
Library clinics: the introduction of an outreach service to postgraduate students in UCD Michael Smurfit Graduate Business School



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This article looks at the introduction of weekly library clinics run by the postgraduate business librarian outside the walls of the library and in the UCD (University College Dublin) Michael Smurfit Graduate Business School. It describes the preparations and steps taken to get the project off the ground, the reaction of both students and staff in the business school and plans for the future!

INTRODUCTION

July 2008 saw the restructuring of UCD library, as the branch librarian in the postgraduate business library retired after 18 years of service. Gone was a person who had worked hard to form strong connections with both the school's academic staff and the various students who had passed through the library's doors in those years. The role of branch librarian ceased to exist, and in August 2008 the two roles of deputy head of academic services (business and law) and liaison librarian for postgraduate business were introduced.

As the liaison librarian in this role I was acutely aware of the challenges that faced me – both in terms of the library staff and how their work lives would be altered and in terms of the academic staff and their relationship with the library. The previous librarian had developed over a period of

time close working relationships with the library team (one senior library assistant and three library assistants) and had also established ties with many long-standing members of the academic staff. I was all too aware of the possible challenges and the time it would take to build relationships of my own – as well as managing a busy schedule in a new post.

As it is a postgraduate school, most of the taught masters programmes last one year. Therefore – bar the part-time masters programmes (generally running over the course of two years) and the PhD programmes (over four years) – the library only has a year to establish a relationship, and a reputation, with the students. Apart from the beginning-of-term induction programmes, there hadn't been a series of information skills sessions or any reference services apart from general desk/phone/e-mail queries.

WHY THIS OUTREACH METHOD?

As the library is situated in the far 'west wing' of the business school a student has to make a special point of coming into the building – there is nothing else at this side of the campus that might lead them to stumble across it. Many of our students use only the electronic library and do not feel the need to come to the library specifically to consult a librarian if they have a query.

Also, given the nature of many of the courses, the students are required to work together in groups on projects and assignments. There is only one room in the library in which the students can work collaboratively (due to noise restrictions) so they tend to use the common room, which is situated right in the heart of the school itself. The common room is a well-designed space where not only do students sit and have coffee, they actively work together in groups on their course work, often huddled around a laptop.

On seeing this I felt that the idea of some sort of outreach service from the library could work. By having regular times for this each week, and by choosing a busy time, then the liaison librarian could have desk space in the common room and students could ask questions or for advice while they are in the middle of their project work. In essence this service would be to pull the library out of its four walls and place it firmly in the centre of the student arena.

NEW GROUND?

Within UCD library the idea of engaging with students outside the traditional medium of the building itself, and of the information or reference desk, is not an entirely new occurrence. Road shows have been running for a number of years, where a team of library staff have gone out to the schools/research centres to promote certain resources or services. Library roving had also been employed as a means to identify students/staff who were in need of assistance but who did not automatically approach an information desk. The idea of a library clinic or outreach service seemed an organic extension to the dynamic efforts already made by others within the library.

PRACTICALITIES

At the most basic level I knew that I would need a table, a laptop and possibly a chair! In reality I booked a specially designed desk (with wheels) that the library had commissioned the previous year for such events as road shows. The desk had the added 'wow factor' of lighting up – thus attracting immediate attention.

I needed an electrical socket nearby for the desk lights and to make sure the power on the laptop was sufficient to last the hour. I also brought a few database guides and some freebies – notebooks and pens (always a good incentive!). Posters/flyers for any upcoming training events were also brought along.

I designed a very basic flyer and a poster which I hung in the library and around the business school. Each morning before the clinic I put the flyers on all of the tables in the common room to inform the students of what the clinic is, the times and so on. Initially I sent an e-mail and put an announcement on the VLE (Blackboard). I also let all of the academics know via a 'Friday memo' for the business school, so they could encourage their students to 'drop by'.

On days when staffing levels were high enough, a library assistant would often accompany me to help out – mainly answering queries. Some more proactive members of staff would approach groups of students who were obviously engaged in work and inform them that the librarian would be here for the next hour or so if they needed help. At these times queries would increase. A slightly negative observation was that if it was a quiet day the presence of two members of library staff would deter the students from approaching,

particularly if the two staff were talking (whether about work-related matters or not!).

REACTIONS

As the clinic was set up at the top of the student common room, it was visible to those sitting working, alone or in groups, having coffee or simply chatting. The position of the desk at the top of the room meant that it was located in the middle of a thoroughfare that leads on to lecture theatres and the restaurant – ensuring high visibility.

The reactions from students have ranged from the curious ('What's going on here then?') to direct questions about specific sessions or workshops that have been advertised. The use of 'freebies' such as pens and notepads acted as an incentive to approach the desk, and while students were there they very often asked questions that they had been meaning to ask in the library, commented on leaflets and so on.

Surprisingly, reactions from academic staff were especially favourable, particularly in the first few weeks. Many staff mentioned that it was nice to see the library outside of the library walls and one commented that it was excellent customer-service practice! On a personal level, given my new role, it was an excellent way for me to get my face known and show that I was willing to leave the library to engage with students and staff alike.

STATS

	No. of Queries	Company Info.	Industry Info.	Database Query	E Journals	Catalogue	IT	Access	Other
Semester 1									
Week 1	13	0	0	5	4	0	1	1	2
Week 2	5	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	3
Week 3	4	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	2
Week 4	5	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	3
Total:	27	0	2	7	6	0	1	1	10
Semester 2									
Week 1	6	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	2
Week 2	5	0	0	2	1	0	0	1	1
Week 3	7	0	0	3	2	0	0	0	2
Week 4	4	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	0
Week 5	3	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
Week 6	3	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	1
Total:	28	1	1	12	4	0	0	3	7

Over the course of the ten weeks that the clinics ran I received nearly 60 separate queries, which were logged as queries rather than as people enquiring because this gives a better feel for the amount of time spent when talking to students. The bulk of the queries came out in the categories of 'Database queries' (mostly how to find information, either within a specific database or on a specific subject) and 'Other', most of these being about Endnote, the bibliographic-management software tool (of which I am also the coordinator). Some also included how to access theses and information on plagiarism.

What struck me most about the first semester was the confusion about how and where to search for articles on a subject – many students were heading straight for the e-journals rather than using a database. I was also pleased with the lack of students asking how to use the catalogue, confirming that many of them are experienced in the basics at least.

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

These clinics have proved to be a useful tool, not only to promote the library itself to both students and academic staff but to proactively place the library at the centre of student life and research, without the students having to come knocking on our doors.

The basic framework from the 08/09 year will be re-used for any future clinics, with a heavy emphasis on promotion, particularly at student induction. The idea of introducing themed weeks – where a certain database or resource/topic is highlighted each week – is one that I would like to explore, ensuring that all areas have been covered with all students, regardless of the level of training in information literacy skills that they are formally exposed to.

As mentioned previously, the UCD Michael Smurfit Graduate Business School deals with postgraduate students only, and the turnover of those students is usually yearly (with the exception of part-time masters programmes and PhD programmes). This results in a new cohort of students arriving on campus each academic year, and therefore the effective promotion of the library service is crucial. Not all students will have used the library effectively in their undergraduate courses, and some are undertaking professional education after many years out of the academic arena; the level of research that a masters course expects of them means that they need to develop their information literacy skills and this is where the library comes in. I see the weekly clinics as an excellent resource in promoting the library and what it has to offer to these students.