Free e-books for all: the Middlesex University Library experience

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Academic libraries are operating in an increasingly competitive market. Recent changes to the higher education system have encouraged private providers, raised tuition fees to £9000 and removed the cap on student numbers. This means that students are likely to compare what different institutions have to offer, in addition to the courses themselves.

At Middlesex University, these changes have led to a greater focus on all aspects of the student experience, which has in turn presented opportunities to develop library services. The university's relative position in league tables and NSS ranking provided an incentive for the Executive to consider investing in the library. We used the SCONUL statistics to argue successfully that we were comparatively underfunded in terms of learning materials budgets and that this was impacting negatively on student satisfaction. Subsequently we bid for 24x7 opening and worked on a project to provide free printing for students. These improvements appear to have had a positive impact on both informal and formal measures of student satisfaction and to have contributed to the university rising up the league tables.

New initiatives quickly become part of the standard service expected, so there is pressure to identify further areas where we can add value. The idea of giving free stuff to students has been explored in the last couple of years at a number of universities. Plymouth University and Imperial College London have given free e-books to students on particular courses. The University of East London has a bursary card that can be used for a range of products and has this year given all first-year students a tablet preloaded with e-books.

During 2012–13 the library developed a bid with the Business School to give their students free e-books to support them in their studies. Although the bid was not successful it generated considerable interest and it was widely thought that it should be revisited for all Schools. In November 2013 we drafted a proposal for the Executive suggesting that the university provide free e-books to students in the coming academic year. It was agreed that there should be a pilot in the first year of operation, and that the offer would be extended to the whole university in the second year. The principle was that the university would give a free e-book to every student for each module they studied.

The main reasons for supporting the scheme were as follows:
- to support the university's strategy of 'enhancing student achievement and satisfaction'
- to improve NSS results
- to provide an additional means of attracting students to the university
- to demonstrate value for money in the face of higher tuition fees
- to assist with course delivery, in that lecturers would be sure all their students have the essential text
- to enhance pedagogy through the ability to annotate passages and share notes.

Finance was provided centrally, from outside the library budget, with the expectation that any money saved on not buying multiple copies of essential texts would be used to broaden the collection. This guaranteed the funding of the project on an ongoing basis and answered one of the library's main concerns – that the project might be supported for a year and then cancelled. It was feared that a short-term approach could have a negative effect on student satisfaction, as it could be deemed that a valued service was being taken away.

There were various options for providing books to the students, and the decision to offer e-books reflected the way our students work and study as 'digital natives'. Logistically both the storage and the distribution of hard-copy

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books would be challenging for a campus where space is at a premium.

A tender process was undertaken and among the criteria set out for potential suppliers were the following:

- value for money
- compatibility with the Moodle VLE
- access both online via streaming and offline on a variety of devices once downloaded
- a publisher-neutral platform
- assistance with negotiation with publishers
- support services

Several companies participated in the tender process; it consisted of a questionnaire and presentation, and was won by John Smith / Kortext.

The tender process was concluded barely six months before the start of the academic year. A project officer was seconded internally to lead on key operational activities. These included: gathering information about the courses running in the coming academic year; collecting recommendations from module leaders; integrating the Kortext system with Moodle.

Gathering course details

Gathering course details was essential in order to ensure that every student had a book for each module they studied. It also provided us with information about what courses were running, whom to contact and projected student numbers. It quickly became apparent that our (somewhat naïve) assumption that there was a central list of university programmes and modules was unfounded. We spent weeks gathering data manually and were never entirely confident that we had information on all the courses. We learned for the future to work closely with the School administrative staff as they have a clear overview. This data has myriad uses across the university, and work has been undertaken to centralise it.

Contacting module leaders

It is essential that the module leader recommend the books chosen. This ensures that they are relevant and maximises support of academic staff for the scheme. Unfortunately, by the time we contacted academic staff for their recommendations, they were deep into exam marking, which led to a lot of chasing up on our part late into the summer. A longer lead-time and a more systematic approach to collection have been developed for year 2 of the project.

Integration with Moodle

It was considered important that students should be able to access their free e-books by clicking a link in the VLE where their other course materials are provided. Close working between the university's IT department and Kortext ensured that there are no unnecessary passwords or systems to navigate in order to access the e-books. It was not possible to automate the placing of these links for the pilot, but a plug-in is being developed for year 2 of the project.

The time taken by these tasks meant there wasn't the focus on publicity and marketing that there might have been, either internally or externally. We aim to develop a more coherent communication plan this year.

The project launched in September 2014 as planned. Emails were sent out before students arrived, followed by induction talks; staff from Kortext provided support on campus for the first three weeks of term, which meant that the majority of queries or problems were quickly resolved.

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Online support has been triaged via the student portal by Kortext and Middlesex staff. Issues have been remarkably few – 300 queries from 5000 students, with most of them requiring a quick fix. Difficulties arose when e-book recommendations came very late – for example when a new module leader was appointed at the last minute and wanted to change the chosen book. If students had already downloaded the original book it could get 'stuck' in the system. The longer time-scale in the second year of the project should mitigate this.

It is important that every student knows about their free e-books and takes advantage of them. The emphasis on communication at the start of term meant that by week 3 around 50% of students had registered. Through liaison and reminder emails and text messages this had risen to at least 85% by the end of the first term. (It is likely that this percentage is actually higher and that some of the students who had not activated their free books had withdrawn from their course.)

Informal feedback has been gathered from course boards and student surveys, and has been generally very positive. More formal feedback will be in order to improve the project.

Plans were made to scale the pilot project up to cover the whole university. Additional time was allowed for the elements of the pilot that had proved most complex, and the project was placed on a more formal footing, with a steering group of representatives from Schools and relevant services. There are several advantages to having the library manage the project:

- The library is perceived as neutral but supportive of the Schools. It means that collaboration with other teams is usually positive. Fostering good relations (and calling in favours) has been essential in moving the project forward.

- The library is seen as making a direct and active contribution to the education of students and contributing to the student academic experience. The added functionality that the e-books offer as teaching objects adds to this.

- Rather than just being a procurement exercise, the e-books project is part of a range of activities taking place in the university to enable students to succeed in their course.

- E-books would be seen as library resources even if the library were not leading the project, so it is in the service's interest to actually be responsible for them.

There is still a great deal of work to be done in preparation for every Middlesex student having e-books but we see this as a great opportunity to place the library at the heart of a bold new initiative as well as putting the university at the vanguard of a new model of service delivery.