What do they really really want? Student expectations

**UCRG Northern event,
16th December 2010**

Event reviewed by Suzie Kitchin
Library Liaison Adviser
Northumbria University
Email: suzie.kitchin@northumbria.ac.uk

A snowy December day saw participants from across England and Scotland arrive at the Research Beehive in Newcastle University. Once divested of scarves, hats, coats and walking boots, a welcome hot drink awaited the delegates. The venue was very good with an open area for coats, refreshments and networking, and a separate well-designed room for the presentations and workshops.

'The forgotten army'

Jon Purcell, University Librarian at Durham, started the event by talking about 'The forgotten army' – how Durham is engaging with and responding to postgraduate student expectations. Understanding the institutional context is key, and Jon gave us a potted history of Durham University and the library, including the context that postgraduate students form 30% of the university's student group, and so is not a population we can afford to forget. Jon has been able to gain a personal insight into this student group as his wife is studying as a postgraduate at Durham, and he is currently living in one of the university's colleges. This, along with his role as University Librarian, has enabled him to have this particular insight.

Jon talked about methods the library has used to find out what postgraduate students want, as well as those used across the university. Key library services Durham postgraduates want include more books and journals to support their research, not having to pay for anything including free and unrestricted interlibrary loans, and personalised services at the point of need.

Discussions with students have emphasised the need to differentiate between undergraduate and postgraduate provision, which is not always easy to achieve. Students want actions, not just strategies. They want the library to listen to them and not assume prior knowledge. They want the library to highlight discipline-specific resources and to demonstrate specific investment in them as postgraduates.

A university-wide postgraduate survey demonstrated a lack of postgraduate study spaces, so Durham has responded by converting a previous silent study area in the library into a Postgraduate Student Centre. Students have been involved in the planning and development of this area, and usage will be monitored over this academic year.

Jon ended his session by emphasising the need to engage in communication with students in as many ways as possible in order to get feedback and input from students. In the current economic climate the increasing need to do more with less is something that all libraries face, and we need to achieve this without having a negative impact on the student experience.

Workshop: What are the best ways to find out what students want?

Nicola Conway (Academic Liaison Librarian) and Helen Wright (Library Assistant), Durham University, facilitated a workshop session on how we find out what students want. Delegates were asked in groups to look at different methods of feedback and to rank them in terms of usefulness.

Methods included surveys, targeted emails, social networking, the National Student Survey and physical ballot boxes. A lively debate ensued as the pros and cons of different methods were discussed. A general consensus was reached in agreeing the importance of using a variety of feedback methods to help cater for students' personal preferences.

The NUS perspective

Stevie Wise, NUS National Executive Council, travelled from Edinburgh, and spoke generally about student expectations in the context of increasing tuition fees. Students are increasingly seeing themselves as customers, and this will affect the demands they make on universities. She echoed the point made by Jon in that we'll need to be doing more with less, and the challenges universities will face by this. Will students expect

more than can be achieved with the available funding?

She discussed the role of student reps – the students engaged in the process of gaining and receiving feedback. How can we reach the unengaged? Will requests for feedback result in complaints rather than constructive feedback? We need to be proactive in engaging with students, not just responding to comments they make.

Following Stevie's presentation there was a useful discussion in which delegates shared their experiences of engaging with students. Several shared their explorations into using twitter, which developed into a discussion about official versus unofficial methods and the pros and cons of each.

Networking

Lunch was very tasty and provided a useful time for networking before the afternoon sessions. Opportunities for networking always feature as a key element in event evaluation, so the University, College and Research Group (UCR) Northern Committee tried to ensure plenty of time was allowed for this, both at lunchtime and during the workshops.

The National Student Survey

Dilys Young, Assistant Director, Northumbria University Library, gave the delegates insight into how Northumbria University are responding to feedback from the National Student Survey (NSS). The context of the NSS is important, as the results are released after that particular student cohort have graduated, thus meaning you can't follow up responses with the student group who gave those responses.

Dilys discussed how Northumbria are developing school-specific action plans to help manage expectations. It's not just about responding to what students have raised, but about telling schools what has been done and turning thinking into action.

Action plans are being developed in each school – the library is considering how it can contribute to those action plans, and it is essential to get buy-in from the academic staff. Within the library, analysis is given to results by school as well as to the overall response, to see if common themes are emerging. A reading list template is being developed and getting endorsed at School Learning and Teaching Committee level, as well as a bottom-up approach with individual lecturers. In one school

where there was a particularly low library score, a project has been developed whereby chapters from highly used texts have been digitised to improve access for the students.

Dilys posed the question as to whether there are potentially exponential costs with some activities. What funds are available to allocate to new or different initiatives? How do we manage expectations within available resources? How can the impact of these activities be measured? With students having to contribute more financially to their degree, will they think this means increased funding to the library? The key is to continually look at how the library can be proactive at any time, not just responding to problems when they occur – it's not just a once-a-year activity when the NSS results are released. Dilys has written up the Northumbria action plan for inclusion elsewhere in this issue of *Focus*.

What do we do with student feedback?

Nicola and Helen led our second workshop on 'Once we've received feedback from students, what do we do next?' Groups examined what we can do with feedback, how we can celebrate successes and using feedback to manage expectations. Delegates had the opportunity to share experiences from their own institutions about how they'd responded, and this was fed back to the whole group.

The session demonstrated the importance of marketing and advertising. If something is working well, we need to tell people – we can respond when students say 'there aren't enough books', but we also need to highlight what good things are happening. Feedback can be used to raise awareness of existing services – do students know all the services and support that are available? We need to ensure students know what we can offer and also where there are limitations.

How strong is the student voice, and how reliable is it? Is there a danger that we respond to a minority who are shouting loudest?

Conclusion

The event was very interesting in looking at managing student expectations from different perspectives, whether by user-group (e.g. postgraduates at Durham) or by exploring different methods that can be used to gain feedback and engage with students.

The three presentations and a summary of the
workshop discussions can be found on the UCR
Northern web site - http://www.cilip.org.uk/get-
involved/special-interest-groups/ucr/divisions/
northern/events/Pages/student-expectations.
aspx.