
Travelling to succeed

Introducing a library Travel Bursary Scheme

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The University of Exeter Library Travel Bursaries Scheme¹ was established in 2012 to support students who wish to visit other libraries and / or archives in order to further their studies. We award up to £200 to taught students who are undertaking or are about to undertake their final year dissertations or projects. Students can claim for travel, accommodation and access fee expenditure. Following a successful pilot year in 2012–13, the scheme has proved popular again in 2013–14 and we plan to continue this valuable opportunity for our students.

BACKGROUND / RATIONALE

The original idea for library travel bursaries came from Jonathan Harris (FXU² Students' Union President, University of Exeter, Penryn Campus) as a means of assisting Cornwall-based students to visit the more established library collections in Exeter. We were also aware, from annual analysis of NSS results and student focus group meetings, that students need access to materials beyond Exeter, particularly at dissertation time. We wanted to offer equality of access to materials for all students, regardless of personal financial circumstances.

We were aware of travel bursary schemes in the higher education sector that supported field trips, interview attendance and other general study support activities. For example, the Lan-

caster University Travel Bursary Scheme, which supports travel to graduate job interviews and assessments;³ the Osler Library Research Travel Grant, aimed at visiting scholars who wish to stay in Montreal to use the Osler Library of the History of Medicine at McGill University;⁴ and Birbeck's Robson-Scott Travel Bursaries, which support part-time students with travel outside the UK for short independent study trips.⁵ However, we were not aware of any specific library schemes that offered funding in the way we envisaged.

A research postgraduate bursary scheme was in operation through the university's Employability and Graduate Development (EGD)⁶ division to support conference attendance, and we were able to gain valuable advice from colleagues that helped us to establish our scheme.

OUR AIMS FOR THE SCHEME

- to improve the student experience for all students, including those in Cornwall, by widening access to research resources available elsewhere
- to create opportunities for students to undertake a research-intensive dissertation project
- to encourage progression from undergraduate to postgraduate level
- to create original research and employability experiences
- to demonstrate the university's investment in personalising the student journey
- to improve student satisfaction with library provision
- to deliver real-life employability skills (completing a funding application, pursuing the research, reporting on the outcomes to the funding body)

HOW IT OPERATES

The scheme is open to taught students undertaking or about to undertake their final dissertations or projects. Funding of up to £200 is available, but we encourage applicants to apply for exact amounts required. Application is on the basis of a short form, which must be supported by the student's tutor. We had originally required a tutor signature on the form but this proved administratively and technically cumbersome. Now, we simply ask the tutors to forward on the applications as approval.

We operate three deadlines per year: November, March and June. These were scheduled to coincide with major landmark periods in the disserta-

tion processes across our subject disciplines. A panel consisting of library staff from both Exeter and Cornwall campuses meets within three weeks of each deadline to assess the applications and award the bursaries. We adapted a marking schedule used by our EGD colleagues for conference visit approvals to score the applications. Each member marks independently, before the panel convenes to agree final scores. The library panel decision is final. There is no appeal process. Unsuccessful applicants are eligible to apply in future rounds. Retrospective applications are permitted.

Bursaries are limited to one per student, per year, so students who wish to fund several trips need to make the case for all the trips in a single application, as successful students are not eligible to apply again. Reimbursement can be claimed after each trip has taken place.

Visits can be postponed for up to six months, but if the visit destination changes, a new application must be made.

All successful students must submit a short post-visit report to the library, explaining how it assisted their studies.

THE STORY SO FAR

We have been very pleased with the take-up and operation of the scheme. In total 122 students applied and 107 bursaries were awarded, totalling £12,667, across both campuses. Reasons for failure of applications included incomplete forms, ineligible status and poor attention to detail in form completion. Heaviest use of the scheme has come from humanities students, with a total of 82 successful applications. This was followed by social sciences disciplines, but with a much smaller total of 19 successful applications. We encouraged applications from all disciplines but we expected this pattern of take-up because of the nature of the subject areas and dissertation content.

We were very pleased to see a wide variety of destinations. In addition to inter-campus travel, visits were made to other parts of the UK, Europe and further afield. The total number of destinations visited in 2012/13 was 47, and in 2013-14 it was 31. Unsurprisingly, the most popular destination was the British Library, with 23 visits, followed by the National Archives at Kew, with 14 visits. We hadn't anticipated non-UK travel at the outset of the scheme but were delighted to support student visits further afield, including trips to the Euro-

pean Parliament, the National Library of Spain and Cologne's university library.

The reports from successful students have demonstrated the value of the scheme to their educational experience. Some illustrative feedback is quoted below:

A big thank you to the Travel Bursary Scheme for kick-starting my dissertation research!

I now feel confident in continuing with my research and am very grateful for the library travel scheme for allowing me this opportunity.

A helpful push from my tutor and the assistance of the Travel Bursary ensured that my dissertation got off the ground.

Without the bursary I would have been unable to justify such a trip and feel my project would have lacked originality, depth and creativity.

The scheme was well supported by academic staff and benefited from a very enthusiastic sponsor, our Associate Dean for Education in Humanities. His tweet⁷ was featured in the student newspaper Exepose⁸ and helped encourage applications.



PROBLEMS AND DIFFICULTIES

Sign-off

Our biggest problem related to the academic sign-off of applications. We found that some academics failed to send on applications in time for the deadline, leaving students with a potential wait of several months before the next deadline. Students had no way of knowing if their application had been passed to the library. As a result we introduced a receipt of application notification so that students would know that their application had been received from their tutor. We dropped the original requirement for a tutor signature because there was much confusion over the need for physical vs electronic signature and this led to unnecessary scanning and delays in applications.

Financial process

As in any large organisation, financial systems are complex and limit the ways in which we can

make payment. We opted for the simplest mechanism available to us – student expense claim forms – but even this has been time consuming to administer.

WHAT NEXT?

We are continuing with the scheme for 2014–15 and have expanded the scheme into a Library Travel and Access Bursaries Scheme. In line with our 'digital first' agenda we have broadened the scheme to include payment of fees for one-off access to online resources by individuals. This may encourage more applications from our business and science-related disciplines. We envisage students paying for a month's access to particular commercial databases or newspaper databases, etc.

We will maintain a regular annual review cycle to ensure the scheme continues to meet the needs of our students, with appropriate adjustments to accommodate changing environments and institutional strategies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCES

All websites accessed September 2014

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- 8 <http://xmedia.ex.ac.uk/wp/wordpress/>