Increasing the engagement: widening participation at York
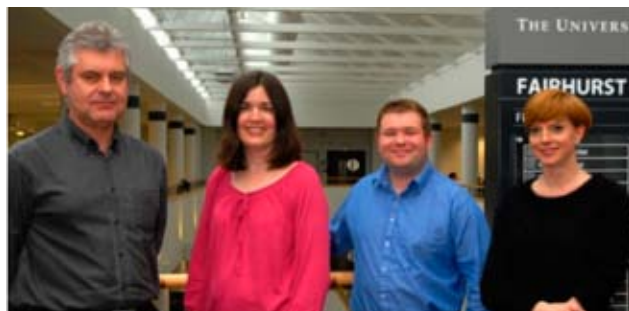
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Introduction

The library has a strong commitment to widening participation activities, which have increased with the increase in student fees. Over the last three years, the number of requests for school visits has grown, and in response to this a widening participation team was set up in January 2012 to help coordinate the work involved in developing and delivering sessions.

York's Widening Participation team: Martin Wilkinson, Clare Ackerley, Tony Wilson and Kirsty Whitehead.

The library offers a series of workshops and activities to meet this demand. This article provides the context and background for the role of the library in widening participation at York and provides

some insight into the range of activities offered to schools.

Developing independent learning (DIL)

The University of York has always had a strong tradition of widening participation. Indeed, it is one of the university's five key areas of investment. However, it is only recently that the library at York has embedded these activities into its vision.

In 2009 the library was asked to contribute to a DIL day alongside colleagues from the university's Widening Participation, Learning Enhancement and Centre for Lifelong Learning teams. This event was targeted at sixth form pupils attending schools and colleges that are part of the university's School and Colleges Network. The aim was to help bridge the skills and learning style gap between further and higher education. The library developed a Researching and Evaluating Information workshop that covered freely available resources, subject gateways, evaluating websites and a library challenge. This event was very successful and formed the basis for future partnerships and events between the library and the Widening Participation and Learning Enhancement teams.

Extended project qualification (EPQ)

The success of the DIL day led to the development of more workshops and activities. We started to receive requests for students who were about to embark on their extended project qualification. The EPQ 'teaches new skills, such as independent research, project management, reflection and self-directed learning' (AQA, 2012). Sixth form tutors were especially keen for librarians to provide additional support in the areas of referencing and seeking out high quality, authoritative sources. The earlier collaboration for the DIL event acted as a springboard for further collaboration with colleagues in the Learning Enhancement team for EPQ workshops. These pilot workshops were very well received and many further requests quickly followed as more schools and colleges became aware of what York could offer in this area. The university also hosted EPQ conferences at which library staff and other colleagues from across the university informed teachers and head teachers of the support that was available to them.

Within the year, library support for EPQ students had developed from two or three small-scale pilot workshops to eight or nine workshops and library

visits a year. In addition, plans to share materials online were developed so that students who could not travel from their schools and colleges to York could still access the support they required.

Realising opportunities

The library plays an important role in the university's Realising Opportunities events for year 12 and 13 students; these include a range of activities such as e-mentoring using current undergraduate students, conferences and preparation for their EPQ or Realising Opportunities assignment. Library workshops form part of Realising Opportunities days and many of the activities outlined below are used in these events.

Student ambassadors
A great deal of the success of all our events can be attributed to the input of student ambassadors. They contribute to events by leading group activities and by sharing their own experiences of researching essays and using library resources. Student ambassadors can use this to accrue points toward a York Award, which is awarded to students who can demonstrate outstanding achievements throughout their time at York and looks great on their CV.

Going interactive!
Originally, library widening participation workshops developed to promote independent learning or to support EPQ students and were delivered in a PC classroom. This was quite successful, but feedback after our events focused on the need for more interaction. Having a varied structure to the sessions also allowed us to address different learning styles. In order to develop the interactive side of the sessions and to make the most of the expertise and experience of student ambassadors, it was decided to move the workshops out of the PC classroom and into a seminar room.

The revised workshops produced immediate results in terms of increased student engagement and meant the ambassadors were able to play a much more active role, ensuring that they also benefited from helping with the sessions.

Team teaching is one of the keys to our success, with most of our recent events being led by two academic liaison librarians. This is especially useful where there are larger groups of students. The combination of the librarians and the student ambassadors gives the workshops variety and enables peer-to-peer learning. The student ambassadors are usually seated among the students,

which encourages participation and minimises the feeling of 'them' and 'us'.

We have provided a summary of some of our activities below:

Resources discussion
The student ambassadors are asked to spend five minutes telling the visiting students about an assignment that they themselves have completed. They describe the resources they used, where they searched for them and, on reflection, whether they would do anything differently as a result of their experiences at university. The groups are asked to feed back what they have learnt; there then follows a more general discussion about the range of sources and resources available to students attempting to do a piece of research. The focus is very much on freely available online high quality resources as the students will not be able to access the subscription resources available to university students. However, they are made aware of the library's walk-in access service if they are local to York. The walk-in-access service is a free service that allows visitors to access library subscription resources, where the licence permits, at a terminal within the Library building. We usually spend a few minutes outlining useful features of Google, as many students are unaware that there is more to Google than meets the eye!

Developing a search strategy
In the summer term 2011–12, a search strategy activity was introduced to help explain the importance of planning a search, using synonyms, truncation and Boolean logic. Originally this was explained using slides, with a mock essay title as the starting point, but it was always felt to be rather dry and unengaging, with too much talking from us and not enough input from the students.

Our new exercise involves showing the students a short video that builds up a search strategy based on an essay title, followed by a practical exercise with keywords on cards and Boolean operators. We present the students with an essay title then give each group of 8–10 students, aided by student ambassadors, a group of keywords on laminated cards. They arrange the cards, as on the video, in a logical order, on desks or even on the floor. This has been successful to date, with one teacher commenting that it was great for kinesthetic learners.

In some sessions, we take this a step further, and enter some of the keywords into Google and Google Scholar and compare the results. Another teacher commented how beneficial it would be for all students to follow the demonstration on screen and carry out the searches on iPads – something for the wish list!

Although many students may not use many databases where truncation and Boolean logic are applied, we feel this exercise is important as it stresses the importance of not simply entering an essay title into Google and hoping for rich, scholarly results, but of breaking it down into concepts, using keywords.

Evaluating websites
Students are asked to consider six different A3 laminated sheets containing screenshots from the homepages of six different websites. They work in groups, led by a student ambassador, to evaluate the sites and they have an additional handout with a table that allows them to score the sites if they wish. The facilitator then asks the groups to feed back their thoughts to the rest of the room before a final summing up about the pros and cons of each site by the facilitator.

The hot seat
This activity was based on one described by a librarian at the Librarians' Information Literacy Annual Conference (LILAC). It was introduced as a fun and highly interactive way to end the workshops for sixth-form pupils as, not only is it fun, but it is also an effective way for the facilitator to get a feel for how much the students have taken in during the workshop. Each group is asked to select one member of the group to be in the 'hot seat' and the rest of the team are shown five terms that have been covered during the workshop such as 'peer review'. The students have to describe this term to the person in the hot seat without using the term until they guess the correct term. The winning team is awarded a prize.

Pass the parcel
Although the majority of our events are delivered to sixth formers, we are, on occasion, approached to deliver sessions to primary schools. This July a colleague presented a 30-minute session for primary school children, which was a repeat visit from last year. We used pass the parcel as the main activity of this event, with a series of simple library-related questions and sweets for each parcel; the parcels themselves were six nested boxes. The children were given a handout entitled *Eleven interesting facts about the University of York Library!* This included some of the detail of the pass the parcel answers and discussion, with

a library-related word search on the reverse, just for fun!

In April two colleagues visited a local primary school to give a presentation to year 6 pupils. On this occasion they used a PC classroom and they chose the Olympics as the main research topic, as this tied in with the topic they were studying at the time at school.

The future of widening participation at York

We are currently looking at more ways of engaging students in our workshops. These include revising our teaching materials, investigating the use of Prezi software and developing more interactive activities.

Not surprisingly, we have found that the more preparation we do with a school – finding out what resources the school has for their students already and what training, if any, the students have had in finding and evaluating quality scholarly resources – the more successful the event is.

We are increasingly being asked to go out to schools. Ideally we visit in advance to see the facilities available and to discuss the content and structure of the workshop with the school librarian or teacher, but often there is not sufficient time to do this and so workshops have to be tweaked and altered at the point of delivery.
Balancing widening participation activities with core academic liaison activities is a continual challenge but we believe it is worth the investment. The university plans to establish new widening participation initiatives over the next few years and the library is eager to have a role in supporting these.

References and further reading

AQA. 2012. Available at http://web.aqa.org.uk/qual/bacc/bacc-epq.php (accessed 21 June 2012)

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