



Enhancing the student experience

Universities need to develop services in partnership with their users says Liz Jolly. What does that mean for services that meet the needs of today's students?

Going to university is not just about 'going on a course'. A student's experience at university is both academic and personal; they gain something extra over and above an academic qualification. How institutions can ensure that the overall experience is the best possible is at the centre of debate within the higher education sector.

'Enhancing the student experience' is one of the objectives of the Quality Assurance Agency's institutional audits and is now also a significant focus in the work of the Higher Education Academy. It is one of the 15 key strategic challenges and drivers for change for HE institutions for the next five years identified by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.

Changes within the HE sector, including the introduction of fees, and the National Student Survey will result in differentiation in the marketplace. Universities will have to be clear about their complete offer to students as they try to attract fee-paying students as customers.

They need to ensure that they are developing services from a student perspective, not just assuming that they know what is good for them and what they want.

Institutions need to take a holistic view of learning and the learning process and how they support students during their course. They need to tell students what they can expect when they arrive, for example by providing a statement of what the experience at that particular institution will be.

Research at the University of Salford has shown that the level of personal contact made by students in their first term, including the development of kinship groups, is a key factor in their deciding whether or not to continue their course. Universities need to provide the culture and the physical environment to enable this contact to happen. Library and information services have a key role to play, both at the service and institutional level.

Salford 'decides the future'

At the University of Salford library services are part of a portfolio of services delivered by Information Services Division (ISD). This portfolio includes student and academic computing, and corporate information, network and telephony services.

The current university was formed in 1996 by a merger of the then University of Salford with University College Salford (formerly Salford Technical College) and can trace its origins back to 1896. It has 16,000 FTE (full-time equivalent) students and 2,500 staff. Its mission is to be an 'enterprising university' by 'achieving excellence in education for capability, research for the real world and partnership with business and the community'. The university has recently developed a new strategic frame-

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work to enable it to fulfil this mission.

A sense that the university needs to be both clear about its purpose and fit for that purpose in the future has led to several initiatives. The first of these, ‘Deciding the Future’, was a full-scale review of the governance structure of the university in the context of developing a learner-centred institution.

A report was drawn up by a group of senior university staff, including the Director of Information Services. All staff were invited to comment on the report via a series of consultation meetings or by emailing the Vice Chancellor.

The report is currently being revised in the light of these comments. It is clear that the university will have to be managed in a very different way if we are to be learner-focused. We will need, for example, a different aggregation of support services. This will have a significant impact upon library and information services.

The university’s strategic framework states that equality and diversity are among the values underpinning the university’s mission. Tackling equality and diversity issues is a key element in the development of the learner-centred university. Salford employed an external consultant, Gus John, to review its current position and to make recommendations, one of which is that the university takes a co-ordinated approach to student support.

An internal audit recommended that the university should focus on the overall ‘student experience’ to ensure that learning opportunities are optimised for all students. Staff and students were consulted by questionnaire on their perceptions of the institution’s student culture. The resulting report led to the setting up of the Student Experience Steering Group and Focus (operational) Group. Both groups have representatives from faculties and schools and support services, who consider how to develop learner-centred services in an integrated way.

Four critical elements

There are four critical elements in enhancing the student experience.

1 Joined-up working – recognising that students don’t care who runs what; they just want access to the support and services that they need.

2 Understanding how people learn – recognising that different people learn in different ways and that the same person may learn in different ways at different stages of their course.

3 Supporting students in living their lives – recognising that students are whole people with distinct lives outside the institution (old models of 18-year-olds are redundant).

4 Involving students in running the institu-

tion, empowering them – recognising that students have a valid voice and role in the development of services and in the governance of the institution.

LIS services need to align themselves with the broad strategic direction of the institution.

1 Joined-up working

Taking a holistic approach to the student experience when resources are in decline can be challenging but provides an opportunity to develop cost-effective services in line with institutional strategies to meet the needs of learners, researchers and other key stakeholders.

We need to ensure the end of ‘silo’ thinking both within LIS departments and within the university: the principle of partnership working is crucial. ISD aims to deliver an integrated and seamless service; this is more than just a converged service, it is an attempt to provide services in a way that delivers maximum benefit to the user. For example, our Crisp project, a review of all our enquiry and response services, has involved looking at end-to-end processes across the division in order to deliver a more effective and user-centred service.

However, as the example of the learning commons at the University of Auckland shows, while ideally an institutional structure should reflect its strategy, in reality this does not always matter. What matters more is the will of the institution to bring together support services to develop user-centred services. (Students don’t care about who runs what...) So partnerships within the institution are also crucial.

There are some examples at Salford of support services working together to enhance the student experience. ISD has worked with the Campus & Residential Services Division to develop a learning café inside one of our libraries. Academic Division has opened I-site, a ‘one-stop shop’ for students wanting information related to courses, finance or accommodation. However, we have some way to go before we offer truly integrated student support across the institution.

Partnerships outside the institution are also important, for example with other HE institutions, further education, local authorities, NHS and local business. Within library services there are many examples both regional and national, usually concerned with access, staff learning and development and collaborative purchasing of, or access to, resources. ISD is a member of the NoWAL consortium of north-west academic libraries. In Salford, ISD’s new strategic partnership with Salford City Council has already resulted in a library access scheme (see below) and we are now working on a joint archives initiative. We also offer services to support university initiatives such

as those with associate FE colleges and the NHS, and the university’s business club, Campus.

2 Understanding learning

Both academic and support services staff have a key role to play in the academic process and so all need a clear understanding of how people learn. In discussing how academic librarians can teach information skills effectively and support learning, Webb and Powis² state that ‘without jettisoning the values and core knowledge that makes us information professionals we must embrace an understanding of learning and pedagogy and seek to integrate it within our practice’.

We need to put the learner at the centre of what we are doing and build our services around their needs. When I use the term ‘learner’ I include researchers and all members of the university community. Much research has been done on the importance of the learning research nexus by Angela Brew and others. Brophy³ has said that ‘academic libraries are here to enable and enhance learning in all its forms – whether it be the learning of a first-year undergraduate coming to terms with what is meant by higher education or the learning of a Nobel Prize winning scientist seeking to push forwards the frontiers of her discipline’.

Putting the learner at the centre is important whatever your role in the library service. This is most obvious in subject support work. Information skills programmes need to be developed in partnership with academic staff and in line with institutional learning, teaching and assessment strategies. ISD’s Liaison & Support Unit staff work with schools within the university in developing information literacy units to enable students to access information effectively and to contribute to the development of skills for autonomous lifelong learning and employability.

However, putting the learner at the centre of service development and delivery is also crucial for those staff involved in Customer/User Services and the development of a suitable and easily accessible physical environment. It also applies to those involved in metadata creation and ensuring that data and information can be delivered and easily accessed both locally and remotely. (Recognising different people learn in different ways...)

To ensure that we support different learning styles, course delivery methods and attendance patterns and environments (both physical and virtual) need to be looked at. Some commentators have predicted the death of the library as a place. But learning is a social process. An example from outside the HE sector can be seen in the success of the EasyEverything cafés. We also need to remember the digital divide in the context of a mass higher education system

and widening participation.

I believe that there is a key role for the physical library to develop as an on-campus centre of learning research and academic collaboration to support a variety of course delivery modes, learning activities and attendance patterns. It will be for use by the whole learning community, not just the university. It will be used by students, academics and support staff, institutional partners (such as NHS trusts and business clubs) and local people. Flexibility of space and resources will be crucial. To quote from ISD's vision (and for those old enough to remember), it will provide 'Martini' data and services – any time, any place, anywhere.⁴

In defining the hybrid library, Dempsey⁴ has said that 'the question we need to address is not the integration of library resources with each other: it is the integration of library services with the learning and research behaviours of users'. The idea of the learning or information commons as

vices Department at Salford City Council has been the Access Salford public and university libraries' access scheme, which includes walk-in access to selected electronic information resources. The scheme, which is seen as a way in which ISD can contribute to the university's initiatives to raise aspirations and widen participation, held a successful launch event, which the Vice Chancellor and the Chief Executive of the Council attended.

It is valued highly by those members of the Salford community and students who have joined. Other initiatives such as Inspire and UK Libraries Plus have already contributed to a national network of accessible libraries for learners.

Technology has a significant role in enabling access to, and supporting, learning and enhancing library services. LIS staff need to be aware of technological developments. In many institutions learning will continue to be delivered through a mix of

are incorporated into the running of the institution. The university's student survey is another way of doing this. Pre-survey focus groups will be held with groups of students to make sure that the focus of the survey reflects the concerns of students.

Surveys such as the Unite Student Experience Report and the International Student Barometer have shown how important library services are in students' choice of institution and in their time at university. ISD's Liaison & Support Unit staff work with faculties, schools and support services to ensure that ISD services develop in line with their plans.

We are also aware of the importance of communicating with students themselves. We run a student survey in paper and online format every year. We analyse the results, feed them back to our users and incorporate suggestions in our service development. (ISD is seen as a purveyor of good practice in the university.) The Associate Directors of Liaison & Support and of Services & Operations have regular meetings with the President of the Student Union. ISD also ensures that it has user representation on our project steering groups and is developing a user council to formalise user input into service development.

Library and information services are a key component in the mix of opportunities that a university offers its students and its wider learning community, both within the institution and the locality. Library managers in higher education institutions need to think clearly and strategically about how their services can help their institution enhance the student experience. J

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pioneered in the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and increasingly on the agenda in the UK, is particularly relevant here. Libraries are being developed as 'supported learning environments that reflect pedagogical, technological and information resource developments' (University of Auckland) and deliver 'seamless, co-ordinated services while encouraging collaborative learning and community interaction' (University of Massachusetts).⁵ There is nothing here physically that is not on offer in many UK HE libraries. It is the cultural concept of the library being at the heart of the learning process that we can learn from.

3 Supporting students

The nature of the student body today is very different to that of 20 years ago: there has been an increase in part-time students, distance and virtual learning and work-based learning. Even many students registered as 'full-time' behave more like traditional part-time students: instead of living around or on campus, they have jobs, families and lives outside that they want to return to after lectures. It is up to the university to ensure that such students are supported in their learning at times and places convenient to them.

It is important that we develop the idea of the university and its library services as part of a broader regional learning community and enable members of the community to access information and resources, physically and electronically, where and when they need them. Institutional members of the community need to work together to bring this about.

The first tangible result of the partnership between ISD and the Cultural Ser-

face-to-face and e-learning approaches. However, the nature of technology used for delivering learning and teaching will continue to change.

For example, many academic library staff have tried hard to prevent the use of mobile phones in their buildings, something that they view as a distraction from learning. We may well need to review this policy in future (and some are beginning to do so). As telephony and other technologies continue to converge, mobiles will become just another way in which students access learning resources and support.

One recent example of this is a 'texting of plot summaries' service to English Literature undergraduates by John Sutherland at University College London. Our attitudes towards mobiles and our library facilities and services will need to be realigned to accommodate developments such as this and to exploit them effectively.

4 Involving students

Universities need to develop services in partnership with their users. Even if we can't provide everything, we can manage their expectations. We also need to respect the diversity of our student body and not make assumptions about needs without consultation. In future, as demonstrated by the National Student Survey, the involvement of students in the management and development of the institution will be crucial.

The University of Salford has a joint post with the Student Union in order to ensure full student representation in the operation of the institution. The Student Experience Steering Group has also approved the development of Student Liaison Representatives, who will ensure that student views

References

- 1 University of Auckland Information Commons (www.information-commons.auckland.ac.nz/).
- 2 Jo Webb and Chris Powis. *Teaching Information Skills*. Facet Publishing, 2004.
- 3 Peter Brophy. *The Academic Library* (2nd edn). Facet Publishing, 2005.
- 4 Lorcan Dempsey. 'The Recombinant Library: portals and people.' Co-published simultaneously in *Journal of Library Administration*, 39 (4); and in Sul H. Lee (ed.), *Improved Access to Information: portals, content selection, and digital information*, Binghamton, NY: Haworth, 2003 (www.oclc.org/research/staff/dempsey/recombinant_library/).
- 5 University of Massachusetts Learning Commons (www.umass.edu/learningcommons/).

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