

ENGAGING THE DISENGAGED INDEFINITELY, AND WITH NO BUDGET: CREATING A SUSTAINABLE MODEL FOR STUDENT LIBRARY AMBASSADORS

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Abstract: University Libraries offer a wide range of services and facilities to help enhance the student learning experience and to aid the transition into learning at University. Often, too few Science and Engineering students fully engage with the services and facilities on offer and therefore do not benefit from the opportunities available to them. Drawing on research highlighting the value of peer support, and the fact that students are far more likely to use their peers as an information source than ‘experts’, Loughborough University Library obtained small project funding in 2010 to employ four Student Ambassadors in a pilot project to improve student engagement with the Library. The successful project demonstrated the potency of the idea in engaging with students, particularly non-users, a large proportion of which are based in the Science and Engineering Faculties.

In the absence of continued funding, the challenge, addressed here, is how to make such posts sustainable. Past experience at both Nottingham and Loughborough Universities has proven how difficult it is to recruit students on a voluntary basis to engage with University Libraries.

In this paper, an innovative and creative method of recruiting and supporting “Learning Resource Leaders” (LRLs) at Nottingham and Loughborough Universities is discussed. The strategies employed have resulted in the recruitment of four LRLs – two at each institution – supported by an industrial sponsor who provides a package of non-monetary incentives. The paper also describes the techniques used by the LRLs to disseminate information about the resources offered by the University Libraries and to engage with the student cohort.

Keywords; student engagement, sustainability, industrial sponsors, library, learning resources.

1. INTRODUCTION

Surveys within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) often show significant differences in library usage by academic discipline among the user community. For example, a large-scale library survey at the University of Washington showed that students in Science and Engineering were more likely to use the library remotely, rather than visit, when compared to students from other Faculties (Hiller, 2002). With remote access becoming increasingly more available and with more resources available on-line, the declining trend amongst Science and Engineering students to visit the (physical) library seems set to increase (Hiller, 2002; Housewright and Schonfeld, 2008; Nolan et al., 2008).

Whilst significant and valuable resources are becoming available on-line, physical libraries provide additional resources to users. As well as books and printed material that may not be available on-line, the benefits that physical libraries offer include: knowledgeable library staff, flexible study spaces, equipment to support group working, computers and specialist software, equipment hire (including laptop loans), photocopying, printing and scanning facilities. By not visiting the library on a regular basis, students risk missing out on these valuable resources. For instance, a case study conducted at University College Dublin suggests that engineering students could benefit from greater literacy training gained through engaging with library staff and physical libraries (Kerins, 2004).

1.1 Volunteering

A good deal of research has gone into identifying the characteristics of people who volunteer. Most studies agree that volunteers tend to be from higher socio-economic groups and have more years of education. Pearce (1993, p.66) states “...*there simply is overwhelming evidence that those of higher socioeconomic status are more likely to volunteer, with education apparently the leading cause.*” Key findings of a U.K. Volunteer Centre report (Knapp 1995) support this. Age factors of volunteers are also examined. Davis-Smith (1999) examines the apparent decline in youth volunteering in the United Kingdom from 1991 to 1997 and suggests that poor marketing and negative images of volunteering may be responsible. He notes that the 1997 National Survey of Volunteering found that volunteers age 18-24 were the most dissatisfied and were particularly critical of how volunteering was organised, the tasks assigned, and the lack of appreciation and recognition for their efforts. Marta, Guglielmetti & Pozzi (2006) investigated motivational patterns of Italian young adult volunteers with regard to social, career, ego-protective, and values functions. Marta & Pozzi (2008) then conducted a further longitudinal study on young adult volunteer satisfaction and linked it to volunteer role identity with organisations involved.

1.2 Volunteer motivation of students

A distinct group of studies into young adult volunteer motivation concerns university students. Burns (2006) conducted a Volunteer Functions Inventory study of university student volunteering with the hypothesis that altruism plays a role in all volunteering activity. He found evidence to support that, but noted that two motivations (career and esteem) were less strongly related to altruism. Frances' (2011) study of generation Y university students indicated that their volunteering is dependent on the observed volunteering of primary reference groups such as parents, siblings and close friends. He recommends marketing communications position volunteering as the ‘normal’ thing to do (e.g. lots of people like you volunteer). Darwen &

Rannard (2011) point to recent surveys showing a strong demand from students for their universities to provide employability programmes with a practical focus and that volunteering become recognised within these programmes. Darwen & Rannard focus on outward-facing, community engagement volunteering programmes which tend toward American models of integrating volunteering into higher education.

1.3 Integrating Volunteering into HE

Integrating volunteering into higher education involves increased extrinsic motivational pressure, i.e. the reward of credits or money to provide satisfaction that the task itself may not provide. The choice to volunteer service can count toward earning a degree or decreasing the cost of it. Mohan (1994) reviews the growth of volunteerism among college students in the U.S. along with the pressures to expand university volunteer programmes. The Holdsworth & Quinn (2010) review on student volunteering in English higher education notes that the government's policy review paper on public services (Prime Minister's Strategy Unit 2007) suggested that universities could formally credit students for voluntary activities. Most of these programmes are outward-facing, serving local communities rather than campus causes. Schobernd, Tucker & Wetzel (2009), however, recount a case at the Illinois State University where students initiated a drive to make volunteering in the library part of an existing service learning programme that had only included community service opportunities. Student motivation was to reduce the cutback in opening hours that had been announced in response to cutbacks in state funding. The programme was approved and accounted a success.

2. FROM LIBRARY AMBASSADOR TO LEARNING RESOURCE LEADER

Using Loughborough University Teaching Innovation Award funding, four student Library Ambassadors had been recruited to provide a conduit between the Library and students at Loughborough University in 2009/10 in order to raise student awareness of, and improve engagement with, library services. The Ambassadors were given free rein to focus on Library-related issues of interest to them, to get feedback from fellow-students in creative ways and to develop campaigns to reach students on those issues. The first semester saw them working together as a group to develop three student videos promoting library support during exam time. Later evaluation showed that 68% of students had seen the videos, and a good number had acted on their advice. The second semester saw them working with their respective Faculties on individual projects. These projects had mixed success depending on the motivation of the Ambassador concerned. Positive outcomes included the inclusion of student-to-student library information in pre-fresher packs, and a useful student perspective on the development of the Library web pages. Focus groups with the Ambassadors showed that they found the experience a positive and developmental one. Focus groups with Library Project staff highlighted concerns about the time- and resource-intensive nature of the Ambassador model.

One important point that emerged during the focus groups concerned the title given to the participants. It was felt that words such as "library", "student" and "representative" were not sufficiently dynamic to attract candidates to the role. Many alternative words were proposed, including: "change-agent", "champion", "leader", "manager" and so on, which led to the role being rebranded as: "learning resource leader" or "LRL" for short.

HE STEM funding was obtained to develop the initiative further at Loughborough and to extend to the University of Nottingham, but to focus exclusively on STEM students. The two Universities in the study have an extensive range of student volunteer projects, largely run through the respective Students' Unions, but these are mainly focussed on providing support for disadvantaged communities either in the local area (e.g. championing reading at local primary schools) or overseas (e.g. Engineers Without Borders). It was felt that simply asking students to volunteer to be LRLs for no reward would not be practical; hence a (non-financial) incentive was needed to attract students to volunteer for the role.

As well as exploring links with extra-curricular employability programmes at each institution, for instance, the Nottingham Advantage Award and the Loughborough Employability Scheme, two industrial companies were approached and tentatively asked if they would be willing to sponsor the LRL role by providing a package of incentives to encourage and support the work. It was felt that a "big name" sponsor may encourage students to apply for the role as it would add to their curriculum vitae.

After some discussion, Jaguar Land Rover (JLR) were selected as sponsor, and offered a tiered level of rewards for the LRLs, depending on the progress they had made throughout the year and their time commitment to the role. These were as follows:

- Bronze - JLR branded items including a notebook, pen and a plant tour
- Silver - JLR branded items likely to include a jacket / hoodie and bag
- Gold - Land Rover experience event – 100 minutes driving off-road

In addition to these tangible rewards, JLR offered additional training throughout the year to enable the LRLs to complete their duties, e.g. courses on time planning, developing organisational skills, and so on.

The benefits to the sponsor were largely publicity, which would be exploited through a number of avenues. LRLs were provided with polo shirts containing the sponsor's logo and photo opportunities would be used when the LRLs had met the bronze, silver and gold targets.

The issue of how much publicity the sponsor could expect to gain from their investment was discussed at length during the project; the two Universities had very different policies on corporate sponsorship, which had to be respected.

3. RECRUITMENT – TWO DIFFERENT APPROACHES

Recruiting LRLs was carried out in two separate approaches. At Loughborough University, STEM students in their penultimate year of study were invited to apply to become LRLs via email. 23 positive replies were received. These students were sent further information about the role and the assessment process. Nine candidates accepted an invitation to prepare a 2½ minute oral presentation on a topic including: "What roles do you believe the JLR Learning Resource

Leader should undertake?" The presentations were to be given without visual aids in front of the other candidates. In the event, five students attended the assessment session.

After the presentations, a round-table discussion was conducted on issues of interest to the library including brainstorming how to promote students uptake of under-utilised resources.

Following the final session, two LRLs were appointed, based on their presentation skills and their performance in the group discussion session. Key attributes were the ability to communicate effectively, friendliness and confident personalities. Of secondary importance was knowledge of library resources and systems.

At the University of Nottingham, the recruitment process began with an email to all undergraduates in Science and Engineering, which was sent out via School Managers, explaining the role briefly and asking students to respond if they were interested.

At first, 14 students replied expressing interest, but none were from Engineering. The lack of response from Engineering Undergraduates prompted a follow-up email to the Engineering School Manager asking whether the initial email had been sent. Within a day, a further 8 students expressed an interest, all from Engineering. The authors suspect that the first email was never sent, which highlighted one of the difficulties the library faces in contacting undergraduate students.

The students who replied to the initial email came from a wide variety of degree courses, covering a wide spectrum of academic attainment and familiarity with library services. A follow up email was sent with more information about the LRL role and the incentives provided by the industrial sponsor. They were invited to attend a short interview where they would be asked to provide a 60 second "elevator pitch" on one thing that they would change about the library.

Only four students replied to the invitation, confirming that they would attend. However, one student withdrew the day before the interview due to ill-health, and one didn't attend. In the final instance, only two students turned up at the interview day.

After their elevator pitches, the two students were asked follow up questions including, "How would they communicate with their peers?" and "Have they been in a situation where they have had to change someone's mind about something?" The two students were appointed to the LRL role; one was from Engineering and one was from Science.

4 FEEDBACK FROM LRLS: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the LRLs. Responses to the various questions asked were categorised as follows:

What attracted you to the role? LRLs mentioned the challenge of taking on a new role with its associated responsibilities, although most respondents had carried out other similar roles including acting as course representative and promoting study abroad opportunities to

undergraduates. As well as providing a valuable service to students, becoming a LRL was seen as improving employability prospects in terms of the skills developed in carrying out the role, as well as the association with Jaguar Land Rover, which creates a distinct advantage: “There are millions of graduates out there – this makes me stand out”.

What did you think about the selection process? Generally, the opportunity to give a short presentation or an elevator pitch was regarded as an appropriate (and even enjoyable) selection process, although one respondent mentioned that the thought of giving an elevator pitch put off a friend who had also applied. Learning more about the role via a discussion group encouraged one respondent to apply for the role: “The role during its initial state didn't attract me, but on learning more through the selection process, the challenge of a new role attracted me the most.” It was felt that the process tended to favour more mature students who had greater confidence and communication skills.

Has your impression of the library changed during your time as a LRL? Several respondents mentioned that they had discovered that the library had more services and facilities to offer as a result of their contact with library staff. Finding out this information encouraged the LRLs in their promotion of library services to undergraduates: “Hopefully we will make other students realise that the Library is not just full of books, but a social, study, meeting space and much more.” One LRL mentioned that it had been very interesting to see the library from the viewpoint of library staff, and to see how much effort staff put in to trying to improve the facilities.

What are your thoughts on the sponsorship package? Generally the reward package was seen as appropriate, but perhaps the benefits to the Universities were greater than the benefits to the LRLs, particularly to those from outside of engineering. There were mixed feelings about the T-shirt; the design was appreciated, but one respondent mentioned that the T-shirt provided was the wrong size. Some items in the reward package were valued above other items; the track day was eagerly anticipated, whereas one respondent had already visited the factory. The enhanced employability prospects through the link with Jaguar Land Rover were again mentioned.

Do you have any advice for anyone considering taking on the job next year? Responses included: “Go for it!”, “Have fun, it's not too stressful and it's really worth it”.

5. LRL ACTIVITIES

Activities at each site got off to a relatively slow start as the LRLs familiarised themselves with the services and facilities that the libraries had on offer and also defined their own roles. At Nottingham, a web-based survey was constructed for undergraduates to comment on existing library services and to receive suggestions for improvement. To encourage uptake, there was a random prize draw for those who completed the survey. The survey was intended to inform, to raise awareness and to educate as well as to gauge students' opinions. For instance, “Did you know that there is a collection of psychometric tests in the library for graduate/internship recruitment?” Also, “Do you use the library's laptop loan facility?”

Links were made with the Students' Union, who were running their own library satisfaction survey. The LRLs are in a unique position to bridge the gap between library staff and the student body.

The LRLs at Loughborough brainstormed improvements they would like to make to the Library services and facilities and sought to bring these about. For instance, negotiating healthier food options in the Library Café; promoting specialised learning resources for scientists and engineers including newly-acquired CAD software as well as open courseware materials online. LRLs mentioned at interview that carrying out their duties during the exam period was very difficult, since they were too busy revising to promote library services to students.

5.1 Plans for Spring Semester

At Nottingham, the LRLs plan to stage a series of Department-specific roadshows to promote library services to undergraduates and to advertise their own roles. The roadshows are intended to be informative as well as fun, with a giant wooden block tower building game providing an eye-catching and occasionally audible attraction.

At Loughborough, activities for the silver award will focus on promoting the LRL role and raising its profile; liaison and collaboration with other students e.g. course reps as well as with the LRLs at Nottingham. The LRLs have been asked to think about the legacy they wish to leave and to investigate other changes to implement

6. CONCLUSIONS / DISCUSSION

This project is on-going; however there are already some important lessons to learn from the experience. LRLs at each site took quite some time to define their roles and to formulate campaign plans. It is suggested that if the LRL programme is to continue, then an overlap between outgoing and incoming LRLs would be useful, with a gradual handover of responsibilities rather than a cold start each year. The three-tiered reward approach has proved problematic, since students operate not in three terms but in two semesters. The first four weeks of the Spring term were effectively 'lost' due to the exam period. Negotiations with the sponsor have been channelled through an 'academic champion' in this case, the project officer; the university libraries have been a step removed from building the relationship. Persistence is key, since making apparently simple arrangements, e.g. for the printing of T-shirts, can become protracted. Convening an early meeting between the sponsor and the students is preferable so that a good rapport can be established.

Whilst Loughborough focussed on "driving change", Nottingham's approach was more on dissemination of existing resources. Meaningful change in library services is not easy to achieve in a short period of time and is therefore difficult to promise, although visible change can be a powerful demonstration of effectiveness. Managing the LRLs can become staff intensive, so the approach is not without costs in terms of staff time. This brings in to question the sustainability of the model.

In the coming year, at Loughborough, the Library's Marketing & Publications team will take on future work with students as part of a holistic approach to student engagement. This may or may

not involve a commercial sponsor. At Nottingham, the project is under review, and LRLs may be asked to give an elevator pitch to library senior management highlighting the benefits of the approach. There are no plans to request funds to pay students an hourly rate, so continuing to work with an industrial sponsor is vital.

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