An academic year of summoning support via text message at the University of Salford

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Salford provides a roving support service in three of its site libraries: the main Clifford Whitworth library and the satellite libraries, Allerton (largely supporting the Health Care faculty) and Adelphi (supporting Art and Design and Media, Music and Performance). The service is provided by information assistants, who give help with physical item queries, support for printing and trouble-shooting of equipment, and carry out patrols to maintain behaviour and environmental standards. They also answer other queries and signpost library patrons to more specialist help.[1]

By 2011 the roving support service was embedded into the way the information assistants carried out their duties and we wanted to make it more of an 'on demand' service as, although 'rovers' met targets to visit every area of the library, they were not necessarily in the right place at the right time.

PILOT SERVICE

Following an investigation including consultations with students, we decided to introduce text messaging to summon a 'rover'. This was introduced as a pilot in the second semester of 2012 in the Clifford Whitworth library and the larger satellite library, Allerton. We used the existing staff and mobile phones, and advertised the service by posters in the libraries advising patrons what to text together with the relevant number. We also ran an item on the library help pages informing patrons of the service.

The pilot raised the following issues, which were addressed prior to fully implementing the service.

Signage

- Originally users were advised to text 'BOOK' and a shelf-mark, or 'JOURNAL' and a title, and wait at that location. However, it was found that students would text the shelf-mark of the item they were looking for, but would not necessarily be at the shelf-mark's location. The book and journal help posters were condensed into one and users were advised to text 'HELP' and their floor number and wait by the catalogues, which are in only one location on each floor. Even if the floor texted was incorrect, staff would be able to check the other possibilities quickly.
- As well as posters in silent areas asking users to text 'NOISE' and location, existing table tents promoting silence were also used by adding the text number so that students could ask staff to attend.
- In the pilot, help with printing was not advertised, as it was believed that printing support was sufficient and that more information by the printers would be confusing. Changes to the way printing is supported and to signage has enabled help with printing to now be included by texting 'PRINT'.

Equipment

- The two phones used for the pilot were very old basic models, which made receiving texts quite difficult. These were upgraded to Android Smart phones (model HTC Wildfire S), and a third was purchased so that the service could also be introduced at Adelphi and so cover all the libraries where there was a roving service.

IMPLEMENTED SERVICE

Rovers were again timetabled to monitor the phone, respond to messages and log all messages received. They could also now use the phones' computing facilities to assist in answering simple queries and for monitoring their message board and printer information pages.

Messages were recorded under one of three headings: help; noise; and print. Messages that did not fit into any category were recorded as other. Messages that were not successfully responded to had a reason recorded for the failure.

The full service was implemented at the beginning of the academic year 2012–13 and we recorded 132 messages from Clifford Whitworth library between 25 September 2012 and 15 May 2013 and 66 messages from Allerton library. (The Allerton total is known to be an under-recording, but the 66 records show how the service has been used. No messages at all were received at Adelphi library.
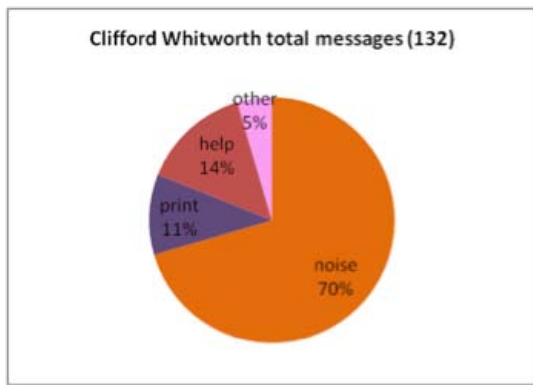
Service usage

Clifford Whitworth total messages

93	14	19	6	132
noise 70.5%	print 10.6%	help 14.4%	other 4.5%	Total

Allerton total messages

16	32	16	2	66
noise 24.2%	print 48.5%	help 24.2%	other 3.0%	Total

The differing way the service was used at each site is immediately obvious. The categories compared in the following ways:

Help

- Requests for help were quite low at Clifford Whitworth but (apart from March) were persistent throughout the year. Of the 19 requests, 13 were from patrons needing help looking for books, four were looking for

journals, one required catalogue assistance and one was unspecific.

- At Allerton requests for help remained significant throughout the year but were highest between mid-October and early December and throughout February and March. Of the 16 requests 11 were from patrons needing help looking for books and the remaining five from patrons looking for a journal. On one occasion the student was found in a location other than that which they stated.

Noise

- By far the largest category of messages received at Clifford Whitworth library was for help with noise, which accounted for 93 texts. Initially requests for assistance with noise levels was the smallest category; however, from 23 October 2012 onwards these requests became the largest category, with a high point reached during March, when 18 out of 19 texts received were in this category.
- At Allerton the noise requests show a very different pattern from the requests for help with resources. Of the 16 texts, nine were received during April 2013 no doubt reflecting the pattern of assignments and revision.

Print

- At the beginning of the academic year (until mid-October) printing accounted for 53% of monthly messages received. This was due to a lack of student understanding of the printing system, rather than to printer faults. Understanding rapidly improved during the academic year, with print messages dropping to 17% between mid-October and mid-November. Only two requests for printing help were received after mid-November; both were for assistance with mechanical faults.
- Printing was the largest category of messages at Allerton (32 messages). At the beginning of the academic year (until mid-October) printing accounted for 70% of monthly messages received. As at Clifford Whitworth this was due to a lack of understanding. Although understanding improved during the year, printing help remained a significant source of requests and was never less than 30% of monthly messages.

Other

- This category reflects a small number of records and consists of such items as missed calls, ambiguous or blank messages and one test message. Apart from the test message all but one of these were sent outside staffed hours. At Allerton both 'other' items were sent in the first three weeks of the service, which suggests that the sender was unsure how it worked.

UNRESOLVED MESSAGES

Unfortunately not all text messages could be responded to; when this happened the staff logged the message together with an explanation of the failure. Unresolved messages were grouped under four categories; staff error, student not found (SNF), out of hours (OoH) and other.
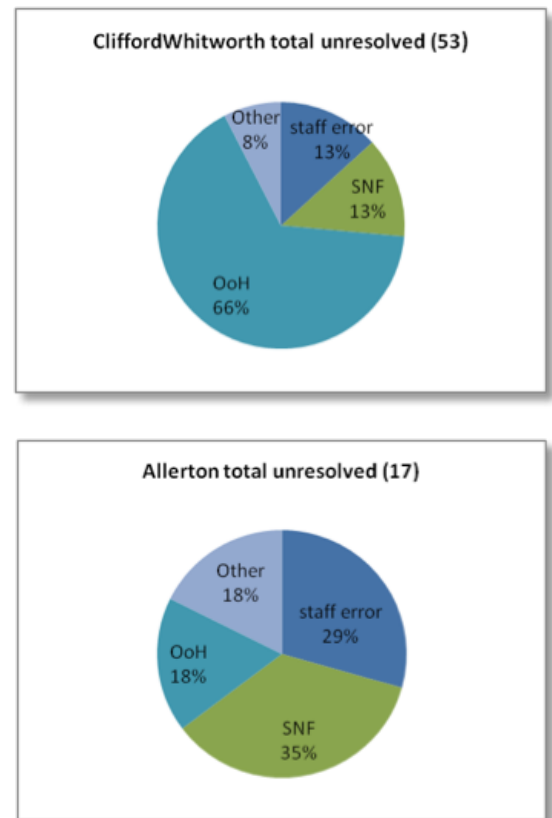

Fig. 2 Unresolved messages

Clifford Whitworth total

53	7	7	3	4
% unresolved 40.2%	staff error 5.3%	SNF 5.3%	OoH 26.5%	Other 3.0%

Allerton total

17	5	6	3	3
% unresoved 25.8%	staff error 29.4%	SNF 35.3%	OoH 17.6%	Other 17.6%

As with the requests, the reasons messages were unresolved differed between the libraries.

Messages were unresolved for the following reasons:

Staff error

Ten messages in total were not responded to due to staff error. During the first four weeks, 5 messages were missed during staff breaks; this matter was raised in team meetings and staff subsequently ensured that phones were monitored at all times. One message was missed during the first month, when the staff member didn't notice the phone vibrating. One message was recorded as staff error as although it was likely it had been responded to it had not been cleared from the phone. No other staff errors occurred until 15 May 2013, when three messages were missed in a 20-minute period due to a staff shortage caused by upheaval around announcements of organisational change.

Student not found

Staff were unable to resolve seven messages at Clifford Whitworth and six at Allerton because students were not where they had texted they would be. In cases where the message had been for print support staff checked the relevant printers for faults.

Out of hours

At Clifford Whitworth the most common reason for requests being unresolved (35) was that messages were sent outside service hours. Five of these were sent at the weekend, the rest after 16:30 when the service closed, but only two were sent after midnight. From 22 October 2012 an automatic response app was implemented so that a service information message is sent during unstaffed hours. Two texts sent out of hours contained no message. There was also a call logged from a withheld number.

Allerton library had three messages sent out of hours, two in the evening and one at the weekend.

Other

A few messages were unresolved for miscellaneous reasons including

- the fire alarm sounding before staff could respond
- a network error causing the receipt of the text to be delayed for over an hour
- nonsensical messages
- security guards mislaying the phone charger and allowing the phone battery to die overnight

SUMMARY

Library staff quickly became used to providing the service, and early issues around monitoring the phones during service hours were resolved in the first month. The service was reviewed regularly in team meetings, and staff suggested improvements such as using an app to text back service hours whenever a message was received out of hours.

Take-up of the service at both Allerton and Clifford Whitworth was very good. Clifford Whitworth has data for twice as many periods as Allerton and has recorded exactly twice as many messages.

The usage patterns at Allerton and Clifford Whitworth showed marked differences: at Clifford Whitworth the overwhelming majority of texts asked for assistance with noise; at Allerton the majority wanted support using printing, scanning and copying facilities. This is no doubt due to the different student demographic served by the different areas.

The service was completely unused at Adelphi library. It is unclear whether this was entirely due to the library's much smaller size or for some other reason.

Less satisfactory too was the attempt to get the university's security team to monitor the text messages at Clifford Whitworth during unstaffed periods in an attempt to address the high number of requests sent out of hours. The service provided by the guards was very mixed. On one occasion the guard attempted to solve the problem and then texted the student back for more information. On every other occasion the messages were ignored (or at least never logged) and on two occasions the guards mislaid the phone charger, once losing it completely, which led to messages being missed on the morning after when the battery was flat.

Taking the service forward
There is an opportunity to extend the service into the small hours at Clifford Whitworth library, as we are about to employ library wardens who will also be able to monitor the text messages and provide assistance to patrons until 02:00. However, there has been little demand for the service after midnight and the Estates Security Team members will not be asked to respond to texts after the library wardens have left.

Another attempt will be made to provide the service at Adelphi, which is to see improved staffing in the new academic year.

To fit into new roving patterns, the service can be extended to other library-managed learning spaces, such as satellite areas; this will help to promote the fact that these are library spaces and encourage students to approach roving library staff.

The phones could also be used for two-way contact. Staff could be encouraged to text back to the sender confirming that they will attend, or with details of where to meet, or asking for more. The level of texts so far received is such that the current price plan would support this without incurring an extra cost.

It might be possible to expand the service by monitoring a single number and then forwarding the request to staff based locally. This could be done via the message board, to be picked up by the person closest. This would require the message board to be monitored fairly constantly on a Smartphone or tablet. A high standard of communication would be required to make this successful.

The system of continuous review through regular feedback to the roving team of the previous month's texts, and implementation of any suggestions made by the team, have been successful and will be maintained together with formally reviewing the service at the end of the next academic year.

NOTE

1   This team has recently been reorganised and upgraded; duties also now include providing all library enquiry services.