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Leo Appleton
Goldsmiths, University of London (United Kingdom)

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LIBERATE MY DEGREE: HOW LIBRARIES CAN HELP STUDENTS HAVE INFLUENCE OVER THEIR SERVICES

Leo Appleton

Goldsmiths, University of London, United Kingdom

l.appleton@gold.ac.uk

Abstract

Student engagement and student voice have become increasingly important in all aspects of university provision, including general and specific quality assurance and performance measurement of services, curriculum design, operational and strategic planning, and the design and continual improvement of facilities and services.

Student engagement in university library and information services is no exception and there are increasingly many examples of student engagement initiatives being deployed to inform the planning and development of library services. Academic libraries in the UK have become very proactive in enabling partnerships with students in order that improvements to service design can be identified and discussed and that developments can take place in a collaborative manner. This includes: use of User Experience methods (UX); focus group discussions; interviews with students; student representation on project teams and boards. Student engagement relies on a continual discussion taking place so that students can have a meaningful voice into the development and improvement of all aspects of library service and provision.

This paper will briefly review different student engagement methods, which will be followed with a more detailed case study from Goldsmiths, University of London. The case study highlights the benefits that have been realised through an embedded approach to student engagement, as well as lessons learned along the way, with particular focus on a Student Library Representatives project which went far beyond its initial objectives. The intended outcome from the initiative was to be able to engage students in the purchasing and acquisition of print library books, but as the project evolved, new outcomes emerged including those around students gaining employability skills and becoming more involved in diversifying the library collections. This in turn has had a significant influence on a college wide student voice initiative entitled 'Liberate My Degree'

Keywords: Universities; Libraries; Students; Student Engagement; Student Representatives; Collections

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Introduction

In the modern 'student focused' higher education environment student engagement and student voice have become increasingly important in all aspects of university provision. This can include general and specific quality assurance and performance measurement of services, curriculum design and planning, operational and strategic planning, and the design and continual improvement and development of facilities and services. This is all applicable to university library services and this paper will explore some of the ways in which students at UK universities have been engaged in influencing how their library services develop.

The 2011 white paper *Higher Education: Student at the Heart of the System* set out a clear strategy for making the higher education system in the UK more accountable to students and to put them in a stronger position to influence the quality of their education, both on a local university wide level, but also at a national, sectorial level [Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011]. This was partly a response to the increasing commodification of higher education and the notion of the 'student as customer' which has been an emerging and increasing phenomenon over the last twenty years. It is still as prevalent as ever, and this is validated through the 2016 white paper *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* which further stresses the importance of quality in higher education and student involvement in defining, shaping and influencing the quality of their education [Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016]

Student engagement in Higher Education

The concept and practice of student engagement has been around for some time, and in recent years has become an all-encompassing term for involving students in collective problem solving in higher education institutions [Owen, 2013]. Engagement occurs when there is a strong partnership between the student and the university, and such partnership requires a relationship with the students which enables dialogues or activities which are mutually beneficial, and an environment in which both partners are proactive in the relationship.

The practice of engaging students has traditionally been linked to the evaluation of the academic, teaching and learning experience of students and many higher education institutions have deployed student engagement techniques as part of their quality assurance of the pedagogic activities that students are involved in. To this end, student engagement has predominantly been used to inform and enhance learning and teaching from a curriculum perspective, for example, enquiring how students have found a particular element of teaching or their experiences of having participated in a specific programme or module [Trowler, 2010]. Such engagement is then used to generate data to inform future improvements to that piece of teaching or learning. Effective engagement and partnership, however, should not really be this 'one off' exchange but should be an ongoing process which characterises the whole student experience [Carey 2013a]. This should be of a qualitative nature rather than relying on performance and evaluation data [e.g. from post module surveys, etc.] which are often a proxy for an authentic student voice [Coates, 2005]

More recently, the 'consumer model' of higher education in the UK has brought with it much debate, suggesting that consumer culture is detrimental to the pedagogical aspects of the university experience in that the educational experience becomes viewed as a commodity and the actual value of that experience is lost [Molesworth et al. 2009]. However, it can also be argued that the concept of 'the student voice' has come directly from this consumerist model, where students need a voice about all aspects of their university experience in order to measure the 'value for money' they are getting from their university education. Subsequently, higher education has sought many ways in which to engage the student as 'customers' and the notion of the student as such has been widely embraced by universities [Little et al. 2009]. UK universities are now increasingly concerned about meeting students' needs and demands and ensuring that students have a "voice" where decisions about their student experiences are made [Maringe, 2010]. Carey [2013b] suggests that student engagement has become

increasingly part of higher education rhetoric and is now seen as a means for universities to understand and enhance the student experience.

Student engagement in libraries

This drive to provide excellent student experiences has had a very positive and long lasting effect on how academic libraries engage with users, in order to seek feedback and to continually improve and develop services in a responsive manner. This has been applied to all aspects of university library provision over recent years, most often, in order to evaluate and generate discussion about students' experience of being in the library and their interaction with physical spaces, services and support. There are many examples of UK higher education libraries adopting a range of student engagement techniques and strategies to fully inform service developments and improvements and subsequently enhance the user experience. Such practice can be a simple single intervention, such as surveying students about a specific space or service. This particular approach proved effective for the University of Chichester, when they introduced their 'SIZ 100 day Survey' in order to find out how students were making use of their new Support and Information Zone (SIZ) [Galloway, 2015]. Alternatively, many libraries choose to use a broad mixed method approach in order to generate deep user behaviour data about a range of services and facilities on offer. For example Hicks [2015] writes about an in depth market research project at Manchester University Library that reached across a number of student segments, services and key buildings in order to understand synergies, perceptions and myths in informing future developments. Their particular mixed approach included questionnaires, focus group discussions and video observation. Similarly, Pittaway [2016] reports how initial surveys and focus groups resulted in further student engagement projects at the University of Worcester including the development of a library mascot, development of a work placement project module for students and a student library representative scheme. A further example comes from Everitt [2015] who talks about how, at the School of Oriental and African Studies library, a range of tools are used to engage students in order to understand their needs and requirements. This includes techniques such as process mapping, web surveys, exit surveys and observational techniques, as well as suggestion and course feedback forms.

Capturing the student voice through many of the student engagement methods illustrated above, allows for the two way discussion with students to take place. Whether intentionally operating within a consumerist model, or driven by external kite-marks such as Customer Service Excellence, more and more academic libraries are engaging their students in dialogue in order to affirm their partnerships, measure their performance and ultimately improve services. This has led to lots of creativity and innovation when it comes to developing and implementing qualitative methods of engaging with students. A selection of such discursive student engagement methods include: the 'Are students at the heart of our processes' initiative at the University of Leicester library, in which students and library staff work in partnership reflecting on library processes [Aitkens et al, 2015]; library critical friends and focussed discussion forums at Liverpool John Moores University [Appleton and Abernethy, 2013]; customer journey mapping in order to see how students interact with services and facilities at Birmingham City University [Andrews and Eade, 2013]; and the growing enthusiasm to use User Experience (UX) strategies and techniques to inform library space and design developments.

The resultant outputs and outcomes from this plethora of student engagement activities is extensive and varied. There are many lessons learned regarding the methodologies and also how students perceive services and student anxieties and apprehensions about using library services. However, there is also much evidence in the above examples of where service improvements have been made as a direct result of these engagement strategies, including: the 'Exam extra' campaign and new sign posting on bay ends at Manchester; the introduction of loanable laptops and an online self-booking system at Chichester; Top tips projects, the introduction of a library mascot and the Great Hive Book Rescue Project at Worcester.

Student engagement in accessing resources and developing collections

It is very positive and encouraging to see that so many academic libraries are now habitually embedding student engagement into their service development and improvement activity. In many cases, engaging with students is now done seamlessly as libraries get more and more

used to having ongoing dialogues with students as to how learning spaces should be developed and what new services they would like to see in the library. This practice becomes cyclical in many instances with new developments and initiatives being evaluated, again in partnership with students, and with the results and outcomes formally fed back to students, before the service improvement cycle recommences. In this way students have a real voice in how their library services are developed, putting them at the heart of service improvement and giving them far more ownership of their own student experience.

With this in mind, whilst spaces, services and support have become the natural areas for student engagement to take place in, there is also now a growing number of more creative and innovative examples of student engagement in areas of library provision which had not previously been regarded as 'engagement' areas. Using UX techniques to test the usability of discovery systems is now becoming more prevalent in UK academic libraries alongside initiatives to give students spending power and more influence on the scholarly resources which the library procures and subscribes to.

A good example of this comes from the University of Liverpool, where the library service embarked upon an in depth usability study to better understand how library users were engaging with their resource discovery platform. The project used a mixed methods approach incorporating a survey, usability test sessions and focus group discussions in order to identify usability issues and student searching behaviours [Woods, Gillespie & McManamon, 2016] A completely different initiative at Nottingham Trent University involved observing user behaviour with digital library platforms through engaging with user analytics, rather than directly with the users themselves. This particular project was carried out in partnership with one of NTU's publisher vendors and involved an in depth analysis of analytics, demonstrating user engagement and usage, and informed subsequent marketing and promotion activities through better understanding how students interact with library discovery solutions [Adey & Eastman-Mullins]

Taking usability testing and student engagement one stage further, the Library Champions scheme at the University of Exeter has been put to effective use in informing and changing the library purchasing activities. Using the already existing Library Champions, the library conducted focus groups over a longitudinal period, during which access to e-books were discussed in depth. The Library Champions were encouraged to test different platforms on different mobile devices and to question why different platforms operated in different ways [Gale, 2016]. This blend of face to face discussion and practical usability testing has proved to be a very beneficial student engagement intervention, again allowing for students to have influence over not only the services they receive from the library, but the learning resources and how they are accessed as well.

Student Library Representatives – case study at Goldsmiths College, University of London

The final part of this paper will focus on a case study from Goldsmiths College, University of London, where student engagement with Library Services has recently taken a slightly different path, the results of which are both interesting and liberating (for all parties involved). Inspired by King's College London's 'library champions' project, which gave student representatives an opportunity to contribute to library acquisitions [Garner, 2015], staff at Goldsmiths developed their own Student Library Representatives scheme in 2016 [Harris, 2018]. The scheme was initially intended to engage students in the procurement of print resources, but over the short amount of time that it has been in existence it has become the vehicle for much wider and deeper student engagement, which ultimately has had a more significant impact on the student experience than was originally intended.

The initial pilot which ran during 2016 was developed in order to give student volunteers a small £300 budget to suggest library book purchases, based on consultation with their student peers. A small amount of funding was made available to provide bursaries in order to recruit both undergraduate and postgraduate students, from all eighteen academic departments, in order to fill the new Student Library Representative (SLR) roles. The students were trained to use the Dawsonenter book supplier database to check book prices and submit their suggestions to the library acquisitions team. Acquisitions staff would then complete the ordering process via the

library management system. For practical reasons the SLRs were advised to focus on in-print English-language books but a small number of DVDs, music scores and second-hand items were also ordered. Most suggestions were approved, but some – for example very expensive items or extra copies of low-circulation items – were rejected. During the pilot phase, 134 items were ordered, with an average spend of £231.57 per department. Additional copies of existing stock made up 15% of the orders, while 85% were new titles. Circulation analysis in May 2017 showed items ordered during the pilot were encouragingly well used during their first year in stock; the average number of loans per item was 2.3, some being borrowed as many as nine times.

Evaluation and participant feedback from the pilot project identified several areas for improvement and development and these were taken forwards as the scheme moved from being a pilot to being 'business as usual' during the 2017-18 academic year. The students' feedback suggested that engagement in the Student Library Representative activity actually introduced the volunteers to new employability skills, including: interpersonal and communications skills; budgeting skills; liaison and negotiation skills; technical skills; and, elements of teamwork development. Subsequently the SLR scheme became a recognised activity for Goldsmiths Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR). The HEAR is an enhanced degree transcript, which displays extra-curricular achievements alongside academic work. As HEAR activities require approximately twenty hours' work in order to be accredited, the SLR scheme was expanded to include other engagement activities such as participation in focus groups, representation on committees and project boards and job shadowing library staff in addition to the primary function of suggesting book purchases.

Initial activity involved sitting on focus groups which had been organised to discuss the library's online reading lists, LibGuides and information literacy provision. The SLRs also contributed to usability testing in advance of the library adopting a new discovery service. As well as being excellent opportunities for engagement, these sessions provided useful feedback, insight and 'student voice' into library projects and developments, and several SLRs commented that they had learnt a lot about library services of which they had previously been unaware. The job-shadowing sessions, which some of the SLRs participated in, lasted for two hours and involved talking to library staff, including subject librarians and staff from acquisitions, serials, reading lists and scanning, inter-library loans, cataloguing, special collections and archives, reader services and systems. The SLRs gave overwhelmingly positive feedback about the sessions, and several of them commented on how impressed they were by the amount of behind-the-scenes work that is involved in running the library. Overall the SLR scheme had proved to be a great experience for all involved. Not only had students received a high quality employability experience, but the initiative had also moved Goldsmiths Library into a new 'patron driven' model with regard to acquisition of print materials and the amount of money made available for SLRs to spend was increased again during the 2017-18 academic year.

Liberate My Degree

One particularly interesting outcome of the SLR scheme, which was noticed during this first 'business as usual' year was that many SLRs were ordering books written by Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) authors and especially books with non-eurocentric perspectives. Without having initially intending it, the scheme was now contributing to the library's efforts in diversifying the library's collections. During 2016-17 the Goldsmiths Student Union ran a high profile campaign entitled 'Liberate My Degree'. The campaign and related activity emerged from reflections on some of the current issues in UK higher education around the lack of diversity in university curricula and how diversity, equality and discrimination were not reflected in the majority of programmes [National Union of Students, 2015]. The library had been working in partnership with the Student Union on aspects of this campaign and had introduced 'Liberate My Degree' bookmark scheme, whereby students were already being encouraged to pick up a bookmark [provided in the library] and write on it to recommend a text by a BME writer in order to complement reading lists, or just to recommend different titles to fellow students. The library acquisitions team were also following up on this and were ordering any titles suggested in this way for inclusion in the general library collection. However, when the library acquisitions team realised that the SLRs were independently selecting titles from a more diverse range of writers the synergy between the two initiatives became obvious. Subsequently the SLRs have been

proactively encouraged, both by library staff and by the Student Union, to focus on diversity when selecting and ordering books for the library and in this way are making an even greater contribution to the 'liberate my degree' campaign. The SLRs have reported that this new approach also gives them more traction when they are discussing possible purchases with their student colleagues and they report that they themselves feel 'liberated' in being able to influence and contribute to such purchases.

Conclusion

This paper has illustrated what it means for higher education libraries in the UK to be able to effectively engage with their students in order to make a difference and add value to the student experience. Academic libraries are often at the heart of the student experience within their respective institutions and being able to influence and have impact on how students feel about their academic and wider university experiences is very powerful. Effective student engagement allows libraries to do this. Where specific areas need to be addressed, such as learning space projects, access to relevant and appropriate print resources, and in the case of Goldsmiths, diversifying the library collection, then focused, well planned student engagement initiatives can make all the difference.

The Student Library Representatives scheme at Goldsmiths has been very successful and has enabled a real partnership between students representing their academic departments, and their use of and engagement with the library. Whilst not being one of the initial intended outcomes of the scheme, the impact that the SLR scheme has had on the college wide 'Liberate my Degree' campaign and the library's contribution to this through a deliberate strategy to diversify the library collection and the modular reading lists has been significant.

The library at Goldsmiths is planning for the next academic cycle (2018-19) and the SLR scheme will be even bigger and better than before. It is anticipated that even more students will be recruited to the scheme and that the opportunity to be involved in library work and especially in the diversification of the collection and the curriculum will be a real incentive to get even more students engaged and having a positive influence and impact on their library provision.

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