# It's all about me! A self-directed achievement scheme in the library at Ulster University

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## Background

The Library services strategy[1] at Ulster recognises the importance and value of a highly skilled and motivated staff team to support the delivery of a responsive, high-quality library service to enhance the user experience. The library at Ulster has a strategic objective to develop and optimise staff, so training and development is integral to delivering the strategic principle of '*empowering our staff and developing their talents*'. In recognition of its ongoing commitment to support and develop library staff, the library management team (LMT) established a continuing personal and professional development (CPPD) sub-group to oversee the training and developmental needs of all staff. Ulster is a geographically dispersed institution[2] and the library service is represented on each of the four campuses. These campuses are quite some distance from each other – for example, Belfast campus is approximately 70 miles from Magee campus. A significant number of staff working across a variety of shift patterns is required to deliver a high-quality service on a seven-day basis during semester. This in itself is challenging; it is essential that there is equality of access to training for all library staff in order to maintain a consistently high standard of quality in terms of service delivery.

Library staff at Ulster are highly valued by users, and their contribution to enhancing service quality has been endorsed through the *LibQUAL+®*[3] user perception survey and student nominations for excellence in the area of learner support. This reinforces and validates the priority given to investment in CPPD of all library staff as an overarching and enabling objective of the library services strategy.

The *Library services staff development framework* identifies a variety of approaches to skills development and acknowledges that not all require attendance at a formal training event. Informal feedback from library staff suggested that colleagues would like to have time to update their skills themselves, for example through reading, webinars or recordings, or experimenting with technology. However, concern was expressed that this would be perceived by some as a waste of time.

Following a review of approaches to staff development in the library sector, a model was identified which would meet the criteria required by Ulster, in that it offered a cost-effective approach to staff development, with the ability to maintain business continuity during service delivery hours. The model was well established in a number of libraries in the USA, notably Tooele City Library in Utah.

A pilot scheme was developed at Ulster and branded locally as It's all about me. The criterion for participation was simple – the only requirement was a clear link between the CPPD activity to be undertaken and the role of the individual or the changing needs of the library service. Managers were asked to support the scheme, and fourteen members of staff participated in the pilot.

## The scheme

Each participant received a pack of information containing guidelines, information and proformas to use during the pilot. To raise the profile of the scheme, all materials, including address labels for the information packs, were branded. This acted as an advertisement as well as a motivator and triggered increased demand for participation in the scheme.



*Fig 1. Branding was created using the WordArt tool*

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Participants were encouraged to let curiosity guide them. The starting point for each activity was straightforward: Identify something relevant to your role. The steps were simple:
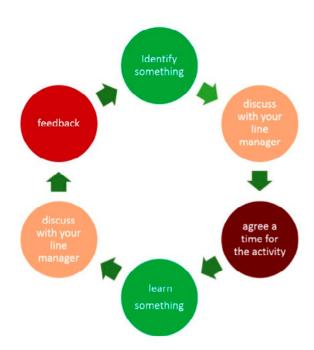


*Fig. 2 simple steps*

The developmental activity had to be work-related, achievable in one hour and supported by a line manager. Participants were asked to identify three learning goals based on SMART criteria (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time-bound) and information about SMART was provided in the starter pack. Staff were also reminded that business continuity had to be maintained at all times.

Participants were invited to choose a location away from their normal place of work where possible. A 'do not disturb' sign was provided to alert colleagues that a staff development activity was in process, and library staff were asked to avoid disturbing participants when the sign was in place:



*Fig. 3 Do not disturb*

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Given the diversity of approaches to learning, the university staff development team contributed an exercise on learning styles for inclusion in participants' packs, to help them to determine their own specific learning styles and identify suitable activities. This was an informative exercise for many colleagues who had not previously had an opportunity to consider their individual learning style.

Whilst many participants approached the pilot scheme with a developmental activity in mind, others were less sure. A *Starting points* sheet was compiled with useful websites and pointers to printed resources and DVDs under the headings of *watch something, read something, try something* and *identify something*. Participants found this a useful, thought-provoking activity.

Following completion of the staff development activity, the participant and line manager met briefly to discuss the exercise and note any possible future activity or further areas for development. The member of staff was asked to reflect on what they had gained from the activity, to consider how the newly acquired knowledge could be applied, and the value of the activity to other colleagues. Participants were also asked to rate the activity on a scale of one to ten. This information was used to evaluate the range of activities undertaken and identify those likely to be of interest to other staff. The feedback was used to provide additional links to relevant resources on the library's internal CPPD web pages and will inform the content of future staff training events.

## Activities

Whilst some colleagues used the developmental opportunity to enhance existing knowledge, others experimented with technology, explored business processes in other parts of the library or investigated a service offered to library users. A range of topics was explored, and included the ordering, receipting and cataloguing of e-books; an exploration of the different page views on fixed PCs and mobile devices; creating a stop-motion animation; the use of social media by libraries; rare books and archives; and an overview of the Library of Congress classification scheme. Given the diversity of topics selected, it is clear that a more traditional model for staff training and development would not be an appropriate mechanism to meet the expressed need.

## Benefits

The pilot of a self-directed learning approach to staff development achieved the primary objective of providing colleagues with an opportunity to enhance skills or raise awareness of facilities and services in order to help staff to operate more effectively.

The implementation of a self-directed achievement scheme has had positive outcomes on a number of levels for the library service at Ulster. Members of staff are encouraged to take personal responsibility for the identification of development needs and obtain managerial support for proposals. Line managers are fully involved in the approval process and can apply the scheme flexibly to ensure that business needs are given priority. The scheme is cost-effective and fully inclusive, the programme is available to all staff regardless of work pattern, and the impact on service delivery is minimal. Staff training and developmental activity are recorded centrally in the library, providing evidence that library staff are engaging in a process of personal and professional development, thus delivering on and achieving an enabling objective of Ulster's *Library services strategy*, to develop and optimise staff.

## Next steps

Feedback from the pilot was very encouraging. Following evaluation, the scheme has been formally adopted by the library service and will be embedded into the annual programme of staff development activity.

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Information packs for participants will be simplified and electronic access to content will be provided on the library staff training area of the institutional virtual learning environment (VLE).

The importance and value of staff as key enablers in the context of delivering a high quality, responsive library service cannot be overestimated, so the library at Ulster will continue to seek innovative ways to develop and optimise staff in the pursuit of the delivery of service excellence to all users.

## References

1    Ulster University. 2012. Available at: http://library.ulster.ac.uk/info/library_documents.php [accessed 13 June 2016]

2    Ulster University. 2016. Available at: http://www.ulster.ac.uk/ulster-life/campuses [accessed 13 June 2016]

3    LibQUAL+®. 2016. Available at: https://www.libqual.org/home [accessed 13 June 2016]