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# Improving the student experience

Providing services and support that are valued

Robert Elves  
*Information Specialist*  
*Kingston University and BLA Marketing and Communications Officer*  
*R.Elves@kingston.ac.uk*

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The title of this article was the theme for the Business Librarians Association annual conference, held in Leicester in July 2014. Business Librarians Association (BLA) exists as a forum for the discussion and exchange of ideas and to facilitate networking opportunities amongst business librarians in the UK and Ireland. Membership is open to institutions that offer courses in management education at Masters level or above. Members are encouraged to collaborate through the mailing list and lis-business and to meet once a year at the annual conference, which is hosted by one or two member institutions. This year the honour of hosting the conference was held by De Montfort and Leicester Universities.

The theme of the conference was how we as business librarians can add value to the student experience, a theme that is very relevant in institutions around the country. In this article I hope to give a taste of the topics discussed and to draw out how they may be relevant to the wider higher education community. The conference included a number of keynote speakers as well as some short papers presented by members. There were also plenty of opportunities to network and to meet with some of the business database providers who sponsored the conference.

## **ADDING VALUE BY PROVIDING EXCELLENT CUSTOMER SERVICE**

Libraries have always been good at benchmarking their service with each other and increasingly they want to get independent verification for its quality. Many are using the government-sponsored Customer Services Excellence (CSE), which had its roots in the Charter Mark, to achieve this. At the conference we heard from Helen Loughran of Leeds Beckett University. The library service was first awarded the Charter Mark in 2001 and

achieved CSE accreditation in 2009. Now the institution as a whole has achieved the award. So how does achieving an award add value to the student experience? One of the criteria for CSE is to ensure that you know your students. As academic librarians we may feel that we know our students very well. We are often one of the first people they meet and we work with them through the ups and downs of their course. We know how particular courses differ and we adapt our services to match. Helen Loughran argued that front-line staff often have the best knowledge of the students, so at Leeds Beckett all library staff have at least one slot on the enquiry desk each week. CSE encourages you to go further, and look at how particular groups use different services and then to layer satisfaction rates on top of this. Any new service should have an impact assessment to ensure that no group of students is disadvantaged.

Knowing the students is only the first step; we should also listen to them. This is something we are all doing but, as Helen Loughran argued, CSE allows you to structure this better. In order to comply with CSE requirements you are compelled to do this strategically and to review this annually. The strategy should ensure that you have the right people listening in the right places and reviewing all of this to see how what was learnt was acted upon.

By knowing our students and listening to them we can deliver services that will be beneficial to them and will be used. We should also ensure that these services are of appropriate quality and then continue to develop them year on year. Tools such as the NSS demonstrate the added value these services bring to students.

#### **ADDING VALUE BY IMPROVING EMPLOYABILITY**

The second keynote speaker was Paul Chin, Head of Skills at the University of Hull. His session was followed by a workshop led by Kaye Towlson from De Montfort University. Through the keynote speech and the subsequent workshop we explored what each of our institutions currently offers and what more we as business librarians could do to help our students find jobs at the end of their course.

All those present at the conference know, as business librarians, the effectiveness of business databases in improving employability. Many of these databases are used commercially, and may help students to research a company prior to an

interview, so it is advantageous for students to be familiar with them and to mention them at interview. Is there more we can be doing?

One thing that Paul Chin highlighted from the start is that it is not just business students who need to be familiar with business databases. Many students with – say – a chemistry degree go into finance jobs, so we need to get our message to all students. Some universities run employability weeks, during which business librarians could offer a session on business terminology for non-business students, for example.

In one of the members' short papers Joanne Farmer demonstrated how Northampton University is putting some of this into practice. They have identified the top ten employability skills and have mapped them against the curriculum.

Many graduates will be called upon to write a report in their job. They will need to evaluate a range of resources and then to reference them properly in their report. These are all skills we teach students, but we need to reinforce that they are life skills, not just academic skills.

There was another interesting members' short paper from Stephanie Allen at the University of Worcester. She talked about The Hive (Britain's first joint university and public library) and the way that it has provided a service to local businesses that did not exist before. Having students and the local community sharing facilities has brought many rewards as well as a few challenges.

#### **ADDING VALUE BY IMPROVING INFORMATION LITERACY**

The fact that students need good analytical and referencing skills in graduate jobs links well with the third keynote speaker, Jane Secker, who talked about ANCIL (A new curriculum for information literacy). The original research project looked at the information literacy needs of undergraduate students starting during the five years following the project's inception. The aim was to produce a structured framework. This was further developed to see how this new curriculum could be implemented at a number of higher education institutions.

One of the key principles was that information literacy should not be about locating information so much as what you do with it. A range of literacies are talked about today – digital, media, academic, etc. – but it can be argued that information literacy overlaps with many of them. It is not the job of

the librarian alone to teach information literacy; it needs also to be integrated in the student's course. The timing of any interventions and how they are referred to is crucial in engaging with students. The aim should be to enable students to become creative, innovative, enquiring graduates, and this should improve their employability and give them skills they will use through life.

#### **ADDING VALUE – BUT DOES ANYONE KNOW ABOUT IT?**

The final keynote speaker was Ned Potter, who gave a presentation about the best way to market services entitled *Tuning out the white noise*.<sup>1</sup> All marketing is communication; so much information is generated that we need to ensure ours counts. In his presentation Ned Potter divided communication into three categories: white noise, peripheral vision and line of sight.

White noise tends to be unfocused and includes posters and global emails. It can be useful as part of a co-ordinated campaign but it is important to focus on one thing at a time.

Peripheral vision is where something from the library turns up where the student or academic least expects it. Most of our users start their search on Google. Adding our material to externally hosted sites such as You Tube, SlideShare and Scribd and then embedding this on library web pages ensures they appear high up on a search engine.

The final category, line of sight, is making sure that the information we want to send to users is targeted in the right way. For example, if you circulate a newsletter by email, don't use 'newsletter' as the subject line; it is better to use the title of one of the key articles as the subject. Emails are more likely to be read if sent just after lunch. This goes back to the discussion around CSE and knowing our users well: we should do what people need and market what they want.

Personalising the communication also helps increase the response. When asking for reading lists from academics, send a personalised rather than a global email. With students, a slightly differently worded email can be sent to each cohort. York University has experimented by sending a global email for a particular campaign to a control group of students and a more targeted one to others; the level of response from each group was compared, and demonstrated that there was a better response from the targeted group.

#### **CONCLUSION**

As I hope I have demonstrated, there are several ways we can add value to a student's experience at university. All such 'value added' helps the student do as well as possible on the course, helps them find suitable employment and increases the influence library staff have with faculty members.

#### **REFERENCE**

- 1 N. Potter (2014). *Tuning out the white noise*. Available at <http://www.slideshare.net/thewikiman/tuning-out-the-white-noise-marketing-your-library-services> [accessed 14 October 2014]