Ethnicity and study skills: active intervention in the library setting

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Introduction

Evidence from a report by the Department for Education and Science (DfES) (2007) suggests that British black and minority ethnic (BME) students are not achieving the same level of progression and attainment as other groups across the whole higher education sector. (1) Academic and support staff working in higher education in the UK must look for innovative and sustainable ways of supporting diverse student groups if they aim to provide equitable access to education for all regardless of ethnic, social or economic background.

Coventry University prides itself on successfully attracting students from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds - in 2008/09 over 30% of students identified themselves as coming from a BME background. (2) Following the publication of the DfES report, a cross-university team explored the issues around improving the degree attainment of BME students.(3) This team concluded that it is a complex and multi-causal phenomenon and recommended actions leading to the ownership at all levels with a commitment to enable all students to achieve to their full potential. The library is a key support service that attracts students from a wide range of backgrounds and is therefore in a strong position to offer additional point of need intervention and support to students. In 2009 funding was made available through the Coventry and Warwickshire Lifelong Learning Network for a series of mini projects aimed at helping recruitment, retention and attainment of BME students at Coventry. The library team successfully bid for funding for a project entitled "Ethnicity and Study Skills: active intervention in the library setting". This aimed to develop a pilot model of roving peer study support to improve the undergraduate student experience and thus enhance academic achievement, retention and skills acquisition.

The Project

The project was designed to:

- review, assess and analyse current areas of study skills support need amongst BME library users,
- utilise student Roving Study Support Assistants (RSSAs) in the library during the Autumn term to assist at point of need during times of peak demand,
- determine the impact of this service on the BME student population through qualitative and quantitative methods
- consider how services might be adapted, targeted or improved to maximise their effectiveness.

We decided to offer the roving peer support service to all students in the library because we felt it would be impractical and undesirable to offer an enquiry service based on ethnicity. A number of academic libraries in the UK had already introduced roving support mainly staffed by existing library staff; a distinctive element of the Coventry project was the use of peer support. We were already aware of the use of student advisors at Warwick University's Learning Grid and after some research we found out about the peer support PALS scheme at the University of Lincoln (4) and the Study Advisor scheme at the University of Derby. All three institutions were generous in the sharing of job descriptions and we were able to utilize examples of good practice these institutions were already promoting amongst their students advisors.

To inform the training of the RSSAs we decided to find out what would help new students settle in more quickly. In July 2009, 500 questionnaires were given out to students working in the library asking them to reflect upon what additional assistance would help new students settle in more quickly at Coventry University. Questionnaire results provided data and evaluative comments on areas of need. The questionnaire also incorporated the university's equality and diversity monitoring form which, where completed, enabled analysis by respondent ethnicity. Of the 500 forms distributed, 187 forms were returned. Analysis of the questionnaire results indicated that for all students, regardless of ethnicity, there were three main areas where additional support was needed: study skills, virtual learning environment and library materials. However, for BME home students support with study skills was the most important. The project aimed to take a holistic view of study skills, using the

Oxford Dictionary of Education (2009) definition of 'The skills which learners need to possess in order to be able to study effectively. These include such disparate skills as …research skills, the ability to use information technology productively, and of course, the ability to read and to write at the appropriate level'.(5) We felt that the RSSAs were ideally placed to provide basic and directional support in a number of these areas, but should be able to refer to the library enquiry desks, the ITServices helpdesk and the Centre for Academic Writing (CAW) those who needed more in depth assistance.

Data from the questionnaires informed an intensive training day and handbook for the RSSAs with input from ITServices, CAW and the eLearning Unit complementing training offered specifically on finding library resources.

In Summer 2009 four Roving Study Support Assistants were recruited from Coventry University's student population. The RSSAs worked in the library between 5th October and 27th November 2009 during the core hours of 11am - 2pm and 5pm – 7pm Monday to Friday. Their main remit was to be a visible presence around the library at these peak times, providing a friendly initial point of contact for students who had enquiries about any aspect of university life. They were asked to record statistics on the type of enquiries they received as well as to report back any areas of concern, (although it would have been useful to be able to map enquiry type to ethnicity this proved impossible to achieve in a practical and sensitive way). During the last 3 weeks of their contract 500 service evaluation questionnaires were distributed to library users asking them to evaluate the usefulness, or otherwise, of the RSSA service. The researchers were particularly interested in results from new students and comparing results from different student populations.

Evaluation

Analysis shows that the type and number of actual enquiries received by the RSSAs differ from the priorities suggested by the results of the pre-project questionnaire. There was a wide range of types of enquiries. A particularly positive aspect to using current students to provide peer support was that they were able to answer questions on many aspects of student life less familiar to library staff including questions on TurnITIN (plagiarism software) and timetables. Questions relating to the library accounted for 63% of enquiries received, ITServices accounted for 26% of enquiries. This may be because the recording of enquiry types is subjective or it could be that students who answered the pre-project questionnaire see library and study skills as interchangeable.

We further analysed these statistics to try to determine whether the RSSA scheme had encouraged additional enquiries or just taken enquiries away from the traditional static enquiry services. A comparison between the RSSA enquiry statistics and the 2008 and 2009 SCONUL enquiry desk statistics shows that there was a drop in the number of enquiries received at the static enquiry desks in SCONUL weeks in October and November 2009 when RSSAs were employed in comparison to SCONUL weeks in October and November 2008 when RSSAs were not employed. This would suggest that the trend is for students to use the static enquiry service less; however, further research is needed to determine students' motives for this.

The service evaluation questionnaire (distributed during the last 3 weeks of the RSSAs contract) was designed to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the peer-support service that the RSSAs had offered. 121 questionnaires were completed. The pre-project questionnaire had indicated that study skills was the area most new BME Home students would have liked assistance with, however, the post project service evaluation questionnaire indicated that the RSSAs had been most helpful in finding library materials. We thought this required further analysis so we contacted those students who had indicated on the survey forms that they would be willing to help us further by attending a focus group.

We ran one focus group in December 2009, which had 8 participants. This showed that students perceived a number of barriers to using the library static enquiry desks including staff looking busy or unapproachable and there being long queues at the desk. Interestingly, the focus group highlighted that there was already an informal system of peer support in place for students from all ethnic backgrounds, so students were already comfortable with the concept of peer-supported learning when the RSSAs were introduced.

Those students who had used the RSSA scheme had found them very useful. A selection of focus group participants comments included:

'*I used them they were very, very helpful made my life much easier my work was much easier*'

'*we should have more of them. They were always asking if I needed help always smiling. It's good to have them on different shifts*'

Our final method of analysis was to ask the RSSAs to evaluate the service they offered and reflect on the ways they thought they had made a difference to the experience of students, particularly new students, at the university. It was clear that they felt they had made a positive difference to students' experience in the library by offering a friendly service at the point of need without the requirement to queue. They felt they helped to overcome the natural nervousness of new students. The RSSAs also made suggestions on how they felt the library could improve its services to new students – these included library staff at the static enquiry desks getting up and roving around occasionally and continuing the use of bright t-shirts to attract attention!

An additional positive aspect of the project was that it enhanced the RSSAs' employability.   RSSA feedback showed that the roles had helped them with their communication skills, helped build their confidence in approaching other students and improved their familiarity with library resources and facilities.

Conclusions.

Feedback from focus groups and the follow up survey indicated that students really valued the peer support given by the RSSAs and preferred it to the static enquiry service. From the small scale study that we undertook, it seems that more BME home students and international students used the RSSA service than white home students. It is difficult at this point to evaluate whether this has had a positive impact on attainment and retention of BME students at Coventry University but indicators will be feedback on library services from the National Student Survey, the Student Experience Survey (analysed by ethnicity) and the framework of Equality Impact Assessments - these will be analysed in due course.

Integral to the success of the project was support from library staff and management whose response to the service was overwhelmingly positive. It was clear from feedback that colleagues felt they could rely on the RSSAs to help deal with the long queues at the three subject floor based library enquiry desks at the beginning of term. Our library induction working group has recommended that the scheme be repeated in Autumn 2010 as a key feature of the library induction process and funding for this (with minor revisions to the timing and length of the scheme) has become available from a Coventry University Enterprise Award which the project team were fortunate enough to receive in May 2010. Clearly if the scheme is to run every year a more sustainable way of financing it needs to be found.

We have some concerns that students' preference for the roving enquiry service means that they don't access the more in depth support and enquiry responses they could receive from the static enquiry desks. It would be interesting to carry out a similar study comparing the approachability, visibility and service of the RSSAs and the library's static desk based enquiry service and to make recommendations about improvements to both services. With CAW and the Maths Support Centre recently coming under the 'umbrella' of the Lanchester Library it is hoped that these together with static and roving enquiry services can offer a joined up approach to supporting new students particularly in the first few weeks of the academic year. A further small-scale project is planned to explore library non-use by home BME students in academic year 2010/11.

References:

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