

Using 'snap focus groups' to improve user experience for specific groups



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Improving NSS scores

Subject librarians from the University of Chichester met together at the end of October 2014 to discuss the NSS (National Student Survey) results. One group that scored 'learning resources' slightly lower than the others was the Foundation Degree in Teaching and Learning Support (FDTLS) based at the Bognor Regis campus. We concluded that this might have been because it is a relatively small course with approximately thirty students in each year group, so a low score from a few students would mean lowering the percentage from that whole group. They are only taught on campus once a week because they are typically working in schools as teaching assistants the rest of the week. Many are mature students with no previous contact with higher education and often need extra support when using library resources.

We decided to run a pilot project with some extra input for this group with the aim of improving their library experience and ultimately improving their NSS scores.

This group did not have formal student representatives. FDTLS students often have tight timetables with family/work commitments. We asked the course coordinator if she could choose some students to attend a meeting with the education subject librarians in order to gather feedback and discuss any issues they might have. We promised refreshments and we asked her to choose a time when she thought the students would be available.

Initial meetings

Students were chosen and contacted. We met at the beginning of December 2014 with an agenda to discuss:

- library environment
- remote access
- Moodle (virtual learning environment)
- library web pages
- books and reservations
- new Discovery service
- any other matters arising

We met with each year group separately on the days and times that suited them best so as to focus the discussions on their particular needs.

The discussions were informative, especially regarding our inductions. We hope to use them as a basis for improving our induction of the new FDTLS students in September 2015. They asked if they could have their inductions in 'chunks'; we shall work with the course coordinator to implement this. We also discussed use of e-books, opening hours, reservations and communication with the library service. We produced agendas and minutes and asked the students who attended to discuss these matters with fellow students and keep in touch, with the aim of holding a second meeting in spring 2015.

However, as often happens, some of the students who said they would attend did not turn up, which meant that our sample student groups comprised two first years, one second year and three third years.

Southern Universities network sparks a new idea

Attendance at an event of Southern Universities Network, initiated by Steve Rose (Rose and White, 2013), in December 2014 raised the idea of 'snap focus groups'. Focus group research is appealing because it encourages group interactivity and therefore enriches the contributions that might have been

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made by individuals (Cousin, 2009). Essentially, a 'snap focus group' involves meeting students at a place where they have already formed natural groups (e.g. the coffee shop) and asking them questions in return for a coffee voucher. The Southern Universities Network offered a prize of £100 Amazon vouchers to the institution that could best demonstrate 'snap focus groups' in action. Enthused by this idea, and motivated by the competition, we wondered how we could apply it to the FDTLS students in order to gather more of their views about the library service.

The difficulty was that we wanted to target this particular group, so it would be tricky to select them from other students in the coffee shop. We discussed the possibility of waiting outside their lecture room after a class and offering them a coffee in exchange for some information, but eventually decided that we could simply email the course coordinator and ask for 15 minutes at the end of a class to hand out some leaflets about services and listen to any comments about issues that they might have.

Snap focus groups

Tutors were receptive and positive about this initiative and told students that a member of the library team would attend their class; this prepared them to think about asking questions or discussing issues. This approach worked well as students approached library staff at the desk prior to the meetings and let them know what they were going to talk about. During the meetings the students discussed access to particular e-journals, opening hours, overdue items, particular core texts, and how to manage their books and accounts when they are only on campus once a week. We were able to answer most of these questions at the meetings and promised a quick response regarding the e-journals they could not access. The students felt able to raise specific concerns that would be relevant only to that FDTLS course.

We hope that by speaking to each year group personally they will now book 1-2-1s with their subject librarian and feel more confident about emailing us or using the general library enquiry email. Emails from FDTLS students will be monitored following these meetings.

An overall positive experience

Not only did we show that we were willing to listen to their concerns and address the issues specific to that group, but we also formed relationships and reminded them about their dedicated subject librarians. It helped to be able to demonstrate electronic access to library services in front of the tutors who were in attendance at these meetings and said that they had learned something new. In response to a query about access to journals from different publishers, we produced a helpsheet that the course coordinator then added to her Moodle modules. This is exactly the sort of proactive relationship that we were hoping to establish and now build on.

Although this 'snap focus group' deviated from the pattern set by Southern Universities Network, it was the springboard for our 'snap meeting'. If we were to win £100 we would use it specifically to buy books for the FDTLS students.

We are eagerly awaiting the NSS results for this group and hope to see an improved rating for learning resources this year.

References

Cousin, G. (2009). *Researching learning in higher education: An introduction to contemporary methods and approaches*. Abingdon: Routledge

Rose, S. and White, L. (2013). The establishment of a staff development network amongst partner libraries in the south of England, *SCONUL Focus* 59 pp. 45-7

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