
From 59 to 95 in a year: improving the student experience in politics



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At the University of the West of England (UWE) there are three undergraduate programmes in the field of politics and international relations (IR). The library's National Student Survey (NSS) score for this group of students has tended to be lower than for other subjects in the last few years. A satisfaction score in the mid-70% is not uncommon. Each year I analyse the data for these subjects and take steps to improve in the areas mentioned by students. However, the combined score in 2012 came in at an all-time low of 59% satisfaction. (The exact wording of the question is 'The library resources and services are good enough for my needs'.) This was both a shock and a disappointment, given that various actions had been taken to improve library provision for these students.

Before delving more deeply into the qualitative data, my first step was to look at the results for the discipline as a whole at UWE. Did other aspects of their student experience receive similarly low marks? The answer to this question was a resounding 'no'. In fact, students had marked nearly all other aspects of their university and course experience with a high satisfaction rating: the only two exceptions to their high satisfaction levels were IT provision and library resources.

The next step was to look through the qualitative data. The first notably depressing trend was that there were no positive comments about the library. From the negative comments it was possible to identify some broad themes, which included issues relating to the physical aspect of the library, such as the temperature and busyness. However,

the majority of comments related to the unavailability of key resources and a perceived lack of up-to-date books. Even more worryingly, there was a sense that politics and IR students are not well catered for in terms of subject resources. This presented two challenges. The first was to ensure that the stock and services would meet their needs in the future. The second was more difficult, and related to the need to change student – and possibly staff – perceptions about the library.

Having identified the main areas of concern, the next step was to meet with the politics field leader. I produced a list of suggested actions for improvement in advance. At this meeting we agreed the actions and during the academic year 2012–13 several steps were taken, falling into three inter-related main areas: collection development; promotion of library services and resources to academic staff; and promotion of library resources and services to students.

COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

I carried out a targeted collection development exercise in consultation with the relevant academic staff. This included a review of both print and electronic books in the areas of the 2010 UK general election; the European Union; Latin America; international development; human rights; and foreign policy. Several new titles were purchased in order to fill gaps in the collection, and older editions were withdrawn. As some of the comments related to the outdated nature of the print stock, it was important that we focused our development on print as well as electronic books. Indeed, print books are still heavily utilised in politics and IR, not least because the availability of e-books is still somewhat lacking compared to other subject areas.

Having purchased a large number of print and electronic books, I was concerned that students might not be making the link between what they see on the library shelves and what is available digitally. I wondered if, when they saw that the print book was not on the shelves, they assumed that the book was not available at all. In some cases this assumption would be correct, but not in all. Therefore I became involved in a pilot library project looking at the use of QR (Quick Response) codes. One of the cited benefits of a QR code is that it provides a bridge between the physical and the virtual,¹ which is exactly the link that I wanted to achieve. We therefore placed codes on the politics and IR shelves. If a student chose to scan the code using their Smartphone, it would



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QR code for politics and IR e-books

direct them to a specific list of e-books in the same subject area. This was made possible through the use of predefined keyword searches on our library discovery system, Summon.

PROMOTION TO ACADEMIC STAFF

It was essential to maintain close links with academic staff to ensure that the library continued to meet their needs. I was also mindful of the importance of academic staff perceptions and how they can in turn influence students' views and use of the library. Throughout the year I attended field meetings, which are attended by all politics and IR academic staff. Indeed, I had already been participating in these meetings for a number of years. However, I agreed with the field leader that we would need to ensure that staff were aware of the low score for the library and the part that should be played by all in improving it. I took the opportunity for some more focused advocacy work on the part of the library during these meetings. For example, during the academic year 2011–12 we had introduced Summon as our new library search facility, and this had received mixed feedback from academic staff. I therefore spent approximately 20 minutes at the beginning of one of the field meetings to talk to them about the benefits of Summon and to show them how to get the most from it. In addition, I had involved a large number of staff in the collection development activities, which also played an important advocacy role.

PROMOTION TO STUDENTS

During 2012–13 we continued to offer a subject-focused programme of library skills and information literacy sessions at all levels, as we have always done. However, there were a couple of differences: at level 1 all politics students received two library sessions instead of one. The first was an induction session, whilst the second was much more in-depth and took place a few weeks later. This enabled us to focus on search skills and to highlight more subject-specific resources that would be of benefit. In addition, the offer was made to all academics for short bursts of library input (10 minutes at most) at the beginning of seminars within specific modules. The offer was

taken up by the field leader for a level 3 module on Latin America and provided an important opportunity to focus on just a couple of resources that were particularly relevant to that module, which the students might not otherwise have discovered. The final activity relating to students was my attendance at staff–student liaison meetings, which are attended by student representatives and just two members of staff – the field leader and me. Again, this was not a new development, as I had already participated in these meetings in the past, but it enabled me to pick up immediately on any difficulties relating to the library and respond to them.

RESULTS 2013

The highly anticipated results for the NSS 2013 were made available in August 2013 and it was with nothing short of amazement that I read that the combined satisfaction score across the three programmes was 90%. The single honours courses received 95% (IR) and 94% (politics). There were of course some negative comments, but this time there were also a few positive ones, the most encouraging of which was 'Library teaching has been second to none' – possibly the first time I have heard about library teaching in these terms! The number of comments relating to out-of-date materials had reduced and there was no longer a sense that the politics and IR students were not being provided for in terms of their subject resources.

Most of the actions taken over the last year were not necessarily revolutionary or new. However, what is important is that each action was taken as part of a coordinated multi-pronged approach over a set period of time. It is difficult to estimate cause and effect, and some of the methods mentioned above were more successful than others. For example, the usage of the QR codes by students was low, whereas the heightened collection development activity and targeted teaching sessions were beneficial. In addition, there are always on-going improvements taking place in the library in terms of the physical space and the services provided, which will also have made an impact on students' perceptions and experiences. It is likely that a combination of factors contributed

to the increased satisfaction level and it will not be long before we are eagerly awaiting the 2014 results to see if this level has been maintained.

NOTE

- 1 B. Pulliam and C. Landry, 'Tag, you're it! Using QR codes to promote library services', *The reference librarian*, 53:1-2 (2010), pp. 68-74