

Piloting a student shadow scheme at The Open University library



Hilary Johnson
Senior Library Manager (FASS,
Student Engagement, Digital
& Information Literacy,
Library Services
The Open University
hilary.johnson@open.ac.uk

The copyright in items published in SCONUL Focus remains the property of the author(s) or their employers as the case may be.



Introduction

During February 2018, the Open University library held four student shadow events to give distance learners the opportunity to visit the campus and learn about the library service. The pilot was a success, and shadowing has become a regular engagement and insight activity. Feedback from student participants has changed working practices and led to students contributing to library projects.

Background

The Open University (OU) operates in the four UK nations, with most staff and key functions centralised to a campus in Milton Keynes. OU students are distance learners and will probably never visit the Milton Keynes campus, where the Betty Boothroyd Library is located. Most students are in part-time mode of study (one 60-credit module); however, there is a gradual increase in full-time intensity study (120+ credits); this is distinct from being full-time, because of HESA's definitions. The OU's mission is to promote educational opportunity and social justice by providing high-quality university education to all who wish to realise their ambitions; most of its undergraduate courses have no formal entry requirements.

Student shadowing: the pilot

The student shadowing scheme was one of five threads in a wider 2017–18 Student Engagement project (SEP), which included a graduate internship scheme and other community-building initiatives. The shadowing scheme's aim was to give students the opportunity to observe the daily workings of an individual or team in order to gain insight into how the OU works. The desire to feel part of the university's community is strongly felt by the student body, because of the OU's distance-learning study model. Few students ever visit a university site in any of the four nations. The piloted shadowing opportunities variously lasted from one to five days.

Library as pilot site

The library was one of three departments that volunteered to host students for the pilot (alongside Careers and Employability Services in Nottingham and LTI Academic in Milton Keynes). Over half the applicants (31) selected the library as their first choice.

The library was keen to participate. The SEP had the slogan 'We need your voice to make change happen', which fitted with the library's ethos of student-focused services. In addition, OU students strongly associate a library with a physical space, and they can feel they are missing out on a central part of the university experience if they cannot visit a physical library. Third-party content is so embedded in the online module materials (especially at levels 1 and 2) that students may not realise they have experienced our virtual library. This perception is reflected in end-of-module survey responses.

Organising the visit

The library's manager for student engagement was responsible for organising the shadow days. After discussion with the Student Engagement Project Manager (SEPM) in January 2018, the library agreed to host one student each Wednesday during February (four in total). This left only nine working days for shortlisting and organising the first visit, but the condensed timeframe was supposed to allow other prospective hosts to apply lessons learned from the pilot.

Piloting a student shadow scheme at The Open University library

For shortlisting purposes, the SEPM provided the library manager with the student's study level and answers to three questions:

- What are you studying?
- What do you hope to gain from the experience?
- How will you share your experience with other OU students?

All students were studying arts or social sciences modules, save for one STEM student. The SEPM notified the successful applicants; the library manager then contacted the students to discuss their travel preferences (three lived more than 100 miles from Milton Keynes), any accessibility issues and the content of the visit.

Before the events, the students were sent a briefing sheet with travel, catering and campus information to help them prepare for the day; site visitor cards were organised as OU students do not have student / library cards. The library's intellectual property manager prepared a recording consent form, which was subsequently adopted by the other shadow hosts. The SEPM organised a confidentiality agreement for all shadow areas where students might see sensitive information. This included the library events, because shadowing the library's (virtual) helpdesk involves the student information system.

Format of the shadow days

February is the second biggest peak time for the library, because of new starters and assignment timings for October starters, so the staff who hosted the 'shadows' were being very generous with their time.

Each day followed the basic outline below:

Welcome, orientation and administrative forms
Meet the Quality & Insight (Q&I) Team Social media takeover starts
Coffee break
One or two activities
Lunch break
Two or three activities (plus tea break)
Recording your reflections (with the Q&I Team)
Debrief with senior library managers Social media takeover ends

Fig 1. Format of pilot days

The Quality & Insight Assistant helped each visitor to record a short video of their reflections on the day. During the pilot, three of these were edited together as a compilation and uploaded to the library's YouTube channel. The video was used to increase awareness of the student shadow scheme to students and staff. The students were so enthusiastic about their experience that it promoted the library's profile too.

The copyright in items published in SCONUL Focus remains the property of the author(s) or their employers as the case may be.



Piloting a student shadow scheme at The Open University library

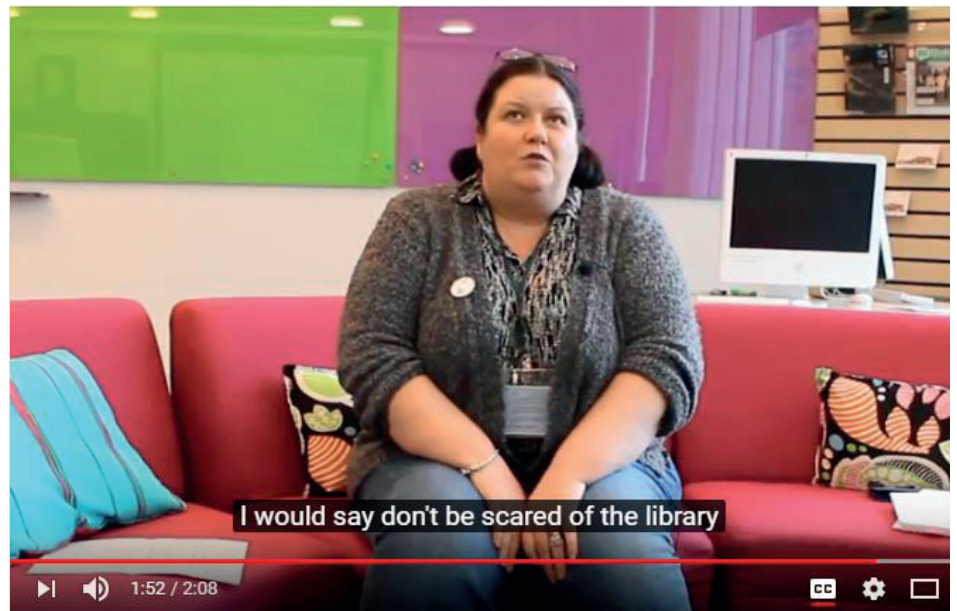


Fig 2. Clip from student shadows' reflections recording shared on OU Library's YouTube channel (https://youtu.be/_Ystyh18lts)

The students' video had already encouraged them to reflect on their expectations and experience, so the final conversation with the library managers was a comfortable progression. The managers were not involved with the rest of the day, so they were curious to find out 'What did you learn today that you did not know before?' and 'What have you observed today that we should think about?' The feedback included some suggestions about service modifications, but was mainly around our marketing. For example, by proudly promoting our helpdesk as 24/7, we were actually deterring some students from using the service, as they concluded they would be interacting with an impersonal bot, instead of personalised support via the OCLC Reference Cooperative. The OCLC Reference Cooperative provided a virtual enquiry service from a team of experienced reference librarians. Our social media team therefore ran a mini campaign to prove that humans work in the library – less of a problem for brick universities.

Over the four shadow events, 11 different activities were arranged. Four of the most popular were:

Shadowing Adobe Connect tutorial

Most OU tutorials are delivered online (rather than face-to-face), including the library's digital and information literacy (DIL) sessions. All the shadows had previously participated in webinars but enjoyed seeing the tutors' interface. This gave them an insight into how their tutors prepare and deliver each module tutorial; webinars are a central part of the OU's teaching strategy. The librarian discussed the session's learning outcomes and planning behind the content, and our other DIL activities.

Usability testing

The digital services development officer introduced the types of UX (user experience) techniques used with members of our student panel to research our services or digital platforms. Five hundred students are recruited to the library's student panel each year as a representative sample of the 168,000+ student body, and they participate in up to three quality and insight activities during that year.

The shadows could not watch a test session (for ethical and practical reasons); none of the students knew the library did this kind of research and they were

The copyright in items published in SCONUL Focus remains the property of the author(s) or their employers as the case may be.



Piloting a student shadow scheme at The Open University library

fascinated. A repeated refrain from the shadows was that they had no idea how much work the library puts into engaging student insights for service improvements.

The OU's accessibility mission

Similarly, the shadows were amazed by the scale and breadth of accessibility work (third-party interface testing and reporting, systematic content conversions, captioning, and alternative format supply) in the library. The OU has over 23,000 disabled students, so this is a key activity area and is part of every library staff member's working life.

Project to rethink our 'Getting started with the library' webpage

A task and finish group's project initiation for rethinking the Library's Getting started webpage coincided with the second shadow day, so the student joined their brainstorm session and contributed ideas. As well as helping design the new resource, this activity helped the student (who had a disability affecting their social skills) to have a positive workplace experience that gave them more confidence in their employability.

Benefits to the library

As expected, the shadow events brought opportunities to integrate the student voice into real work and highlight to the visitors how committed the library is to improving the student experience. The library's participation in the pilot was something the Q&I team and director could 'shout' about within the institution, at every level and through every medium.

What we had underestimated was the boost to staff morale at an acutely stressful point in both the academic year and a truncated institutional transformation project. It reconnected people to our deeply valued mission (<http://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/strategy-and-policies/mission>), which we are celebrating in our 50th anniversary year. Helping with some of the sessions also proved a useful probationary objective for new team members who were adjusting to a distance-learning environment. One shadow (with a disability) also helped the library prepare material for use at the next Global Accessibility Awareness Day (GAAD) [<https://globalaccessibilityday.org>].

Problems encountered

The February shadow days were not without difficulties, many of them directly attributable to the nature and timing of the pilot. Providing four activity-rich shadow days in a month was resource-intensive. February is the second busiest time of year for the service and coincides with half-term, winter colds, dark days and, in this instance, a blizzard (requiring early closure and an epic journey back to Greater Manchester for one student).

The pilot's constraints meant we did not have enough time or information to tailor the days to the participants' interests. Furthermore, the supporting paperwork – such as the confidentiality agreement or recording consent form – was not in place, so the library created or sourced them; as previously stated, they were adopted by subsequent hosts. The pilot's application process asked students how they would share their experiences, but this was difficult to assess after the event without access to their various social and academic communication tools.

Beyond these issues, one visit had to be rescheduled – at the request of the student engagement office – to avoid a student's first experience of the campus being a UCU picket line. The social media takeover's success was uneven partly because Wi-Fi is weaker in parts of the building, one visitor did not have a smartphone, and we had forgotten to use a hashtag to link posts.

The copyright in items published in SCONUL Focus remains the property of the author(s) or their employers as the case may be.



Piloting a student shadow scheme at The Open University library

With one exception, only arts and social science students applied. Although the university aims to be highly disability-friendly, only one shadow had previously declared a disability to the university, although two more did so in the pre-visit conversations with the library manager (so some adjustments could be made).

After the pilot

The library's extended leadership team evaluated the pilot experience. The problems identified above were all things that could be mitigated or avoided. The team concluded that having students on site brought substantial and beneficial insights, and that student shadowing events should become part of 'business as usual'. Other departments had hosted several students at once and / or over several days. The library decided to host up to three students twice a year, in September and March, and to give the students 'buddies' (for lunch breaks); events remain viable, even if a student has to withdraw at short notice.

During 2018–19, we publicised the opportunity heavily to STEM students (as this is the largest faculty). The advertisement has been reworded to be more student-friendly, and applications are open for longer, but they close four weeks before the event to allow more preparation time. We have also asked for the students' ID numbers to help with the shortlisting; a student's self-description of their subject or study level can be misleading.

The structure of the day is unchanged, with the middle of the day activities fitted around real work in the library. However, the time spent on an individual activity has been slightly increased in response to staff and student feedback. So, in September 2018, the students spent an hour helping with an ethnographic survey of building use and another shadowing the (virtual) helpdesk.

We have rethought how to explain the library's role in the module production cycle, and academic liaison librarians are now joined by rights and e-resources advisers from the content, licensing and IP teams. This was very popular with both shadows and staff.

Staff participation was also broadened by two staff room initiatives. Every staff member was asked to fill out a postcard to share something about themselves, linked (by string) to a massive desk schema. Staff used the new floor-to-ceiling whiteboard to write questions for the shadows, such as, 'Where do you usually study, and when?' This helped the students feel part of our community, and they wrote personal answers during the day: simple but powerful.



Fig 3. Library staff room's facebook via a postcard

The copyright in items published in SCONUL Focus remains the property of the author(s) or their employers as the case may be.



Piloting a student shadow scheme at The Open University library

An additional development for 2019 is that the library is developing a virtual shadow experience suitable for disabled students who cannot travel to the campus. Instead of one day, the students will 'tune in' for daily one-hour sessions during a normal library week.

Tips for other libraries

- If you select a student early on their study journey, any lessons they take away from the day may be shared and benefit the wider cohort. However, the library may get more insight from students midway through or nearing the end of their course. Consider what your primary objective for the initiative is.
- An 'open calendar' policy is really helpful for identifying interesting activities naturally occurring on the day. Or, with enough notice, you can negotiate for things to be rescheduled to the shadowing day.
- Plan your schedule, with refreshment breaks, but still build in slippage between sessions. Engaged, interested students always want to spend longer with each host. And the hosts may lose track of time too.
- Give each host basic details of each student – access requirements, study pathway – to help them accommodate the students, but warn them that last-minute substitutions may be necessary, so they should not tailor their plans too tightly.
- Produce a video recording from each event to promote the library's interest in student voice internally and to help recruit new shadows. Share the asset with the relevant qualification leads or senior staff; this may be useful for things they are working on (such as briefing packs for accreditation bodies).

Conclusion

The student shadow initiative has provided students with an insight into how the library works and enabled them to feel even more part of the university community. It has also provided us with beneficial feedback that has influenced service delivery. We plan to continue the initiative and would encourage others to consider how students can engage with library staff across all teams to influence service design.

The copyright in items published in SCONUL Focus remains the property of the author(s) or their employers as the case may be.

