Building an informed picture

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'Marketing' is often perceived as mainly promotional and communication activities, and although this does represent a large proportion of what many of us do in this area, it is not the whole story. Library Services at the Open University (OU) have been focusing this academic year on building the evidence base that supports and informs the decisions we make or service developments we introduce. We have developed a Market Research and Insight framework (MRI) that has set the strategic direction and tone for our work this year. Although we have increased external research activities such as benchmarking and horizon scanning, one of the primary areas for us has been engaging and working with students directly.

However, over recent years this has presented a slight challenge for us. With our students studying at a distance, we have traditionally had to rely on tools such as online surveys or other online methods, and by 2012 we had seen response rates drop to under 8%. We have few opportunities for face-to-face discussions with students so we needed to find another way to build a sense of community and to capture the student voice. An overarching motivation was to get students actively involved in shaping their study experience and to help inform developments in how Library Services supported their learning.

In late 2012 the OU Library student panel was established as a pilot project to provide a mechanism for finding, encouraging and supporting the student voice. A second core driver for the pilot panel was to test our hypothesis that pre-engaging students as part of a panel would increase participation rates in subsequent pieces of research activity.

Two cohorts are recruited to the main panel annually in February and October and we are currently maintaining a panel of between 450 and 500 students at any one time. Each student

on the panel is able to participate in a maximum of four research activities within a twelve-month period, and they can opt out of particular methods (such as focus groups or surveys). Each time a new research activity is planned, the panel (or a sample) is contacted (excluding any students that have opted out) and the students are asked if they would like to participate; this means that once they are members of the panel they still have the option to take part in activities on a case-by-case basis.

We are currently formally evaluating the panel with stakeholders, and initial findings so far suggest that using the panel has resulted in increased student participation and engagement in the research activities completed. For example, one student panel survey received a response rate of over 85%, and an online focus group was so heavily subscribed that a waiting list had to be used and additional sessions run. We have seen clear but less tangible benefits too; the panel is not simply putting more bums on seats (or the online equivalent!). Because the students are engaged and interested in the subjects, they are actively participating in discussions or activities and not simply box-ticking or going through the motions as has been the case with other research activities in the past. There is a risk here, therefore, that although the panel is demographically representative of our student population, the research output could be biased as certain types of learners or learners with certain experiences may be more likely to participate in a panel geared solely towards exploring and developing library services. Although we haven't seen any evidence of such a bias to date, we certainly need to bear in mind that we could still be missing 'library-disengaged' student voices from our research.

To date we have used the survey to explore a wide range of questions, using a variety of methods, including:

- preferred delivery time for online training session (online survey)
- exploring ideas for personalised library tools (online focus group)
- search and discovery – student needs and preferences (online interviews / usability testing)
- search and discovery – prototype testing (online interviews / usability testing)
- assessing skills development tools (online survey).

These activities and others have meant that we have been able to make decisions based on the needs and feedback from students as well as other stakeholders. The information and insight that we gain from the panel helps form the pictures we need to improve our services. Our practice and approach is changing and we are evolving to be more 'expertise led, but evidence informed'. We are ensuring that we use a range of knowledge, skill and insight – ours, our students', that of other university staff – and lessons from the higher education sector.

As we think about where we want to get to next year, we see that the panel is also an opportunity to place more emphasis on students as drivers for change (and not just assessors of change), allowing them to be less passive and to work more as co-designers and collaborators.