

Working differently: an account of how a library-publisher partnership can enhance trust and value

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Working differently: an account of how a library-publisher partnership can enhance trust and value

Exploring the features of the unique partnership set up between SAGE and the University of Sussex in 2010, this article outlines some of the outcomes and how they have added value to the work and experiences of both the library and the publisher. With the changing models of delivery in scholarly communication and the shifting funding arrangements for higher education in the UK, this collaboration was – and is – an innovative and unprecedented attempt to understand the pressures and current priorities of our respective professions. Lessons learned from the experience as well as future possibilities are covered in order to demonstrate the value gained from working together differently.

This article explains the nature of an ongoing partnership first set up between the University of Sussex and SAGE in September 2010. It outlines the thought process behind its instigation, and our experience of working together in this unprecedented and innovative way.

The vision of UKSG is ‘to facilitate an efficient information chain, a better experience for scholars and a world where all members of the scholarly and professional information supply chain understand each other’. It is in the spirit of the final part of this statement that the agreement between SAGE and the University of Sussex was conceived.

We (this article’s authors) met whilst serving as UKSG Marketing Committee members. This afforded us the opportunity for many informal discussions on train journeys and at conferences that we each found very helpful in attempting to understand the pressures and current priorities of our respective professions. There were lots of ideas we wanted to explore, and with which we hoped to benefit both our organizations and colleagues. Brief casual meetings three times a year over a shared journey were never going to accomplish anything other than to further our own personal understanding, so we developed a plan to formalize a ‘special relationship’ between our respective institutions.

This was far less easy than it sounds; we had to distill our enthusiasm to come up with a proposal that would appeal to both SAGE and Sussex, and so with the help of Mithu Lucraft (PR Manager at SAGE) and Clare Dobson (Head of Campaigns and Operations at Sussex) we began to formulate our thoughts.

The University of Sussex Library was just about to undergo a very big refurbishment, and it made sense to find an element of this to base the proposal on. We settled on the new area we had just created in the Library for researchers – the ‘Research Hive’

This space was going to be completely new to the Library, and it seemed to present many opportunities for SAGE to get involved in its development, not just as a physical space, but also with what went on inside it. We were developing our plans all the time – this would not only be a relationship between publishers and libraries; we would also be attempting to extend this out to doctoral students and researchers. We began to see endless opportunities for working together in new and exciting ways, but first of all we had to establish why a partnership between SAGE and Sussex would work.



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301 The key tenets of the proposal were as follows:

- that Sussex is committed to supporting world-class research and teaching and is an institution founded on the promotion of interdisciplinary study
- common interests between the Library's vision for the development of its researcher support services, and SAGE's desire to better understand how the research process happens
- we are similarly-aged organizations, with Sussex celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2011-12 and SAGE having been founded in 1965
- Sussex has traditionally made good use of SAGE collections, both journals and books, as the range of publications match almost identically with the range of subjects taught and researched at the University
- the profile of the dedicated library support team for research – the Research Support Team – had an excellent and improving profile both internally and externally, being one of the first university libraries to recognize the need for a dedicated library team to support research.

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For Sussex, the question: “Why SAGE?” was as important to get right: promoting a close relationship with a commercial company, especially in the Library, meant that the record and connections of that company had to be able to withstand the strong and ethical stance of student politics at Sussex. SAGE, as a privately-owned company with a long and demonstrable record of supporting education and research to fulfill its vision – that engaged scholarship lies at the heart of any healthy society and that education is intrinsically valuable – fitted the bill perfectly. SAGE has also become increasingly aware of the importance of talking with and understanding the needs of the communities it serves so was keen to work closely with Sussex in this way.

The proposal asked SAGE to support the Research Support Programme at Sussex for two years from 2010 until 2012 with a gift that was match-funded by the government. Within the proposal, both parties agreed that the gift would support various aspects of the Programme including:

- the Sussex Research Hive
- Sussex Research Hive Scholarships – three newly established scholarships would be made available to experienced doctoral students to support the development of the Research Hive initially ensuring it was embedded in the research community at Sussex. It was envisaged that the ‘Scholars’ would be advocates for the Research Support Programme more broadly, which would help both the Library and SAGE improve their understanding of this difficult to reach and often remote group of researchers. Crucially they would contribute to the evaluation of the Hive during its first year of opening and make recommendations on future use. It was envisaged also that the Scholars would be able to develop their own skills in a number of areas, including marketing and promotion, presentation and peer mentoring
- the Sussex Research Hive Seminar series and Open Access Week events using internal and external speakers and run with the intention of raising awareness of current issues affecting researchers
- an International Educational Conference for doctoral-level students to be held at Sussex each year.

Although there was a concrete proposal on the table, and of course the gift agreement, our hopes for this arrangement were that it would go beyond the agreed initial actions and that there would be a number of unforeseen collaborations. It is important to say that for SAGE, the partnership was viewed experimentally with many aspirations and plans but no concrete

302 outcomes built into the decision to offer the gift. It was an 'unknown' in many ways but one that both parties were keen to explore.

To date, Sussex has successfully employed six Research Hive Scholars and is about to appoint three more for 2012–13. The Programme itself has worked well so far and has certainly helped us embed the Research Hive and the Seminar series into the research community at Sussex. The Scholars work in facilitating peer-to-peer discussion sessions following the more formal Hive Seminars, and other training events have been particularly successful. These pick up topics discussed at the seminars, including copyright, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the changing research environment.

"The relationship between the Scholars and SAGE has been especially symbiotic ..."

The Scholars themselves have worked with SAGE – presenting at the SAGE office in London to SAGE staff on their research and the issues they face as doctoral students and also contributing to meetings, focus groups and e-mail discussions. The relationship between the Scholars and SAGE has been especially symbiotic with the students benefiting from workshops by SAGE on how to get published and learning about academic publishing and research communication, from the publisher perspective.

Jane Harvell has presented at a SAGE company-wide meeting about the future of the academic library and answered questions following this event from staff from various departments.

The Research Hive Seminar series and Open Access Week Seminars have now been running for two years, and Sussex has had speakers from SAGE at the events as well as hosting a number of SAGE staff who have visited Sussex specifically to hear the Seminars and to look around the Library.

An attempt to embed the relationship further into the institution by way of financial support for the Education Conference was less successful in exploring alternative ways a publisher could be involved in this type of activity. The event itself was a success, but it did highlight that these new ideas for working together do need energy and commitment; they cannot just be set up and left to run. Input of creative thought is needed to take advantage of all the potential opportunities available.

Unexpected outcomes were numerous. SAGE staff from the New Products Team ran a number of focus groups in the Hive for students and academics trialling new e-book platform ideas. These were followed up by usability testing. The New Products Team also spoke with library staff about purchasing patterns in areas of product development interest. All of this was found to be hugely beneficial. The Senior Management Group of SAGE visited the Library, and Library staff and Scholars took part in focus groups to discuss current issues and topics relevant to publishers. SAGE advertised for, and appointed, two paid Social Media interns from amongst the doctoral community at Sussex.

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We are now coming to the end of the original agreement and are currently in negotiation to extend the gift. We believe there are many further mutual benefits that can be offered by our association. For example, could the Scholar role be extended to include students? These roles could provide valuable data (for instance, with specific questions around how teaching and research material is used) and provide an understanding of the learning behaviours of students as well as capturing the development of an undergraduate during their three years as a student. Additionally, could we learn more from each other by way of job shadowing in areas such as marketing, teaching and research support set up around specific projects or needs?

Other areas we want to explore over the coming years include how research data is stored and used and how open access article submissions, funding and processes will evolve – in all subject areas, with a particular interest in the social sciences and humanities. It would also

303 be interesting to explore how some non-research data can be shared between publisher and university to better understand our communities and to aid how we serve future researchers and students.

Sussex always keeps SAGE staff in mind in its planning, looking for opportunities to get them involved when there could be a development opportunity for them. To be clear, this wasn't a *sponsorship* deal. The spirit behind the gift was always about mutual professional development and understanding. The term *sponsorship* puts too much emphasis on commercial gain and feels one-sided and rather finite. Our agreed approach with this gift was to aid learning and be able to work hard and make demands where necessary to ensure we were ambitious and unrestrictive in approach.

"The spirit behind the gift was always about mutual professional development and understanding."

It is hard to do things differently, and it does demand a great deal of energy to step outside of the natural publisher/library relationship to challenge and investigate new ways of working together and to take risks. However, it is important to do this now, more than at any other time, as our value to the academic process is being challenged. Working together and understanding each other's businesses and pressures surely has to be a good thing. Certainly, it was recognized as such by the judges for the Times Higher Leadership and Management Awards in 2012 with a shortlisting for 'Outstanding Library Team' for the Research Support Team and their work with SAGE.

Lessons have been learned that should prove valuable for this initiative in future years, as well as other innovative collaborations. The idea is just the beginning; energy and commitment of a number of staff to step outside of day-to-day work is essential to build and maintain momentum as well as explore the various opportunities generated by the partnership, both imagined and unforeseen. Additionally, it is important that those staff who are creative thinkers and passionate about new ways of working are able to play a key role in efforts such as this. Not everyone will be able to work differently without direction, but we found those who were have been key players in finding the value in this initiative.

Another key lesson learned is that new initiatives take time to bear fruit. It is no use looking for measures of success or widespread involvement in the first six months or even longer. Organizations need time to embrace collaborations such as these and reminders in the form of talks at SAGE company meetings or workshops by Sussex researchers and library staff were essential to foster understanding and involvement.

Finally, we learned it is OK to try things that turned out to be less successful in terms of usable results. It is impossible to anticipate all outcomes at the start of a venture like this, and some activities will be repeated whilst others will not.

Ultimately, this kind of project can be viewed as non-essential and take a back seat to the many priorities and pressures involved in the day job. Many of us know, however, that without looking outwards, asking questions and listening to the answers, we are unlikely to be truly able to grasp the needs of the communities we serve or be future-ready.

It is fair to say that Sussex now has a much better understanding of the publishing process as a result of this relationship. The library team has met staff in Editorial, HR, Finance and in IT as well as developed a more trusting relationship with contacts in Sales and Marketing.

For SAGE, this collaboration has helped put key customers at the heart of thinking and planning. It is easy to slip into patterns of making assumptions or asking colleagues for answers instead of researchers and libraries themselves, and this collaboration quickly ensured that was not allowed to happen.

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