
Getting to the root of student 'dis-satisfaction' at the University of East London

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PART 1



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INTRODUCTION

At the University of East London (UEL), student feedback is taken very seriously. In the library, all comments made by our users – positive and negative – are recorded and, wherever possible, acted upon, with outcomes published in a quarterly 'You said... We did...' publication. Many of these comments are collated by the team of subject librarians who regularly attend their school's various 'programme committees', where student representatives feed back on all aspects of their university experience, including the library. Similarly, members of the library's management team participate in the university-wide Joint Staff-Student Consultative Committee. This engagement with our students' feedback contributed towards the university's retaining its Customer Service Excellence accreditation in 2012.

In an effort to increase further the attention we pay to student satisfaction, we have also begun to look ever more closely at the results of the university-wide student surveys. At UEL, all students are surveyed annually by the university, with a Student Satisfaction Survey (SSS) conducted with all students not eligible to complete the National Student Survey (the NSS, which is targeted only at final year undergraduates). Furthermore, all international students at UEL are now surveyed

as part of the International Student Barometer (ISB).

Every year, when the results of these surveys are published, subject librarians pore over them and try to uncover why some programmes give lower satisfaction scores for the library than others, even when taught within the same school, on the same campus and provided with the same services. This article is an account of how two subject librarians responded to relatively low satisfaction scores for a few programmes within their schools, and the findings they made in the process. It also outlines the response and findings of the library's Academic Services & Skills Manager following publication of the most recent ISB results.

SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY

In the 2011 SSS, two programmes in the School of Psychology – PGDip Career Guidance and BSc Counselling & Mentoring – gave the library satisfaction scores of just 60%, which was well below the average for the school as a whole. The first step the subject librarian took in investigating this was to arrange one-to-one meetings with the two programme leaders. The outcome of these two meetings were much the same, with both programme leaders independently suggesting the possibility of short-term considerations – such as the availability of a particular textbook – clouding students' overall opinion of the library at the time of the survey. Although this was clearly a possibility, it was decided that further investigation was required, not least because the PGDip programme had also given a relatively low satisfaction score the previous year. It was therefore decided that the best course of action was to conduct in-depth surveys with students on both programmes to uncover their habits and opinions in relation to the library.

The library surveys covered a broad range of questions, under the following headings:

- **Library habits** e.g. 'What time of the day do you most frequently visit the libraries?'
- **Library resources** e.g. 'Can you normally find most of the books you need in the library?' and 'Have you ever used any of the library's e-books?'
- **Library training** e.g. 'Have you had a library training session?' and 'Did you find library training to be adequate?'
- **Library help** e.g. 'When you cannot find what you want, where do you ask for help?'

Students were also strongly encouraged to add general comments about the library.

After compiling the results, it became apparent that the two student groups were very different from one another in their make-up, and had very different reasons for giving the relatively low satisfaction scores. For example, a considerable percentage of students on the PGDip programme were 'returners to education', often taking the part-time route, and were largely infrequent visitors to the library. This contrasts quite strongly with the majority of students in the school, including those on the BSc Counselling programme who were generally younger, full-time students, who frequently visited the library.

Intriguingly, the PGDip students indicated that they were generally happy with the level of library training they had received and yet appeared to be rather uninformed about the range of services offered to them by the library. They were also largely happy with resource provision. In contrast, the BSc students appeared to be well informed about the services available to them, yet were less happy with the training provided, asking for longer sessions. Their main concern appeared to be difficulty in finding items from their reading lists. As a brand new programme, with reading lists that were still evolving, this was no great surprise, and clearly suggested a reason for the satisfaction score. With the PGDip programme, it appeared that the most likely reason for their satisfaction score was a lack of confidence in using some of the library's systems and services, leading to a feeling of disengagement, despite being happy with the training given.

The final step in the process was to draw up action plans for the library in relation to each programme and to present them to the programme leaders, who in turn distributed them to their students. Common themes in these plans included a need to promote the use of many library services better, notably sources of help and our ever-growing e-book collection. An unexpected outcome of the whole process was the very positive response that came back from students and staff on the two programmes about the library's proactiveness over the results.

PART 2



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SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

In the 2010 NSS the BA Social Work programme gave the library a very high satisfaction score of 88. By the time of the 2011 survey this had dropped to 74. The 2011 survey was conducted at a time of great change, with the programme due to move to a different school, based at a different campus, from September 2011. Over the course of summer 2011, the social work book stock was moved from the modern, purpose-built Docklands library to the older and smaller library at Stratford. Following this move, and the earlier drop in satisfaction score in the NSS, it was decided to call a meeting with the student year representatives and members of library staff. We also thought that it would be useful to canvas the opinions of all the social work students by asking them to complete a survey similar to the one used in the School of Psychology, with the printed questionnaires distributed by the social work staff in their lectures.

A total of 107 questionnaires were returned to the subject librarian, and it was immediately noticeable that the move from Docklands to Stratford was reflected in the findings. It was apparent that the first year students were much more positive about the library environment at Stratford than were the second and third years, who had been used to the Docklands library.

Some of the second- and third-year students felt that not all the books they used in previous years had been moved to Stratford. As there is a cross-over between books used by social work students and those used by psychosocial studies and social policy students, some of these titles will have been bought by the latter two departments and have remained at the Docklands library. Students also complained that there were insufficient copies of some of the social work titles.

- Of the 107 students who answered the question 'Have you had a library training session?' 105 said they had, 1 said that s/he hadn't and 1 was unsure.

- Of these, 105 students 99 found it adequate. There was a variety of responses from the students, whether they had found it adequate or not, as to what should be included in the session.
- Several of the students would have welcomed a tour of the Stratford library and guidance on how to use the printers and photocopiers.
- It was also felt that it would be useful for training to be given to students in all years.
- As regards where they asked for help, 94 asked at the library enquiry desk and 15 asked their subject librarian.

Once the findings of the survey had been analysed an action plan was drawn up to address the issues raised. To address the perceived problem of books still being at Docklands and there being insufficient copies, a list was produced of all reservations placed for books within the relevant areas for social work students, including those that had been requested as inter-site loans. This list was circulated to the lecturers with a view to ordering extra copies.

In the academic year 2012–13 we are intending to run training sessions across all years of the programme. Moreover, we have had discussions about the first-year assignment and are proposing to include questions that require the students to come into the Stratford library to find the location of printers, photocopiers and other facilities.

The subject librarian has produced a document giving his contact details and availability at both sites and has sent it to the year tutors for distribution.

It is also hoped that the initiation of hourly patrols of the Stratford library by staff will help ensure the library environment is conducive to quiet study.

We put all these actions in a 'You said...We did' handout, which was circulated to the students.

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INTERNATIONAL STUDENT BAROMETER

Like most universities, UEL aims to attract international students by offering them the best possible experience before and after they arrive, hoping that this will also influence their friends and family when they are considering studying in the UK. To capture their voice, UEL started participating in the International Student Barometer (ISB) in 2010; this tracks decision-making, expectations, perceptions and experiences of international students. Following the appointment of a new Director for the International Office and a new UEL International Students Experience Board, the detailed findings of this survey began to be shared with all schools and services from 2011. The 2011 ISB saw 395 out of the 1715 international students at UEL respond to the survey, a response rate of 23%.

The students were required to comment on the physical library and the online library; ninety percent said they were satisfied with both. This result placed UEL Library first among the million+ group of universities in the UK. Although the library did very well in the survey, there was some dissatisfaction expressed about noise levels and a perceived lack of quiet and silent study spaces, with some of this attributable to a lack of awareness of where these spaces were. Most of our international students come from countries where libraries are for quiet study and not a place where you socialise with your friends. Some of the students said they struggled to navigate our online library, find electronic articles, use e-books and make sense of Athens authentication. Having been presented with their results, each school and service was required to address the issues raised in the form of an action plan. A timeline to report on progress was set by the International Students Experience Board. With qualitative data provided in the form of comments made by students in the ISB, our efforts could focus on the specific issues raised.

Key actions for the library included:

- bidding for funds to reconfigure space at our Docklands library, where the majority of international students are based, to tackle issues relating to the physical environment
- creating a new silent study room to take up to twenty students and zoned areas for both silent and quiet study
- better promotion of the availability of quiet, group and silent study spaces in our welcome induction
- roving patrols by library staff to assist students, monitor noise levels and report equipment breakdown
- workshops targeted at international students on searching for articles and referencing, run over a two-week period. These will be ongoing, with the initial workshops attracting just 17 students.
- analysis of one-to-one appointments offered by subject librarians, which showed that a good proportion of our international students take up this opportunity. We aim to promote this service in a targeted way.
- revamping our web page for international students and sign posting information relevant to them
- A new library is planned to open in 2013, which will improve the experience for our Stratford-based students.

Progress on our action plan has been reported to the International Student Experience Board.

The obvious question to ask is whether any of this has had any impact. The latest ISB results, which came out in March 2012, saw a very slight drop in our score, but still saw UEL libraries well placed compared with other universities. Looking at the comments made by students, some familiar issues came up again, although there were fewer complaints about accessing the online library. There were also more positive comments about the library in general and more appreciation of the services offered and willingness of staff to help. We will continue to listen closely to our students and work with them collaboratively in a bid to carry on improving the student experience for all.