
Students as consultants

A fresh approach to customer engagement

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BACKGROUND

The large and diverse student groups in the University of Liverpool Management School, and the need to work continually at improving student experience, make for both challenges and opportunities to develop creative and mutually beneficial approaches to liaison with faculty and students. By developing a detailed understanding of programmes and modules, liaison librarians are in a unique position to co-create learning opportunities in partnership with module leaders. At the University of Liverpool such a partnership was developed which led to learning opportunities for our students as well as to new ideas to enhance our services.

Emma Thompson was Liaison Librarian for the University of Liverpool Management School for five years. She has now moved to the University of Manchester; this article refers to her time at Liverpool where she became involved with teaching on a wide variety of undergraduate and postgraduate modules. Following completion of a postgraduate certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education in 2012, she began to engage with teaching more directly, stepping out of established information literacy curricula.

In spring 2013, with a new Head of Academic Liaison, Andrew Barker, in post, liaison librarians were tasked with improving student experience through liaison with schools and departments. We had been examining National Student Survey (NSS) scores and highlighting areas in need of particular attention. In early 2013 one such area was marketing, whose library scores in the 2012 NSS were lower than other Management School subjects areas (though the picture was much improved in the September 2013 results).

Marketing is a single honours programme offered by the University of Liverpool Management School, which has experienced strong growth in the past three years and witnessed a changing student profile this has been fuelled in part by the arrival, particularly into the second year, of approximately 250 students from the University of Liverpool's partner institution Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) in China. This direct-entry group faces the challenge of learning the nuances of a new institution and culture change, including of course a new and much larger library service. For several years information literacy had been embedded in core modules in all three years of the BA marketing programme, including a session for second years studying a market research module. Prior to this, this session had introduced the students to market research sources such as Key Note reports, Mintel and MarketLine.

THE MARKET RESEARCH MODULE

Market research has been a core module on the BA marketing programme, and has been delivered at level two since the programme began around ten years ago. It is also an optional module for students studying on business studies, international business and multiple joint and combined honours programmes. There is therefore a very mixed student population, although all must have passed the level one fundamentals of marketing programme to progress onto it. A particular feature of this market research module is the experiential learning component built into the coursework activity; this involves a live project for which students study a real business and examine specific areas of it. Their reports form part of their assessment but are also shared with the business (client). The idea behind the project is that students will be asked to apply practical market research techniques to answer a particular client (business) brief. These techniques might be drawn from the traditional quantitative data collection approaches, or, more helpfully for the learning experience, allow for a wider market research

toolkit to be utilised, such as qualitative and net-nographic techniques. Businesses participating in previous years have included an independent café, a private school and a tourist attraction.

THE LIBRARY PROJECTS

Considering what more could be done to support marketing and improve the student experience, and having an interest in marketing and its benefits to library services, the academic liaison department of the library formed the idea of using the library as client. Following an email to the module leader Philippa Hunter-Jones and several cups of coffee, the idea was fleshed out enough to propose to colleagues. With backing from the library leadership team and the module leader, the first task was to identify suitable projects. With 110 students in teams of four or five, it was essential to spread out the projects around the both university libraries and extend the focus beyond academic liaison to other library functions. Each library section was briefed on the project and was asked for suitable areas that warranted this approach. Twenty mini-projects were identified as suitable for the students, ranging from noise in the library, to food and drink, and perceptions of the library website.

INTRODUCING THE PROJECT

Early in the semester the projects were shared with students via BlackBoard, and the groups were asked to select their preferred projects. Inevitably some, such as examining social media presence, and website perceptions, were more popular than others. Following the project selection the client (in the guise of Liaison Librarian) attended a lecture to brief the students (now our consultants) about the library and to take questions from the groups. In this lively session it was necessary to stress how important this feedback would be to us, and to challenge the students to look beyond their current experiences of the library. The UK-based students had experienced a year of using the Sydney Jones library, which houses the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences collections, but only one or two of the students in the large lecture theatre had ever visited the Harold Cohen library, home to Health, Sciences and Engineering. For the students recently arrived in Liverpool from China, this was a chance to get to know the library intimately, and quickly; one of the projects selected invited them to compare provision in the UK to their experience in China and make recommendations enabling a smooth transition for future cohorts.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT

The module leader was established as the first point of contact for the students and the liaison librarian as the client representative, who brokered meetings with other staff where appropriate. Despite the fact that over a hundred students participated in the projects, the amount of time expended by the library was not onerous. Students were encouraged to be professional and organised in their dealings with the library and arranged meetings in advance at the convenience of staff. It did become clear, however, that some of the projects we proposed were proving more tricky than others. For example, we as a library struggle to engage with research assistants and this was identified as a suitable project. Of course we struggle because they are a difficult-to-reach group working on short-term projects, and in labs rather than in lecture halls; on reflection we could not expect second-year undergraduate students to achieve a breakthrough where we (and others in the institution) had failed before. Nevertheless, the range of projects allowed for a varied and innovative engagement with market research techniques; some groups opted for questionnaires, in person and online; others adopted projective techniques; and yet others were more innovative, utilising experimental techniques to highlight the perennial problem of gaining sufficient data to base analysis upon.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

Once the students' work had been marked, the reports were shared with the library. Recommendations were pulled out of the 20+ student assignments and written up as a report for the library leadership team. Inevitably many of the recommendations chimed with our own plans to improve the library service, but it was helpful to have our thinking endorsed by students. Pleasingly, some recommendations had been put into place by the time the students reported back – for example, a recommendation to improve information about PC availability. The library had been working with computing services to improve information about free PCs during busy times, and the new PC finder service was in place for the end of semester exam period.

Following the reports, changes have been made to social media channels, and the student feedback forms an important resource to refer to and consider when services are evaluated or new ones planned.

LIBRARY EXPERIENCES

Partnership with academic staff and students enables the library to be proactive; formal opportunities for feedback such as the LibQual and NSS surveys are helpful for benchmarking, but cannot provide new ideas for service development. Harnessing student feedback and ideas from the student population can help. This is not consultancy on the cheap, however. It is important to remember that the student learning outcomes were more important than the benefits to the library.

Examples of lessons learned:

- Students from China were used to basic kitchen facilities in their library to prepare their own snacks and drinks and expected this from a library.
- There was demand for more visual content via our social media channels and less re-use of links and tweets from other university channels.
- Awareness of off-campus service is low.
- Students can struggle to find items in our libraries, and need clearer signposting.

MODULE LEADER EXPERIENCES

The selection of clients, and projects, plays a pivotal role in the success or otherwise of experiential learning activities. Whilst the activity needs to be as realistic as possible, there are a number of inevitable limitations which hamper educational engagement with industry:

- The project activity must meet with the module learning outcomes.
- The project is only one project of many the student cohort will be involved in completing.
- The timeline has to 'fit' with the university timeline for assessment activity.

Working with the library provided a tremendous sense of security and relief: yes, the projects were important, worthwhile projects in their own right, but so too they met the module learning objectives, and were managed in a way that allowed the student population actually to deliver, and within a reasonable timeframe. Fostering relationships of this nature undoubtedly provides important opportunities for enhancing the student experience.

STUDENT EXPERIENCES

At the end of each module, students are invited to comment on their learning experiences. In particular they are encouraged to identify one aspect of the module that they felt most enhanced their learning experience. The library project work was cited as positive time and again in this context, with the following comments about the one aspect that most enhanced their learning being indicative of the general feeling: 'The group work is really helpful. It helps me to improve my study ability'; 'Guest lecturer [i.e. the project introductory talk delivered by the library liaison]'; 'Doing an actual [i.e. real / live] market research project'. Clearly, even with limited time and resources, and competing pressures elsewhere, students were still able to appreciate the value of this activity, and take potentially lifelong transferable skills away from it.

This approach to engagement will help us to improve as a library and strengthens our links with staff and students. These were marketing students, but this approach could perhaps be explored with students in creative programmes such as media production, design or even architecture, depending on the type of university student profile and the needs of the library. Crucial to success was trust between the library and the academic department, developed through effective liaison, building relationships and developing understanding of the academic environment.

Although Emma Thompson has left the university to take up a new post at Manchester University Library, the library will be implementing some of the student ideas straight away; for example, special collections are now highlighting collections through Flickr and are developing a presence on Pinterest. Beyond this local and informal approach to implementing our students' ideas, there are also more formal plans to investigate the implementation of the final recommendations over the next year through a library working party. The library is seeking opportunities to build on this experience and engage with curricula in creative ways, harnessing the creativity and talent of our students and helping them develop skills and competencies that will help them succeed in the workplace.