

# The student library reps project at Goldsmiths College

## Giving students a say in our collections

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Developing collections that satisfy the needs and interests of our students is a perennial challenge for academic libraries. Many readers will be familiar with feedback that their library has insufficient copies of popular books, or lacks literature on particular topics. The 2015 National Acquisitions Group conference featured a presentation about King's College London's 'library champions' project, which gave student representatives an opportunity to contribute to library acquisitions (Garner, 2015). This inspired Goldsmiths College to initiate a 'student library reps' scheme, which commenced in January 2016 and is about to enter its third year.

### Year 1: Pilot project January–May 2016

The initial pilot ran from January to May 2016, the premise being to give student volunteers a £300 budget to suggest library book purchases, based on consultation with their peers. Volunteers were recruited on a first-come-first-served basis through student news emails and the peer-assisted learning network (*Peer assisted learning*, 2017). Goldsmiths has eighteen academic departments, and volunteers came forward from 14 of them. Ten students successfully completed the project, representing 12 departments between them (some were joint honours students). Six were undergraduates, four were postgraduates.

The students were trained to use the Dawsonenter book supplier database to check book prices and submit their suggestions to the library acquisitions team. Acquisitions staff would then complete the orders process via the library management system. For practical reasons we advised students to focus on in-print English-language books costing up to £50 per item. However, a small number of DVDs, music scores and second-hand items were also ordered. Most suggestions were approved, but some – for example very expensive items or extra copies of low-circulation items – were rejected.

During the pilot, 134 items were ordered, with an average spend of £231.57 per department. Additional copies of existing stock made up 15% of the orders, while 85% were new titles. Circulation analysis in May 2017 showed items ordered during the pilot were encouragingly well used during their first year in stock; the average number of loans per item was 2.3, some being borrowed as many as nine times.



Figure 1 Pilot project – spend per department

Note: ICCE = Institute for Creative and Cultural Entrepreneurship, STACS = Social, Therapeutic and Community Studies

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### Year 2: October 2016 – April 2017

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Evaluation and participant feedback from the pilot project identified areas for improvement; these were taken forward into year 2. Students joined the pilot project at different times, so training sessions were given to small groups or individuals on an *ad hoc* basis. In year 2 a formal application process was introduced, enabling more streamlined training. Retention was an issue during the pilot, with four volunteers dropping out. To remedy this during year 2, catch-up meetings with the project co-ordinator were introduced, which gave students an opportunity to seek help with any difficulties they had encountered. Consequently, only one volunteer was lost from year 2. Additionally, the project deadline was brought forward from May to April to avoid clashes with the exam and dissertation period.

Another big change in year 2 was that the student library rep project became a recognised activity for Goldsmiths *Higher education achievement report* (HEAR). The HEAR is an enhanced degree transcript, which displays extra-curricular achievements alongside academic work (Higher education achievement report, 2015). As HEAR activities require approximately twenty hours' work, in year 2 the project was expanded to include focus groups, job-shadowing with library staff and writing an evaluation in addition to suggesting book purchases.

The focus groups were facilitated by staff members from across Library Services, and reps were invited to give feedback on the library's online reading lists, LibGuides and information literacy provision. Reps also contributed to usability testing in advance of the library adopting the Ex Libris Primo discovery service. These sessions garnered useful feedback for library staff, and several students commented that they had learnt about library services of which they had previously been unaware.

The job-shadowing sessions lasted two hours and involved talking to library staff, including subject librarians and staff from acquisitions, serials, reading lists and scanning, inter-library loans, cataloguing, special collections and archives, reader services and systems. The reps gave overwhelmingly positive feedback about the sessions, and several of them commented on how impressed they were by the amount of behind-the-scenes work that is involved in running the library.

Sixteen students successfully completed the project in year 2, covering almost 90% of Goldsmiths' academic departments. Ten were undergraduate students, six were postgraduates. Ten per cent of the 184 items ordered were additional copies, while 90% were new titles. There was an average spend of £278.89 per department.

It was pleasing that participation increased during year 2 of the project and that the reps spent more of their money and ordered more new titles. Several reps ordered books written by Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) authors and books with non-eurocentric perspectives, thus helping to diversify the library collections. The project is therefore adding value to the library's collection development practices while giving students a voice and helping to meet demand for topics not covered through existing acquisitions strategies.

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Figure 2 Year 2 – spend per department

Note: ICCE = Institute for Creative and Cultural Entrepreneurship, IMS = Institute of Management Studies

Figure 3 Comparison of year 1 and year 2

	Year 1	Year 2
Students who completed the project	10	16
Number of items ordered	134	184
Average spend per department	£231.57	£278.89
New titles	85%	90%
Extra copies	15%	10%

### Future plans

At the end of year 2 feedback was gathered from the reps through focus groups and written reports. The reps noted many benefits of the project – for example: satisfaction of adding new books to the library collections; developing budgeting and communication skills; having an opportunity to give feedback about library services; and increased appreciation of library staff. Some challenges were also acknowledged – for example: undergraduate reps found it difficult to elicit book suggestions from postgraduates in their departments and vice versa; and some students received more book suggestions than their budgets could accommodate. Reps also suggested that their role could be expanded to include promoting library services and resources and acting as an advocate for their departments.

The student library reps project has been of great value both to students and to the library, so a decision has been taken to expand the project further, taking into account the feedback and suggestions received. In year 3 (2017–18) we aim to recruit one undergraduate and one postgraduate rep per department in order to address the difficulties encountered and to accommodate the differing needs of these student groups. We also intend to increase the budgets assigned to departments with most full-time equivalent students in order to ensure that more book suggestions can be accommodated. Plans are under way to enhance the range of activities undertaken by reps, for example by involving them in promotional activities such as open days and e-resource demonstrations and inviting them to attend library user group committee meetings.

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To manage the increased scope of the project and formalise the processes involved, a steering group has been formed comprising members of staff from library and acquisitions staff. We hope that the student library rep project will help to enhance our collections and engagement with the student body for many years to come.

## References

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