Student views on library services: key lessons for developing libraries of the future

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When planning the SCONUL 2009 conference in Bournemouth (reviewed elsewhere in this issue of *Focus*), the planning team came up with the idea of producing a student vox pop. The video would present students' views on library services and would be run throughout the conference.

Why did we decide to do this? Well, we hear of increasing references to fee-paying students as 'customers'. Nationally, the student voice is evident through the NSS (National Student Survey) and, locally, we are striving to create an ethos whereby service development is driven, as far as is practicable, by students' needs. Therefore, to complement the views of learned professionals, who traditionally take the centre-stage at such conferences, it seemed sensible to offer up a student voice, or rather a voice 'straight from the horses mouth' – to continue the equestrian betting theme metaphors that underpinned the conference's publicity.

The video production was led by a team from Southampton Solent University. Six universities agreed to take part in the filming. Our gazebo was erected in a prominent place at each location and passing students were invited to be in interviewed, or in some cases enticed by freebies of chocolates, pens and so on.

Five questions were asked of every student, namely:

- Where do you first look for information when you are studying?
- If you were struggling to find what you need, where would you go or who would you speak to?
- What would you say is the best aspect of the library?
- Is there anything that you least like about the library?
- If you had one message to give to the library to help it improve, what would it be?

A total of 21 students were interviewed in each location, giving a sample of 126.

Lessons learnt : the future of library services

Perhaps not surprisingly, many students referred to Google, the internet or wikipedia as their first ports of call for accessing information. Similarly, the library or library staff did not necessarily feature as the top answer to the question about where they would go for help – course tutors or peers were referred to just as often.

Does this spell doom for the future of the library? Well, it perhaps highlights the ongoing challenge librarians face in educating students to think beyond Google when searching for information. It also indicates a need to market and promote more effectively the role of the librarian as a source of help. As a profession, we have perhaps not been known for being particularly good at 'selling' ourselves to those we serve.

However, there were many other answers to the questions posed that suggested that the library is far from dead. Long opening hours were mentioned frequently when answering the question about the best aspects of the library, whereas the same response was given to the question about what they liked least / wanted as an improvement for those libraries that have not quite achieved 24x7! More than one student commented on the need for libraries to be open longer during key periods – for example, in the run-up to exams – whilst one concluded with the key message that libraries just need to get bigger, to accommodate growing demand.

Either excellent computer facilities, or the need for more computers, also featured as answers to these questions. It would appear that students see the library as a place that should provide access to technology, as in equipment, not just as a place to facilitate access via wireless networks. Although it might be assumed that most of the students inter-

viewed would own laptops (which they were not asked), there was no evidence to suggest that the library should reduce its investment in computing equipment or that students were happy to be self-sufficient. As more and more material is provided in digital format, a robust and state-of-the-art IT infrastructure appears to be required.

Whilst acknowledging technological advances and the need for libraries to embrace them, many responses indicated that the book is not dead and that a hybrid approach to information delivery remains the way ahead. Reserve collections were praised, or criticised for the restricted hours during which they could be borrowed, by more than one respondent. Back runs of journals and the availability of books in specific areas were praised, just as not enough books in certain disciplines was criticised as something least liked about the library.

The vox pop responses were illuminating with regard to the need to think about the role of the library as a space for study generally. Whereas a number of students liked facilities provided for quiet study, as many commented favourably on the variety of purposes the library now served. Areas dedicated for group work and socialising were highlighted as good practice, whereas those who were more critical of their library suggested that a greater emphasis should be placed on facilities for group work and considered that librarians should get rid of their hang-ups on rules about no food or drink to be brought into the library. A message that one student wished to give to the library was to ensure that the vending machines were filled up for the weekend – not rocket science in relation to meeting the information needs of 'net gen' learners, but it followed a theme!

Many of the responses to the questions posed for the vox pop had some correlation with the messages within JISC's 'Libraries of the future' campaign. This year-long campaign has been looking at the future of the academic library within the context of the digital age. A specially commissioned documentary has been released as part of the campaign, which features leading experts such as Sarah Thomas (Bodley's Librarian and Director of Oxford University Library Services), Jean Sykes (Chief Information Officer at the London School of Economics) and experts from JISC as well as students and academics, who discuss what the future of the library will look like.

The notes below represent some of the opinions of Sarah and Jean, compiled in preparation for the documentary.

Some of the messages to emerge suggested that library buildings will remain at the centre of the university, but they will be vibrant and interactive. They will include buildings, books and people, although they will also be transformed by the way that people use technology. There will be a continued transition to a less formal environment, with soft chairs and furniture configured to user preferences, along with coffee, conversation and consumer devices. Libraries will be transformed from havens of solitude and silence to places buzzing with activity. They will accommodate a variety of learning styles, to include zones for quiet study and group-study spaces to facilitate team assignments and peer-assisted learning.

We may recognise and accept that students will still go to Google and related sites as the first port of call for information. Indeed, large enterprises such as Google, Amazon and YouTube will provide the foundation in broad swaths of content. However, libraries will have a role in contributing original materials and special collections because Google acts as a retriever, not a creator or curator. Libraries will also deliver services via popular social networking and open-access databases.

Change will be driven not just by the technology, but also by the needs and preferences of library users. 'Choice' is the buzzword here. Just as many students will want to embrace digital developments to access library information from home or via mobile devices, students are in the main choosing to spend more, not less, of their time physically in library buildings. High demand is being characterised by new university library buildings, extensions and refurbishments. The high demand may be due to the fact that students do not always have good study facilities where they live and that libraries have generally been seen to be responsive to students' needs and have developed an environment which suits them. Therefore libraries are well placed to make a difference in the future and their future looks bright.

With reference to the comments in the paragraph above, the full footage of student interviews conducted for the Sconul conference vox pop (about 2–3 hours each), will be provided to each of the corresponding six higher education libraries that agreed to take part; we hope this evidence may provide food for thought in building the libraries for the future.

An edited version of the vox pop video (about 10 minutes' worth) can be viewed from the Sconul website at http://www.sconul.ac.uk/events/agm2009/.

JISC's 'Libraries of the future' documentary and other related materials can be found at http://www.jisc.ac.uk/librariesofthefuture.