
Skills development at the University of Manchester Library

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The Alan Gilbert Learning Commons – a £24 million investment run by the library – opened in October 2012 at the University of Manchester. The building, with over 1000 study spaces, 400 PCs and 30 group rooms, offers a state-of-the-art facility for students and has proved extremely popular.¹ This article describes how the ‘learning’ is being put into the Learning Commons through the work being done on a new open training programme.

The Learning Commons is naturally seen as a hub for student activity. The central location on an extensive city campus provides a great opportunity to enhance learning both by being a support provider and by signposting students to other resources. At the beginning of this year a dedicated Learning Development Officer was appointed, with the responsibility of developing the skills part of the library’s open training programme. The programme develops and delivers training and workshops that are new and innovative, with topics such as academic writing, presentation, interview and job-searching skills. It brings together the expertise and best practice already available on campus, with the library acting as a bridge between the students’ needs and the wider university resources. The aim is not to duplicate already existing resources, nor to create a parallel programme, but to create training that links students to the resources they need, wherever they happen to be provided.

The impetus for the creation of the open programme was a growing awareness of the potential inherent in designing a programme that allowed for cross-university collaboration and exposed students to expertise from outside their own discipline. The programme itself is designed with a blended approach to learning – with face-to-face workshops and training focused on supporting students in an informal and personalised learning environment, and the online provision currently being developed and rolled out. The latter will neither take the place of the workshops nor centre around material used in face-to-face sessions, but will be deliberately designed to take advantage of the flexibility and interactivity of the web and will serve as a signpost for students interested in a topic or skill and as an effective way to broaden the impact of the programme to support more students.

The University of Manchester has recently announced its vision for 2020, which includes the sort of skills development programme currently being created by the library. Students at the university will be expected and encouraged to investigate beyond the strict content of their degree programmes and invest time in developing a broader and more varied set of skills than is traditionally expected. To achieve this, the partnerships across the university become key, offering an opportunity to demonstrate both the resources available and the multitude of ways the skills and knowledge acquired at university can help a student after they have left.

Much of the work has involved seeking partnerships with other service providers across the university and inviting them to develop workshops and become an active part of the open training programme. The courses delivered are open to all students at the university, regardless of year, degree programme or postgraduate or undergraduate designation. These workshops and training sessions allow students to evaluate and self-select areas where they feel they need support or have an interest in improving or learning. This structure moves the focus from a top-down remedial model to one where students are encouraged to explore the options and resources that provide pathways for success and go beyond the traditional content studied during a degree.

A trial was offered in spring 2013 to assess both student demand and the optimal timing and design of the programme. The workshops covered areas from academic writing to presentation skills and also had an employability emphasis which

was run in partnership with the Careers Division and focused on CVs, interview skills and job search techniques. In all, 21 workshops have been delivered to nearly three hundred students in a twelve-week period. The trial was organised with minimal marketing; attendance rates were generally very high, with, on average, over 60% of students signing up then attending a session. Although no work has yet begun to measure formally the impact of the workshops on retention or student satisfaction, the consistently high attendance and requests for additional sessions are a promising sign of the programme's potential impact on the student experience at Manchester. There was low-key feedback survey in order to gauge the impressions of some of the students who attended the sessions. Student comments on the programme included:

I really enjoyed the session, had no idea what to expect going into it but left learning a lot about myself. Very well organised, great session!

I'm very much impressed at the trainings you've conducted so far. I've learnt a great deal.

Student satisfaction with the workshops was high, with over 90% reporting that they found the workshops useful and the trainers leading the workshops 'excellent' or 'very good'. Usage statistics were tracked and sign-ups were available via a bitly bundle, which allowed a rough gauge of interest in a course compared to actual sign ups and attendance. To ensure that the training programme stays current and reflects student need, feedback will be acquired from students attending courses, staff acting as advisers and others – with a commitment to responding to the feedback to meet demonstrated need.

It is anticipated that, once all the workshops and other face-to-face sessions are running, there will be over thirty workshops and nearly as many other training opportunities (one-on-one or drop-in sessions), possibly tripling the number of students supported each semester. Work has also begun to create workshops that highlight research skills, allowing Manchester's world class research and focus on innovation and intellectual curiosity to become a part of the experience of all students, undergraduate and postgraduate. All this support will be tied in to the database of workshop materials, making the innovations and resources linked with the training programme available to the rest of the university. This will go far beyond the modular workshops and will help to integrate

skills support and disseminate best practice across the university.

The programme does not intend to replace skills support in Schools and will work to improve support across the university. In this sense, the workshops, online provision, work with faculties and other partners will add up to more than the sum of its parts. Expertise of the entire university will be drawn upon to deepen the student experience and create a unique and innovative programme that goes beyond skills support and actively impacts upon learning.

REFERENCE

- 1 R. Jones, 'Alan Gilbert Learning Commons University of Manchester', *SCONUL Focus*: 57 (2013), pp. 14-16