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S.O.S – Supporting Other Students: the role of student library ambassadors at Southampton Solent University



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Since March 2008, the library at Southampton Solent has been employing a team of students to act as 'library ambassadors'. They provide alternative support to our users, particularly during periods when library staff are not on duty, such as during extended opening hours on bank holidays and late evenings. Ambassadors provide peer support covering library facilities and resources, as well as more technical issues (ICT, photocopying, binding). Overall they help to ensure that a high-quality learning environment is accessible throughout our full opening hours.

EXTENDED OPENING HOURS

The library has been under increasing pressure from students to open longer: later in the evening, at weekends, during vacations and at bank holidays. We identified this from frequent comments made on opening hours through our monthly online surveys and our suggestions box scheme. To be able to meet these expectations, the university needed to consider alternative ways of providing access to the library that would not put pressure on existing staff and without incurring high additional costs.

The library had already invested in self-service facilities to allow students to borrow and return library material when there was no staffed loans service available. During 2006/07, the library opened during a few key weeks of the year until



midnight and on three bank holidays, with only security staff present. Feedback from students was generally positive, although they were frustrated when some facilities were not available because of a breakdown or failure during the session; for example, the printers ran out of paper during one evening and the print credit machine became inoperable over one bank holiday, which prevented students from being able to print or photocopy.

PEER STUDENT SUPPORT

As part of a 'learning spaces' project that investigated the future requirements for learning spaces within the university, members of the project team had an opportunity to visit a number of other university libraries. Some of those universities employed students as first-line support for other students needing help and advice whilst studying in the library or learning centres. In particular the University of Warwick's 'learning grid', a high-tech learning environment, is almost entirely operated by students, 24x7. Shortly before the launch of the scheme, members of the team also visited the learning zone at the University of the Arts and spoke to staff about their use of student assistants in running the service.

Feedback from the students on the learning spaces project team suggested that many students who feel nervous about using the full facilities and resources of the library would be more comfortable initially in asking another student for help rather than having to approach a member of the library staff at a help desk. This had already been

proven to be the case, as is evidenced by the success of the LexisNexis student associates at Solent, who provided students with assistance with using this law database. In addition, anecdotal evidence from other universities showed that students who receive well-informed support and advice from other students during their first forays into the library are then more likely to request help from library staff when they need more professional support later in their studies.

EMPLOYING STUDENTS AS LIBRARY AMBASSADORS

The library has for many years employed students to shelve materials. Student shelvers, however, were only trained to shelve materials, although they have often been approached by students asking for help, for example in finding a book.

Following consultation with the students' union and their enthusiastic support for the idea, we set about recruiting a team of student ambassadors. The students were recruited via the university jobshop, which provides internal paid work opportunities to current students. These vacancies range from temporary administrative work to permanent work in a faculty or service.

THE JOB PROFILE

The job profile outlined the role as including the following tasks:

- provide roving, practical support and help to library users and assist them with their use of the library, IT facilities and the copy centre

- during staffed opening hours, to be an additional point of contact for all basic enquiries relating to the use of library services
- make a contribution, outside of normal library staffed hours, by ensuring resources are accessible, functioning and fully stocked (e.g. printers, photocopiers, equipment and so on)
- give guidance in implementing the library and LRC rules and regulations, such as policies on eating and drinking, mobile phone usage
- refer users to the appropriate level of support, depending on the nature of the enquiry and the availability of staff
- carry out regular head counts and obtain and record user feedback when required for evaluation of the service
- help security / caretaking staff with clearing the library at closedown (though responsibility for security of the building rests with security staff / caretakers)
- re-shelve library stock, clear tables and tidy the study areas to ensure a good standard of study environment is maintained
- support students with their use of the library portal, including dealing with general enquires and helping students locate resources through the catalogue and portal pages
- provide help and support with use of the facilities and equipment available and assist students with simple enquiries and troubleshooting, such as for PCs, printers, scanners, copiers, use of wireless system, self-service machines
- communicate any problems or observations to daytime staff via the log or diary provided.

WHAT THE AMBASSADORS DON'T DO FOR THE LIBRARY

We felt it was important to be clear about what we were expecting the ambassadors to do (see job profile above), but also to state what we were *not* asking them to provide. It was important for the ambassadors to be clear about this but also for the library staff to have a clear understanding of their role and how this would differ from that of our permanent staff.

WHAT THEY DON'T DO:

- help with detailed subject or other enquiries that would normally be dealt with by library staff
- provide advice and guidance on the completion of student assignments or help with

their study-skills needs, other than directing users to the relevant section of the library or to printed and online resources via the portal

- diagnose and fix major IT or other systems problems
- access student records and other confidential systems
- use the library management system to issue or return books, other than helping students use the self-service machines
- help students with loans queries (such as blocks on their borrower records) or advise on penalty-points issues, other than through referrals to the relevant staff
- undertake a security or cleaning role for the library building.

RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

A rigorous selection and interview process was followed, not dissimilar to that used for permanent library posts. The interview questions focused on areas such as:

- previous experience of working in a supportive role in customer services or in an educational setting
- knowledge of the library, including organisation of the stock
- use of the catalogue and library portal pages
- customer services skills and teamworking
- evidence of reliability and responsibility
- knowledge of ICT applications.

Members of the library staff, along with a student union officer, carried out the selection interviews. We initially appointed ten ambassadors and equipped them with distinctive T-shirts and the nautically inspired slogan 'S.O.S. – Supporting Other Students'.

A team of library staff members, including information librarians and the loans supervisors, plus copy centre and ICT staff, contributed to the training programme.

Library ambassadors received a structured programme of training, including both formal training sessions and some shadowing of staff on public desks. They have been encouraged to consider the training they have received and the experience gained from working in the library as helping to develop their transferable skills and therefore helping to enhance their future employability.

CONTENT FOR THE TRAINING PROVIDED TO THE LIBRARY

STUDENT AMBASSADORS:

Training activity	Training by:
Tour of the library – all floors – and pointing out main services, facilities and equipment	Information team
Library regulations silent study and group study areas mobile phones food and drink policy	Information team
Library catalogue types of resources to find using the catalogue how to search and view results accessing ebooks, ejournals and websites checking acquisitions dates (mention 'new books' shelves) logging in to library catalogue renewing books reserving books how many books to borrow	Information team
Finding books on the shelves etc. Dewey checking the returns shelves checking loans-desk trolleys study tables missing books file	Information team /loans team
How to shelve	Loans team
Student logins and passwords for accessing student network	Information team
Athens – logins and passwords	Information team
Library portal logging in to access full information main links to resources, service information and help information	Information team
Self-service machines issuing, returning and renewing books	Loans team
Referring enquiries information librarians and learning resource assistants: who they are and the areas they look after where to find contact details: posters/portal	Information team
Copy centre/IT centre binding photocopying printers (e.g. refilling machines) wireless network scanners	Copy centre team
GPAS (printing and copy system) – adding credit to accounts	Copy centre team
ICT facilities software student image printing	IT centre staff
Library data collection head counts	Loans team
Help contacts MyCourse – ambassadors site IT help options FAQs issue desk/enquiry desk contact details staff contacts for subject or service-specific enquiries	Information team
Health and safety – lifting and handling (DVD), safety on leaving the building at night	Loans team
Customer services skills	All teams

CONTINUING TO SUPPORT THE AMBASSADORS

Following the initial training we realised that it was important to continue to support the team. So that they would have a ready source of information, we developed a library ambassadors site on MyCourse, the Solent virtual learning environment. This area provides a forum for us to communicate with them and vice versa. The site includes practical information such as current rotas, where to get help, access to previous training materials and links to further information. To date the site has been well used as a resource by the team.

The aim is also to provide regular update sessions with the ambassadors, an example being a recent training session provided about our new library catalogue, which has been introduced as part of the library's implementation of a new library management system.

LINKS TO THE 'REAL WORK' PROJECT

The 'ambassadors' project also has close links to a wider university initiative called 'real work', which is being run by the university careers and jobshop team. This aims to bring a structured approach to the employment of students by the university and will include developing more formal recruitment procedures and interviews, along with guidelines, and handbooks. The library will in future benefit from such generic training materials as those on customer-service skills or health and safety, which to date the library has had to develop on its own, specifically for the ambassadors.

AN AMBASSADOR'S VIEW

Finally, how do our library ambassadors view their role? Ayla Iskender, one of our ambassadors and a journalism student, comments:

What does it mean to be a student library ambassador? Well our primary role is to 'Support Other Students – S.O.S' (as is stated on the ambassador T-shirts). We help with anything from issuing a book on the self-service machines to helping to locate a book. By introducing the library ambassadors, the library can stay open later Monday to Thursday, which of course benefits the students who need to use the facilities. The library can be open on bank holidays now, which proved immensely popular during hand-in time last term, with hundreds of students turning up to a packed library – the four hours of being open was not long enough! Every shift we help at least one person and if

we were not there the students would not have the help or have access to the much needed facilities the library has to offer.'

CONCLUSION

The library ambassadors have proved to be an important development for the library, helping us to provide extended opening hours throughout the academic year. We are already looking to recruit our new team to continue to provide this essential peer support to users for the academic years ahead.

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