
Enquiry services go mobile at LJMU



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BACKGROUND

In May 2009, library and student support (L&SS) at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) launched a six-week pilot project trialling a number of mobile devices in student-support contexts. The pilot explored whether a mobile student-support service can make a viable contribution to bridging the gap between static reference enquiry points and the service users working throughout the physical library environment. Following the completion of an initial research phase on mobile learning technologies, the purchase of a number of mobile devices was funded by the learning development unit (LDU) at LJMU to trial their effectiveness in a practical setting:

- 5 x iPod Touches
- 3 x Asus EEE PCs
- 2 x LG X110 notebooks.

All three devices were tested by library staff working in the LRCs, either based at an enquiry point or while roving.

Delivery of reference support at LJMU has been very traditional up till now, with a number of



staffed enquiry points in each LRC. However, the service model is changing, following on from the development of the social learning zone at the Avril Robarts LRC, an innovative student-centred and flexible learning space. The focus is now on self-service and student-owned learning space, which creates a tension between the traditional reference enquiry point and the activities of users in the more informal physical library environment. Further to this, the Aldham Robarts LRC is undergoing a significant refurbishment over the summer vacation, which will result in a radical repurposing of the enquiry desks. New approaches to working by all staff involved in delivering front-line services are being developed, including enquiry handling. There is already a well-developed model for roving support in the LRCs and the trial of the mobile technologies was designed to give staff the opportunity to try out the new devices and evaluate their use.

PROJECT APPROACH

The mobile devices were distributed between two LRCs (Avril Robarts and IM Marsh). Each site had a project leader who oversaw the day-to-day running of the project: training pilot participants, acting as key-holder for the devices (issuing/returning etc.) and ensuring the smooth running of the pilot at their designated site.

An online survey was constructed using Bristol Online Survey (BOS); pilot participants completed the survey after each instance of student support, using the mobile device in question to fulfil this task. A project wiki was also created to act as a log-book for pilot participants, allowing them to record their experiences in more detail where necessary. Finally a focus group was held at the end of the trial period, allowing pilot participants from both sites to come together and discuss their experiences of providing student support with mobile devices.

RESULTS

The uptake of the pilot was extremely positive. The online surveys returned data showing that 76.6% of library staff felt that the mobile devices helped them to complete the student-support task in question. The communicative capacities offered by the mobile devices appeared to hold the most potential. Learning and technology assistant (L&TA) pilot participants were excited by the prospect of constantly being in contact with specialist help at the touch of the button, either to research and learner support officers (R&LSOs)

or to IT support, through instant messaging. L&TAs indicated that such access would ensure a continual provision of high-level, point-of-need service to students whilst roving, improving the efficiency of service delivery.

Interestingly, the group respondents recognised how the pilot had helped to break down barriers with regard to technology use in the workplace, specifically in mobile format. This is encouraging because it suggests that the preconceptions of new working approaches are more daunting than the change itself, and that resistance to change is more about a fear of the unknown than a deep-seated resistance to it.

The main reasons for negative responses related to areas that were out of the control of the trial period: some drawbacks with the technologies chosen were identified and the time of year (summer vacation) with its consequent low number of students and queries was not ideal. The online surveys showed that the 13.7% of the pilot participants who felt negatively about using a mobile device for student-support activities gave reasons such as small screen size and slow processing power. Hardware-based barriers such as these are inherent in mobile devices when compared to the capabilities of the desktop PC; however, when applied in roving support contexts, device portability is of higher importance. As the new service model develops and roving support becomes more widely accepted as the norm, the expectation is that staff will gradually adapt to using the devices and will solve some of the initial problems encountered in the pilot.

CONCLUSION

The mobile student-support pilot has revealed how mobile technologies can enhance student support whilst staff are based away from the traditional enquiry desk or roving. It is apparent however, that the most appropriate mobile device is at times context-specific, indicating that delivering a mobile student-support service cannot be achieved successfully with just one type of device.

The overriding consensus amongst the pilot participants was that the iPod Touch is a useful device in *providing an answer* to a quick question or student query rather than *dem-*



onstrating how to perform a more complex task, and is therefore suited to the roving activities of information service assistants. On the other hand, the LG notebook is the preferred device for the staff handling more specialist enquiries, proving to be very usable, with a good operating speed and being easy to transport whilst on the move. Its major benefits are its screen size and keyboard (compared to the other devices), allowing for in-depth reference enquiries to be dealt with at the student's point of need.

At LJMU the next phase of LRC development will see a number of different groups of staff delivering a range of services from the ground floors, including reception, student administration enquiries, IT support, careers advice and welfare support. We anticipate that the use of mobile devices will contribute to the development of the more flexible and accessible model of student support being implemented from September 2009.

