Moving from an in-house classification scheme to a standardised scheme: an outline project plan

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History of our scheme

Since 1994, The University of Law (formerly The College of Law) has had its own classification scheme, a simple four letter notation for broad subject headings in the areas of law in which we offered modules. This classification scheme is in use over the University's eight centre libraries. Over time, as courses changed, new subject headings and classmarks were added to our scheme. In 2015, the University announced the launch of its De Broc School of Business and, with the planned purchase of resources to support the new courses, it was clear that our classification scheme would have to adapt to accommodate these. In the summer of 2016, work was undertaken by the library team in London Bloomsbury to augment our current classification scheme and to provide a separate collection for students studying business and finance. However, in time it became apparent that trying to fit resources into the schemes was not without problems. One of the problems that we encountered, was that there are some resources which are dual use to both business and law. According to whether a particular resource was purchased for law or business, meant that copies of the same title could therefore be shelved in different places within our London Bloomsbury library! In addition, some of our classmarks were not sufficiently well differentiated e.g. planning, land and conveyancing have separate shelfmarks. With the planned rollout of De Broc courses to other centres in time, it was felt that the current arrangement would not work in centres with more limited library shelving space and did not enable students to find easily the resources that they needed by browsing the shelves. As the University continues to expand the courses offered, both through strategic partnerships with other higher education institutions and with additional subject areas being considered as part of joint law degrees, it became necessary to carry out a review of our classification scheme to accommodate current and future course offerings within our libraries. The project scope (beginning in April/May 2017) was therefore to plan for reclassification of materials at all of our centre libraries by the end of summer 2018, to run concurrently with another project to replace our library services platform (LSP).

Dealing with staff and time constraints

Although ULaw has a professionally qualified librarian at each of our eight centre libraries and a small central team, many of our staff members are part-time and geographically dispersed. With focus also on the replacement of our LSP, this had to be borne in mind when requesting staff resources from the centres. In the initial stages I worked closely with the Head of Libraries and one of the Senior Library Assistants at London Bloomsbury with assistance from our Library Systems Officer. The initial part of the work was reviewing possible classification schemes open to us and reviewing schemes in use by other higher education institutions. A lot of this initial work was done by teleconferencing and by sharing documents on SharePoint. Additionally, the library teams at the centres were consulted by email and asked for input.

A range of classification schemes were originally considered. It was important to us that any classification scheme that we selected, be especially strong within the subjects of law and business. Although we were not looking for an identical match with our in-house classification scheme, it was important to us that mapping from the old system onto the new one, not be too complex, given time constraints and staff resources available. Because some of our students may only study with us for one year (on the postgraduate courses), we also wanted to avoid any classification scheme which would involve a lot of work for users to familiarise themselves with. Dewey Decimal classification was rejected by many of our staff members due to the long strings of class mark numbers which would have been required within a specialist collection such as ours.

Additionally, schemes which required further training use by staff were rejected, due to time constraints associated with implementing the new LSP as well as reclassifying and relabelling items, while continuing to provide full service to students (some of our courses have different start dates throughout the calendar year, so consequently some centres do not have significant windows of time for project implementation). Following an article in CILIP Update,[1] we reviewed Thema,[2] paying close attention to correlations between our subject areas and the Thema scheme. After due consideration, the core project team recommended the adoption of Thema, due to its relative simplicity and freely available resources. We demonstrated the scheme at our annual wider team meeting in Manchester in June 2017 and this was approved for adoption by a simple majority of the librarians.

The LSP project unexpectedly gave us an opportunity to complete some of the mapping work face-to-face and to include more members of the wider library team in the project. As vendor presentations were arranged over a four-day period in London in August 2017, several of us were therefore staying in the same city at the same time (a rare occurrence for our wider team!) and we were therefore able to hold face-to-face meetings to discuss some of the mapping issues after the LSP presentations had concluded. To give an idea of our team distribution, we therefore had staff from Chester, Derbyshire, Guildford, Birmingham and London able to meet over four days. We were also able to consult with library staff at our London centres, an important consideration, given their experience with a wider range of students and resources and some of our other centres.

Facilitating the move to the new scheme

One of the fortunate aspects of dealing with the reclassification of legal resources, is that we generally have a higher turnover of stock than would a research library, because we are equipping our students to deal with current law. Our first step (and indeed this is an ongoing one), was for our Library Systems Officer to produce a series of reports on outdated and superseded stock for withdrawal, to eliminate relabelling out of date resources. This again ties in with our LSP project, and has the twin benefit of only transferring current data to our new system.

Reports have been crucial to the first part of the project. In particular, knowing our most populated classmarks, has meant that during face-to-face meetings we've been able to concentrate on resolving any mapping issues for those classmarks. Classmarks with much smaller quantities of items, were therefore dealt with by email where we ran out of time, as in the example below:

Shelfmark	Shelfmark Count
ACCT	1
ARBN	354
Ask at Enquiry Desk	10
BNFN	727
BNFN.INS	1
BUSN	970

1. Green, Rob. (2016). Subject classification goes global. *CILIP Update*. September, p34-35.

2. http://www.editeur.org/151/Thema/ accessed 29th August 2017.

The next step was producing a shelfmark correspondence list, matching up our shelfmarks to the Thema scheme and agreeing clarifications and refinements. Because we were working within quite a small timeframe with limited face to face meetings, this did give us the impetus to reach agreement relatively quickly on some areas where there was a divergence of opinion. It is amazing how a looming deadline can focus attention!

As of the end of August 2017, our next steps are now to produce a list of all the Thema shelf marks we expect to use within the first year of adoption and to circulate this to all members of library staff for any final comments to be incorporated into the scheme (with a view to regular revisions in subsequent years to take account of any change in our resource holdings). The aim is to do this by the end of September 2017. With a geographically dispersed library team, it is important to reach agreement on broadly similar times for adoption in each centre, whilst taking into consideration each centre's own timetable. We have an annual library assistants team meeting in October 2017, so the project will be presented at this meeting to keep every member of the library team informed and to work together on final project implementation times.

From October 2017, each MARC record on our current library system will have two shelf marks, one for our old in-house classification scheme and the other for the Thema classmark. There will be a data transfer from of our current Voyager library system to the new LSP before June 2018, so we anticipate that some work will carry over from Voyager to the new system. The plan is for each library will then be able to undertake relabelling at a pace which suits it, with the last library to relabel each item, deleting the old classmark as it does so. We have estimated the amount of time it will take to relabel each item, giving us an estimate of the staff resources which will be required over the following year. This allows us to put in a request for temporary additional staff, if required. Additionally, one of our smaller centre libraries at Chester is transferring to a new city centre location during summer 2018, so it is likely that at this site the relabelling will be done as part of the relocation project.