by two internal and two external reviewers and the preparation of a quality improvement plan (QIP).

The library agreed to be the first university department to undergo a review under the third cycle university reviews, which commenced in 2015. This allowed us to have significant input into the structure of the SAR and to suggest ways to best present evidence of our wide range of activities, outside the standard written report. To achieve this, we produced the **Maynooth University Library Quality Review 2015 blog** (<https://libraryqualreview2015.wordpress.com/>), which serves to complement the SAR.



MU Library atrium

Blogs and blogging

We had some experience of blogging, having been awarded first and joint second prize in the Academic and National Library Training Co-operative (ANLTC) (<http://anltc.conul.ie/>) 2014 Blog Competition for our blogs on staff development and library information services at MU Library. We were able to build on our knowledge and experience in developing the blog, and it was an opportunity to acquire new skills. The process of developing the blog was a useful professional and personal development opportunity.

Planning

The main aim of the blog was to be a visual aid to enhance the quality review process. The timeline for preparing the SAR and the blog – approximately two months – was short. We kick-started the process with a brainstorming session with a colleague who lectures on blogs and blogging on the postgraduate course in librarianship at University College Dublin. This was a chance to discuss what we wanted to convey via the blog. An accurate and balanced representation of the work undertaken by the library within the university and the wider community was essential.

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Blog software

WordPress (<https://wordpress.com/>), an online publishing platform for creating websites, blogs and apps, was chosen as the platform, and a basic design template selected. There is a wide variety of free themes (looks) to choose from, with several more available in their premium range at a cost. You can link the blog site to Facebook, Twitter and other social networks. WordPress software is user friendly and lends itself well to learning as you go.

Blog design and content

We were aware that the external reviewers – both from the UK – would not be familiar with the library or indeed the university, which helped us decide how best to design the blog. It needed to be succinct, user friendly and visually attractive. However, it was important to not short-change on this opportunity to showcase achievements. As there was a vast amount of potential material, it was necessary to be selective. The period covered in the SAR was 2010–15, and the blog had to mirror this. Information had to be concise and chronological where desirable, for example in showcasing the various exhibitions and events held in the library. Most importantly it had to be easy to navigate and understand. In order to achieve this, in traditional library style we decided to break each area to be highlighted into different subject categories or headings. The categories / headings chosen were: collections, community engagement, events, exhibitions, staff development and student experience. We were able to use existing material from the blogs that won the 2014 competition as both display library activity in different ways. Information was also harvested from the library's Flickr and Facebook accounts.

With the structure and content of the blog decided, the next step was to choose a design theme. The basic WordPress template originally selected was subsequently changed to a different theme, one that allowed uploading the university logo alongside the title of the blog. Keeping in mind some of the basic elements of good design such as composition, type-faces and colour pallet, we chose the free design template 'Big Brother'. This allowed the use of images instead of solid colour for the backdrop, which afforded opportunities for creativity. The use of the images would, we hoped, captivate the audience immediately. A variety of images was chosen, some modern, several others with an old-world feel. Maynooth University Library has a bank of images gathered over the years, which proved to be very useful. The images chosen were not always the obvious ones: some had an artistic or unique perspective. Rather than using an image of the façade of the library building, the image of the library atrium was chosen for the home screen as it has a modern, welcoming and rather exotic look. The backdrop is a map, selected because it symbolises a journey of development of library activities going from local, regional and national to international.

The blog afforded the opportunity to showcase a sample range of items from our vast array of collections. It captured a glimpse of some of the wonderful treasures that may otherwise have been overlooked during the two-day site visit due to time constraints; and it provided an insight into how the library collection has evolved over the period of the review. Included in this captured vision is the new special collections reading room (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BdWM6oJSKv0>) and the flexible learning spaces available in the new library extension (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HSdrjaGHLu4>). The library has been acknowledged as the hub of the university and it was important to reflect this through the material selected. One challenge was not to overwhelm the reviewers, who received a lot of documentation and met many people over a short period. We also wanted to include the fun elements, showing how the library is used as a social space as well as a learning environment. To achieve this we included some of the wonderful videos captured at such events such as Exploring African and Caribbean Culture (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wq7IFqxx0pg>) and the Robot Soccer

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match capturing our community engagement during Science Week 2014 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-oWawX5qno>).



Some of the images chosen and adapted to customise the randomised header in the blog

Finding innovative ways to showcase library staff activity and student engagement was interesting. Using internet resources such as Animoto (<https://animoto.com/>), Movie Maker (<http://windows.microsoft.com/en-ie/windows-live/movie-maker>), YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/>) and Picasa (<https://picasa.google.com/>), an online photo editor helped to vary the forms while also increasing our skill set in these areas. The importance of recording library activities, whether presenting prizes to students or capturing students using the library in creative ways, became very clear during the process. Creating the blog further emphasised the importance of keeping chronological records of library activities. Encouraging staff to keep their own photographic evidence of their extra-curricular work helps to raise the status of such activities which could otherwise be absorbed and overlooked, while taking ownership is essential for career enhancement.

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Outcomes

Measuring the outcome of this journey was important. Assessing whether the objectives discussed at the start of the project had been achieved was essential to instil confidence in the work undertaken. Throughout the process of creating the blog the feedback was very positive. At the peer review group meeting on 29 April 2015, Durham University Librarian, Jon Purcell, explained how the blog, of which the reviewers had received details two weeks before the visit, helped them from the outset. Professor Jim Walsh, Vice-President for Strategy and Quality at MU, commented on the innovative aspect and anticipated that other departments in the university might consider using a blog to enhance their quality review process. Manchester University Librarian and Director of the John Rylands Library, Jan Wilkinson, had the following comments to make on her experience of using the blog as an external reviewer for the quality review:

As a reviewer entering a new organisation for the first time, knowing almost nothing, your blog performed the wonderful job of showcasing all the wonderful things that are going on at Maynooth and without the leg-work! You helped us to hit the ground running last Tuesday, by focusing our attention on the things that you, the staff, wanted us to know about and to see. Without it, it would be impossible to gain so many insights into the breadth and depth of your impressive library in just the two days we had. We could see at a glance, all the things you are rightly proud of. What followed next was the combination of the blog with many, many fruitful conversations with the full range of library stakeholders. This meant that by the time we left, we had as full a picture as it is possible to achieve in such a short period.

Professor Mark Boyle of the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA) / Geography Department at MU explained his experience of the blog in the following way.

Fluent communication is central to effective team building and collective action towards an end goal. The MU Library's blog is an excellent and pioneering example of how a complex organisational unit can harness social media to further awareness at all levels of ongoing events and activities. It also played a key role in helping the library prepare so thoroughly for the review process. It is a simple but most impressive initiative and is to be commended to other units in Maynooth.

Reflection

There is no doubt the blog contributed to the library's very positive peer review report, and praise for the blog was abundant and warm. Following such praise, appreciation and approval it is not too surprising to be able to say, with a measure of gratitude and relief, that the vision and objectives set at the outset were achieved. The experience of working on the project was rewarding; it enhanced opportunities for skills development and promoted the library in a creative and exciting way. The journey is not over, as the two authors have subsequently been asked to present at conferences, which is helping us develop our skill sets. We hope that this article will stimulate interest in innovative ways of presenting the library for peer reviews and other quality initiatives. It seeks to highlight how to enhance opportunities to promote the library in creative and exciting ways while providing an opportunity for new skills development.

References

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