
Bridging the gap: the importance of induction in underpinning information literacy



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There have been many articles reporting on new and innovative ways of delivering library induction to new university students. However, these often involve 'little discussion of the actual content'¹ In devising interesting and engaging programmes using interactive, blended online and face-to-face approaches, the substance of those sessions can be taken as given. Post-induction evaluation can give librarians a feel for whether the activities were appropriate and useful. However, the retrospective nature of such feedback, sometimes weeks after the training, means that it is difficult to assess the unique contribution of the library in the steep learning curve facing new students during their first weeks at university.

This article reports on research conducted in 2007/2008 and funded by an Elsevier/Library and Information Research Group (LIRG) award, when I was in post as a learning support librarian with shared responsibility for library induction at Durham University. The aim of this project was to discover what the needs of new users were they before they arrived, rather than as part of an evaluation of activities after they had taken place. It sought to establish the gaps in experience rather than judge the provision in secondary and tertiary education sectors. This article highlights the differences between libraries in both sectors and draws attention to areas that need particular consideration at induction. Many institutions already address these key themes, but the research experience shed fresh light on our services, particularly from the perspective of a new student. The

research was deliberately discrete, looking only at induction for recent school leavers and restricted geographically to County Durham. It did not take into account other parts of what is an increasingly diverse cohort of new students, notably international and mature students.

As part of the research, a series of visits were made to school and sixth-form-centre libraries in the area around Durham University's two campuses in Durham and Stockton-on-Tees. A survey established the details of the operational side of library services. It sought to find answers to questions such as whether students had access to an online catalogue, how many books they could borrow and whether fines were imposed – all areas that are routinely covered as part of a university library induction. The aim of this comparative framework was to establish how contrasting our services were and what areas needed greatest attention in the induction period. Further to this, a round-table discussion with school librarians from across County Durham revealed the strength of feeling that their students were unaware of the differences that they would find when using university libraries. This occasion also afforded the opportunity to present initial conclusions to the librarians and to solicit their feedback. It was an extremely valuable experience which enabled the corroboration of findings and added weight to the project's conclusions.

These two research methods revealed a number of stark variations between the prosaic elements of library usage at university and school libraries. Key themes that were highlighted were scale, access, resource range and format, which are all addressed in more detail below.

By visiting schools and sixth-form colleges, rather than sending round a questionnaire, I was struck by the opposing scales of their libraries and ours. The majority were in a single room, easily navigated from the entrance. Durham's, like many university libraries, is on multiple levels, with an unusual building footprint. Finding one's way around is not intuitive and new users could easily be intimidated by this deviation from their prior experience. Previous reviews of Durham University library's induction have produced anecdotal feedback of new students who are too scared to enter the library, and this was borne out in discussions with librarians who had sent pupils to visit the university library who had been overwhelmed by the scale of the place and returned straight back to school.

The personalisation in the school library acts as a further distinction from the university experience. On visiting schools, I saw that librarians greeted their students by name. Students did not need a library card to facilitate borrowing or entering, therefore, and the space was open to users; there were no physical barriers in place. It is not possible to match this level of service in many university libraries due to the scale of their operations. The experience is automated, from entering the buildings to borrowing resources, and while this becomes second nature to most users after a very short time, the initial impact of this difference needs to be carefully managed during induction.

The contrast in the scale of the library experience in terms of physical space was replicated in terms of access to resources. The school libraries often allowed just two items to be borrowed at once, both for a standard loan period. This contrasts radically with the loan privileges in double figures and the variety of loan periods that exist in many universities. A corollary is that fines in schools are minimal, where they exist, with many doing without them. It is not surprising that the £1 per hour fines for items on four-hour loan at Durham come as a surprise. The absence of a user-accessible online catalogue was notable in many school libraries. In general, they were either the preserve of the librarian or were not seen as necessary in the smaller collections, where browsing is seen as adequate. The centrality of the catalogue to library operations in higher education is often mirrored by the focus it receives in induction. Nonetheless, the concept of self-discovery may be alien to many of the students we meet during induction and it needs addressing as such.

The range of resources available in schools is vastly different to those in a university library. Not only do limited finances restrict the possibility of school libraries stocking journals, but their significant emphasis on fiction reveals many of these libraries to be distinctly different learning spaces from the role they fulfil at university. The balance shifts from reading for leisure to independent study. While many sixth-form students will be familiar with this change in their own behaviour while at school, the differently oriented collection will be a new experience. The disparity in the format of these collections was another obvious contrast. School resources are predominantly paper-based, again for financial reasons. For many users, therefore, the scale of a university's online resources will be a revelation and the idea of reading online books and journals on a

platform other than an openly available web page may be a completely new experience.

While these may seem like unremarkable findings, it is important to reflect on quite how closely our inductions follow on from users' prior experience, and it is our challenge to make the transition a seamless one. In addition, my discussions with school librarians revealed that while we, as information professionals, may be able to spot the differences, students are oblivious to what will be expected of them at university, both operationally and educationally. The school librarians I met were keen to help their students increase their awareness and reported informing them that 'It won't be like that when you get to university.' However, there is the need for co-operation between school and university libraries, to help ensure that students are prepared for using the latter in order to make the most of the resources and services available to them.

There are many well-established programmes to help school-aged children gain experience of life at university. Most notably there is the government's 'Young, gifted and talented' scheme² In addition, many libraries are involved in delivering content as part of summer schools and taster sessions in term-time. At Durham this is co-ordinated as part of the work of the library, archives and museums' education outreach officer,³ and the remainder of the Elsevier/LIRG award will contribute to creating enhanced literature for communication with schools.

However, the numbers of students that are reached by such activities form a small proportion of school leavers and, while such contact can help to improve expectations, many of the issues around orientation are institution-specific. In addition, pre-application open days, when many students have their first taste of the scale of studying at university, do not always include a tour of the interior of a library. While school librarians reported trying to tell their students what they might expect on leaving the sixth form, the feedback they received was that giving such information was patronising. There is therefore a unique opportunity at induction to convey the necessary information to large numbers of new students who may be more receptive in this new environment.

Induction activities, due to the scale of the operation, are inevitably generic in nature and should remain so. Information skills training can help users in their subject-specific information needs.

However, it is at the point of orientation that we need to ensure that all have a solid foundation to enable them to develop the more advanced skills that these training sessions aim to cultivate. The majority of our users no doubt quickly assimilate the differences between their previous and current experiences, but we should be mindful of the gap we need to fill to help our new students make the transition from being school to university library users.

The material differences between school and university libraries are acute. Understanding essential issues of the scale, services, range and format of resources forms an essential foundation for advanced information literacy skills. If we consider the impact of failing to convey basic information – that is, what resources exist and how to find and access them, both physically and electronically – it is possible to see how key it is that we get it right. The negative impact on the student may be disillusionment with a service that seems unfair or frustration, leading to disengagement with the library. For library staff, the impact will be on their time and resources as enquiries rise and collections are underutilised. Students will surely struggle to progress through the different stages of information literacy and graduate from ‘novice’ to ‘expert’ if they are not in full possession of the basic information to orientate them in their new library environment.⁴

The process of library induction aims to alert new students to services and resources; induction is about initial contact rather than full immersion. However, this does not make it dispensable. I would suggest that if we wrongly pitch induction we are undermining the whole foundation of our users’ information literacy skills. Orientation is a distinct phase in developing these skills, and without sufficient proficiency in this area it will be impossible for new students to know which tools to employ, which resources to consult and how to access and locate the information required. Students may have been adept at using the resources they had on offer at school but many have little awareness of what will be available to them at university. Until there is continuity between secondary and tertiary education skills sets, as envisaged by the ‘National information literacy framework (Scotland),’⁵ university library induction will have to help them bridge that gap if they are to embark on a successful university career.

REFERENCES

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