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White, Sue and Noel, Lorraine

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## Refereed paper

# Any questions? Just Ask: changing library roles at the University of Huddersfield to support widening participation

## *Sue White and Lorraine Noel*

## Authors

Sue White is Head of Library Services in Computing and Library Services at the University of Huddersfield. She chaired the groups which developed and monitored the Guide scheme discussed in this article. Lorraine Noel is User Services Manager in Computing and Library Services at the University of Huddersfield, with responsibility for most of the library front-line services. She was a member of the implementation and monitoring groups which co-ordinated the Guide scheme and led the evaluation process.

Email: s.a.white@hud.ac.uk

Email: l.c.noel@hud.ac.uk

## Abstract

This article describes an innovative scheme to improve students' abilities and confidence in using a University library, by adapting the role of library assistants. Through developing a more proactive and welcoming approach to supporting students when they entered the Library, it was hoped the Library would be able to contribute to the University's mission to attract and retain students from non-traditional HE backgrounds. The scheme has been well received by students and staff. The article highlights issues raised during the development, implementation and evaluation of the scheme.

## Introduction

Much has been written about changing roles in academic libraries. The majority of the literature focuses on the changing role of qualified staff, but the impact on assistants of technological change has been equally marked. Over a decade ago, the Fielden Report (1993) noted that work previously undertaken by qualified librarians was increasingly being performed by assistants, and predicted this trend would continue. The elib Project IMPEL2 (Edwards, Day and Walton, 1998) found that Senior Library Assistants or 'para-professional' staff were handling a greater proportion of enquiry, reference and help desk work. More recently, as noted by Webb (2004), 'even in traditional domains like lending services, the introduction of self-issue is changing the nature of work for all involved'. A recent study at Napier University showed that as a result of introducing self-check, 24% of survey respondents reported that staff had more time for non-issue desk tasks such as user assistance (Gollin and Pinder, 2003).

The main drivers for role change have been largely technological, as libraries adapt to the new electronic environment and all that entails. Another big factor is provision of appropriate support for students in the mass higher education system. Skills development is a key area in which library staff increasingly contribute; not just in terms of developing information literacy, but IT skills as well. At Huddersfield we have overhauled our entire IT student support service, and have introduced hybrid IT/library posts to help provide the support required; a collaborative venture to improve student IT skills between Library and academic departments at Leeds Metropolitan University has been highly successful (Payne and Waller, 2003).

The main focus of this article however, is a scheme introduced at the University of Huddersfield to improve our support for students at a more fundamental level, and its impact on the roles of support staff.

**The Huddersfield context**

The University of Huddersfield has for many years been successful in widening participation in higher education by students from under-represented backgrounds, especially from lower socio-economic groups. Such students often need additional academic and pastoral support to ensure their retention and progression. The Library at Huddersfield University, in common with most other academic libraries, has developed its services to support part-time students, mature students, distance learners, off campus students, and students with disabilities. We have steadily increased our provision of information literacy training. But despite all this, many students still appeared to struggle with the basic skills required to use the Library.

Many were unable to navigate their way around the building, were confused by the catalogue, perplexed by the Dewey system, and generally lacked confidence. Indeed we had anecdotal evidence that some students found the Library so intimidating they simply could not bring themselves to cross its threshold. A number of factors came together in 2002 which encouraged us to change the way we support students at the front line:

- A need to improve student recruitment and retention rates at the University. Whilst the Library's impact on recruitment was likely to be marginal, we felt we *could* contribute to retention rates. For struggling students, the smallest of obstacles (such as being unable to log on to the network, or find the key text on the reading list) can potentially tip the balance between persevering or dropping out. By being more welcoming and supportive, we might just make a difference.

- The results of a large scale independently commissioned student satisfaction survey. The perception amongst students was that Huddersfield was a friendly place, and the University was advised to exploit this. The Library felt it could play its part.

- The experience of front line staff in promoting self-service issue. Assistants had found when demonstrating self-service issue at machines in the library foyer, that students took the opportunity to ask other questions about using the library – how to check their borrower record for example, or locate a particular book. The majority of these students would probably never have approached a help desk, but felt quite comfortable about talking to a member of staff out on the floor.

- During the staff consultation meetings which contribute to the formulation of the annual service plan, a consensus emerged that we should adopt a more proactive welcoming and guiding role to our students, and this became a central theme in our strategy for 2003/4.

**The 'vision'**

Our aim was to provide a friendly welcome, and routine support. The 'Guides' (as they became known) would be the first point of contact for people entering the Library; they would stand near the main entrance and offer help as required ; they would show students how to use the catalogue, guide them to the appropriate subject floors, locate books and journals, and direct them to relevant service points. They would also refer students to experts for more specific subject help.

In terms of customer interaction, our ideal was a balance between the overpowering retail 'meet and greet' philosophy, where unwitting customers are pounced on as soon as they enter the shop, and the wallflower approach, in which staff would wait meekly for students to ask questions. In the event of course, we got a range of styles from our library assistants, according to what they felt most comfortable with.

**Implications for staff**

The requirement for library staff to be multi-skilled and flexible is now an accepted fact of life. The SCONUL vision for academic information services in the year 2005 states:

> 'The library workforce will have to be more flexible and versatile, with different structural arrangements and management practices to meet changing needs. Significant investment in continuous professional development will be required for all library staff, including

development of learning support competencies and continual refreshment of professional and technical skills.' (SCONUL, 2003)

Our proposed scheme had significant implications for library staff. We were requiring our library assistants to change their role, from a passive one of standing behind a counter and serving students when they presented themselves, to a more proactive one of approaching students at the Library entrance and offering help. We knew from the outset that some staff would take to this role like ducks to water, others could be persuaded, and one or two would be resistant. Training and development would be a key to the success of this scheme.

Other staff too would potentially be affected: in particular the librarians at the Enquiry Desk, who historically dealt with the majority of student enquiries on the main entrance floor. Although they supported the initiative and recognised its value in terms of dealing with many of the more routine questions, there was some anxiety that the Guides might exceed their remit and encroach on the work of qualified librarians.

## Methodology

A working party was established to implement the new scheme. The then Director of Computing and Library Services, Phil Sykes, circulated to all staff a paper outlining the vision and rationale for the initiative, which put the subsequent development work into context.

The working party was chaired by the Deputy Director, and comprised nine members of staff from across the service. It included four library assistants to act as 'champions', and in retrospect this proved to be one of the most significant factors in ensuring the engagement of the staff who would be undertaking the role. The champions were extremely enthusiastic about the new role, both during the development phase and during the actual implementation, and there is no doubt their dynamism helped win round some of their colleagues.

A series of meetings were held over summer 2003, during which time the group defined and redefined the role of the Guides (a working title, which ultimately was adopted). All library staff were consulted and invited to contribute their comments. Readers may be interested in some of the issues which invoked most discussion:

- Who should do the Guiding ? Should it be confined to the extroverts with the outgoing personalities, or should it be a requirement for all library assistants? There were arguments for and against, but in the end we decided on the latter. We felt that as this more proactive support to students was the direction in which we wanted to take the service long term, it was right for all staff to be involved in delivering it.

- Where should the Guides be based? Obviously they needed to be near the entrance, but should they be sited at a desk, or should they be free-standing? Again, we plumped for the latter on the grounds that it was important to remove any potential barriers, which a desk could be perceived as.

- The means of making the Guides easily identifiable to incoming students. Our assistants strongly resisted the idea of wearing a uniform, or even a tee shirt. We considered sashes and hats, but ultimately chose a large round badge which simply read 'Any questions? Just Ask'.

- Referrals i.e. the point at which referrals should be made to Enquiry Desk or subject specialist staff. After considerable discussion we arrived at a carefully defined list of Guide responsibilities, and we re-stated the role of the Enquiry Desk. It was essential to achieve absolute clarity on who did what.

- Training. Because of the nature of their substantive posts, many library assistants were not familiar with the layout of the subject floors, or the catalogue functions. A comprehensive training programme was devised to ensure that all Guides had a base level familiarity with the key library services and functions.

It was agreed to pilot and monitor the scheme for a full academic year. During the Autumn term a monitoring group met weekly; thereafter meetings reduced to fortnightly or monthly as appropriate.

### Evaluation

A range of statistics was collected throughout the year, as well as feedback from the Guides themselves, other library staff, and a user satisfaction survey.

**Take-up of the service throughout the year**

During the 2003-2004 academic session, the Guide service was provided throughout the 13 weeks of the Autumn term, the 13 weeks of the Spring term, and for 4 weeks during the Summer term (from April to May). Guides recorded both the type of assistance/enquiry and the number of users they dealt with using a simple 'five-bar gate' system. An analysis of these statistics revealed that during the year, the Guides dealt with **9,711** enquiries from **8,902** users.

**Table 1: Breakdown of the number of enquiries by term**

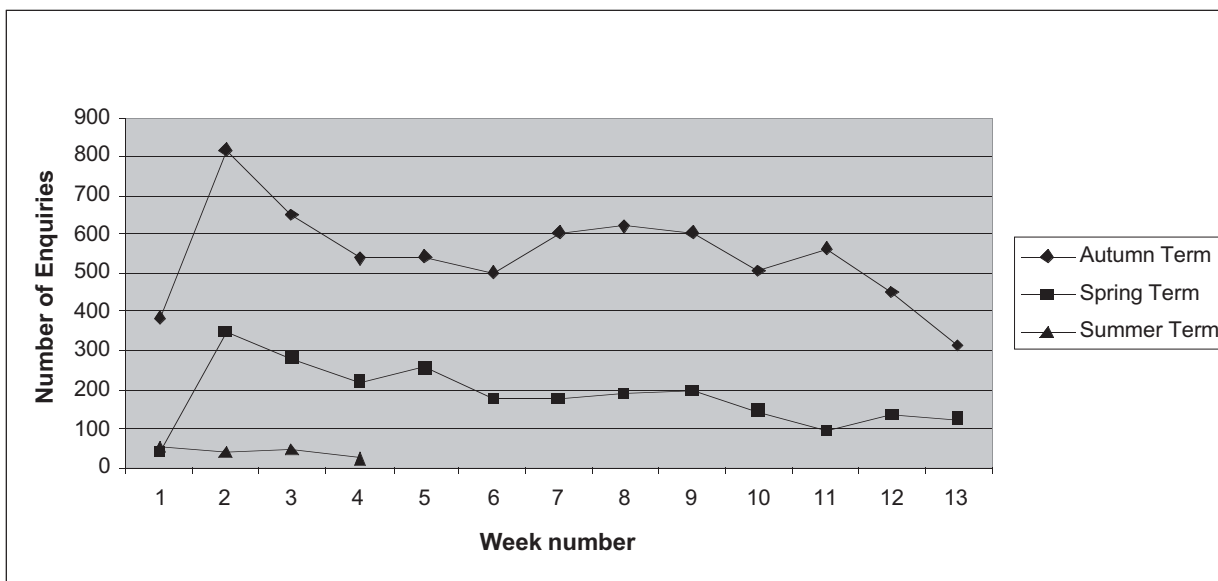|  | Number of Enquiries | Number of Users |
|---|---|---|
| Autumn Term | 7116 | 6480 |
| Spring Term | 2417 | 2252 |
| Summer Term | 178 | 170 |
| **Total** | **9711** | **8902** |

Table 1 clearly shows:
- The majority of enquiries (approximately 73% of the total) were received during the Autumn term. This was to be expected, given the influx of new students who were unfamiliar with the Library and its services.
- A substantial decline in the number of enquiries received during the Spring term (approximately 25% of the total)

- There was very little demand for the Guide service during the Summer term, with only 2% of the total number of enquiries being received after the Easter vacation

Figure 1 provides a further breakdown of the enquiries on a week-by-week basis during the three terms.

**Figure 1: Number of enquiries by term 2003-2004**

It is noteworthy that:

- The highest number of enquiries was recorded during week 2 in the Autumn term (the first week 'teaching' week in September) when 821 enquiries were received from 717 users.

- The highest number of enquiries during the Spring term was also received during week 2 (again the first 'teaching' week) in January. This peak of 350 enquiries is possibly attributable to a small January intake of new students.

- The Guides were on average dealing with over 500 enquiries per week during the Autumn term, approximately 200 enquiries per week during the Spring term and approximately 50 enquiries per week during the Summer term.

**Take-up of the service by time of day**
Throughout the year, the Guide service was provided between 10:00am and 4:00pm on weekdays. The number of enquiries received during particular time slots is outlined below.

**Table 2: Breakdown of the number of enquiries by time of day**

|  | 1000-1100 | 1100-1200 | 1200-1300 | 1300-1400 | 1400-1500 | 1500-1600 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Autumn term | 768 | 1111 | 1509 | 1630 | 1355 | 743 |
| Spring term | 210 | 399 | 510 | 622 | 437 | 239 |
| Summer term | 13 | 49 | 61 | 35 | 18 | 2 |
| **Total** | **991** | **1559** | **2080** | **2287** | **1810** | **984** |

The table clearly illustrates that throughout the year the highest demand for the Guide service was between 12:00pm and 2:00pm. This corresponds with the peak period of demand for all Library services and facilities generally. The relatively high demand for the service between 11:00am and 12:00pm and between 2:00pm and 3:00pm, and the lower demand between 10:00am and 11:00am and between 3:00pm and 4:00pm, also follows the established pattern of demand that already exists for other Library services.

**Analysis of enquiries**
Figure 2 illustrates the number and type of enquiries handled by the Guides throughout the year.

**Figure 2: Number and type of enquiries 2003-2004**
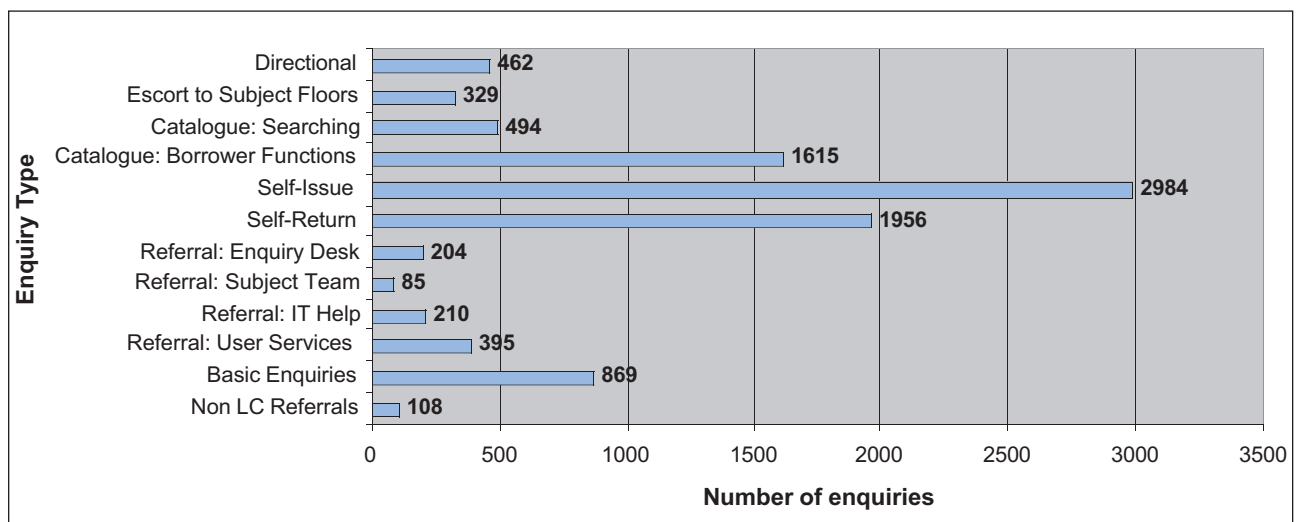
The dominance of 'Self-issue', 'Self-return' and 'Catalogue: Borrower Functions' (e.g. self-service renewals and reservations), is striking. Between them, these enquiries account for **65%** of the total received during the year, and almost without exception, they were consistently the three most popular types of enquiry on a weekly basis – though the gap between them and the other types of enquiry reduced as the year progressed. This result was not entirely unexpected given that part of the Guides' remit was to actively promote the use of the self-service facilities.  The strategy worked, with 71% of total daily issues being attributable to self-service during 2003-4, compared with 31% in the previous year.

After 'Self-service' assistance, 'Basic Enquiries' emerged as the next most popular type of enquiry (869 recorded occurrences). This covered issues such as opening hours, sales and loans. The highest number of 'Basic Enquiries' were recorded during the first 2 weeks of the Autumn term (66 and 103 enquiries respectively), compared with an average of 44 enquiries per week for the remainder of the term.  This was largely attributable to the need to show students who were coming in to the Library for the first time, how to use their I.D. cards to gain access. As the academic session progressed, the need for 'basic' assistance declined significantly.

'Directional Enquiries', 'Non Library referrals' (e.g. University Finance Office, Students Union) and 'Referral to the IT Helpdesk', are all examples of assistance which 'peaked' during the first 2 weeks of the Autumn term and significantly declined thereafter as users obviously became familiar with both the layout of the Library, and the location of essential services on the campus.

Prior to the introduction of the Guide service, we had anticipated there would be a substantial demand for assistance in locating books on the shelves. However, the statistics reveal only 329 requests for an 'Escort to Subject Floors' and interestingly, 130 (40%) of the total requests for this service were received during the first 5

weeks of the Autumn term. For the remainder of the term, the Guides only dealt with an average of 19 requests per week for the service and an average of 6 requests per week during the Spring term. These results were slightly disappointing and appear to challenge an assumption about a potential demand for Guide assistance which did not materialise.

'Catalogue: Searching' and 'Referrals to User Services' (e.g. photocopying, Lending Services, Inter-Library Loans, Disability support), are both examples of assistance for which there was a slight peak during the first 2 weeks of the Autumn term, but for which demand remained relatively steady throughout the year.

## User perceptions of the Guide service

Guides were encouraged throughout the year to note any feedback they received from users. There were many positive comments about the Guide service in which users expressed their appreciation for the 'great welcome', the 'great service', the 'really useful information' and the 'help with renewals'. The Guides also noted that as the service became established, students began to approach them for help, rather than waiting for a Guide to offer assistance.   It was interesting to note that users also began to approach the Guides solely for the purpose of making comments, suggestions and complaints about aspects of the service (e.g. signage, printing, self-service facilities).

In addition to the informal comments made to the Guides, user perceptions about the Guide service were sought from the biennial User Satisfaction Survey which was conducted in February 2004, and which was disseminated to all students whether or not they were regular users of the Library.

### User awareness of the service
In total, 1764 people responded to the User Survey. Of these:

- 57.2% of users claimed they were aware of the Guide Service compared to 41.2% who said that they were not.

- 91.8% of users stated that the Guide Service was a good idea compared to 3.5% who said it was not.

- 42.8% of the respondents claimed to have made use of the Guide Service compared to 55.2% who said they had not.

These results were very encouraging particularly as the User Survey was undertaken only five months after the Guide service was introduced.

**User rating of the service**
Those students who had made use of the Guide service were asked to rate it, and 755 responses were received.

**Figure 3: User rating of the Guide service**



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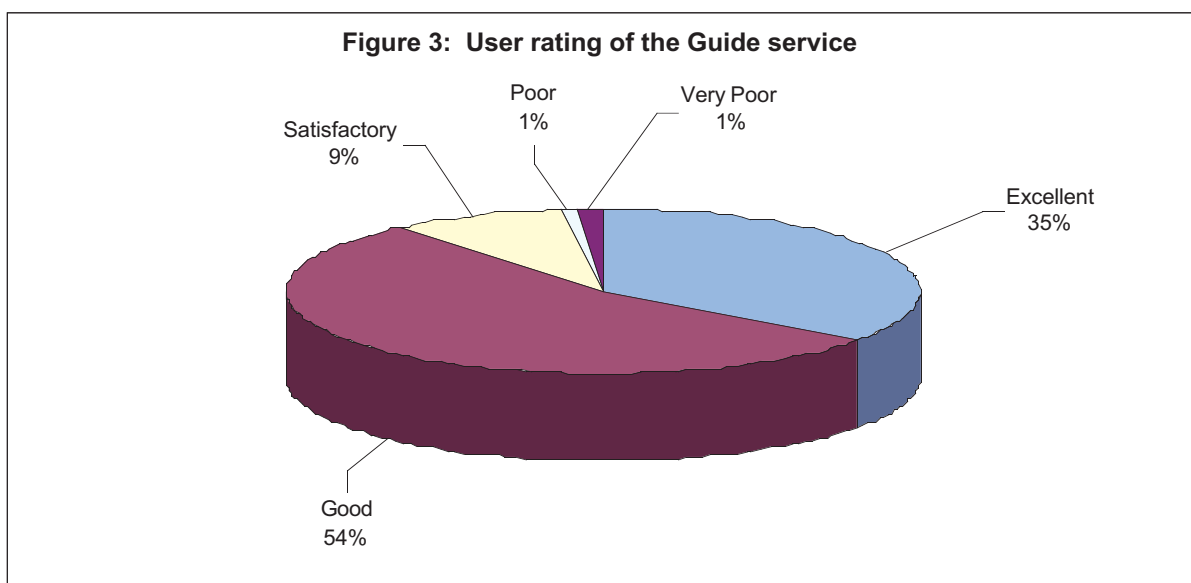
The vast majority of students who had used the Guide service rated it as either 'Good' or 'Excellent'. Several users also specifically referred to the Guide service when they were asked to comment on Library Services as a whole. They said they liked being directed or escorted to the correct subject floors, they appreciated the help they had received with the self-service facilities and they liked the fact that 'staff are on the look out for people who need help'.

Conversely, 2% of the students (16 respondents) rated the service as 'Poor' or 'Very Poor'. Comments indicate that for a minority of students, the Guide service is an unwelcome enhancement. Users stated for example that they found it 'off-putting being approached', they disliked 'getting help when it's not needed' and they felt as though they were being approached by 'an overly- enthusiastic shopkeeper'.

**Library Assistants' views of the Guide service**

Although library assistants had been actively encouraged by the Champions to express their views about the Guide scheme on a weekly basis throughout the year, a formal survey was also undertaken in July 2004 as part of the evaluation process. The survey was disseminated to all the assistants (49 in total).

Thirty nine assistants (79.5%) responded, and of these, 37 assistants felt that the Guide service had been a good initiative.

**Guide training**

- The majority of assistants (approximately 75%), considered the training they had received to be 'effective' or 'very effective'.

- Thirty two assistants (82.1%) felt they had received an adequate amount of training to confidently assume the Guide role. However,

two assistants suggested that assertiveness/confidence training should also be included 'to enable us to approach people who look as if they need assistance'.

• Four assistants stated they had undertaken Guide duty without receiving any formal training. Two of these were appointed after the scheme commenced, and the other two had been unavailable for training.

Although the initial training programme conducted in August/September 2003 appears to have been highly effective, its routine inclusion in induction programmes for new library assistants was overlooked. It should be noted that a small minority of staff still feel slightly uncomfortable in the role.

### Length of Guide duty slots
During the development phase of the scheme, it had been agreed that library assistants would be assigned Guide duty for no longer than one hour at a time. The survey revealed that the majority of assistants (82.1%) felt that this was 'Just right'. In addition:

• Four assistants stated that if Guide duty were to be undertaken for longer than one hour, it 'could lead to fatigue and poorer concentration'.

• Eight assistants noted that although the one hour time slot was appropriate when it was busy, they felt that even this was too long 'when it was quiet' and 'during the second and third term'.

The issue of what the Guides do in quiet periods was one which emerged not just in the formal evaluation, but throughout the year as well. More thought needs to be given to how we balance the need for Guides to be visible and approachable on the one hand, but not standing idle on the other.

### Enhanced support to students
Most Guides felt the scheme had proved to be a very useful' and 'popular' service enhancement, particularly for new students. They stated for example that students had 'a friendly first point of contact', 'easy access to help', and 'support

to find what they need more efficiently overall'. They felt students were appreciative of the 'one-to-one' assistance and the 'hands-on help' they received (e.g. with the library catalogue, borrowing, renewals), and the Guide presence meant they neither had to queue at, nor approach a counter/desk that could perhaps appear 'intimidating'.

Several assistants commented on the positive outcomes of the Guide remit. The 'welcoming' aspect of the role had meant that students 'didn't feel embarrassed about asking questions', and the 'proactive approach' had worked very well because those students who looked as though they were 'struggling… might not otherwise ask for help'.

### Benefits for library assistants
The majority of assistants enjoyed and responded positively to the Guide role. This was typified by such comments as 'Helping new students get on track with basic information was very rewarding', 'I liked having face to face contact with users and giving positive assistance' and '…we got lots of profuse thanks from the students which made it all worthwhile'. The library assistants also clearly felt that the Guide scheme had increased their morale and led to greater job enrichment because they claimed that they had benefited from:

• An improved knowledge and appreciation of user needs and the problems faced by new students
• Increased confidence due to 'the freedom to help users effectively'
• Improved knowledge of key aspects of Library Services (e.g. the bibliographic aspects of the catalogue, familiarisation with the Subject floors)
• Further skills development, particularly 'in undertaking basic enquiry work'

### Benefits for front-line service points
Several assistants noted that the Guide scheme had resulted in certain benefits for front-line service points. These included:

• The active promotion and user take-up of the various self-service facilities

- Improved signage (as a consequence of user suggestions)
- A reduction in the queue/waiting times
- A reduction in the pressure on front-line services as the Guides handled simple enquiries
- An improved referral process

### Negative aspects of the Guide scheme

The over-riding concern of library assistants was 'standing around with no prospective customers when it was quiet'. Several assistants also felt the service should have been suspended much earlier in the academic session when demand began to decline.

### Suggestions for improvements to the Guide scheme

The general consensus amongst library assistants was that the Guide service 'was a really good scheme' which should continue. Several assistants did however take the opportunity to suggest some minor modifications to the scheme which included: greater promotion of the service during student inductions, and the provision of Guide "refresher" training prior to the commencement of each academic session.

### Other Library staff views of the Guide service

All those library staff who were *not* Guides were also asked to comment on the scheme. They reiterated many of the positive views that had been expressed by the library assistants, although a minority of librarians still felt the Guides might be tempted to answer questions 'that would be better answered by professional librarians'.

### Issues for consideration when implementing a Guide scheme

There are a number of issues which emerged during the implementation and evaluation of the scheme, which may be of interest to others thinking of embarking on similar initiatives.

### Changing roles

We were fortunate at Huddersfield in having fairly widespread support for the scheme from the people who would be undertaking the new Guide role. We were also fortunate in not having to formally review job descriptions to incorporate the new role, as the provision of routine support for students was already included, but this may not be the case in all institutions.

Workload is an issue to be aware of, particularly for part-time staff. We expected Guides to acquire new skills and knowledge to undertake the Guide role, in addition to the knowledge required in their substantive posts. Some staff understandably felt overloaded, and unable to retain all the required information needed for the distinct roles within their jobs. As managers it is tempting to demand ever more flexibility from staff, but we have to be realistic about how much information our colleagues can assimilate.

On the positive side, the majority of Guides loved their new role. Our assistants enjoyed the increased customer contact with students and being able to help them in a more substantial way than simply 'stamping books'. They gained in self-confidence as they became more proficient in using the catalogue and finding information.

One area we need to investigate further is the impact of the Guide role on the enquiry services provided by qualified librarians. Not having collected detailed statistics at the Enquiry Desk in 2002/3 we were unable to evaluate the impact fully.

### Ownership and communication

As with all projects which involve significant change, good communication is essential. Ensure staff are involved at the outset, and consult them throughout the development. Enlist Champions from amongst the group who will undertake the Guide role, and respond promptly to any concerns.

## Training

Do not under-estimate the time it takes to train staff to a base-line level of competence. On average each of our library assistants received about five hours induction training, which included an overview of the scheme, layout of collections on the subject floors, and basic bibliographic searching on the catalogue. Additional catalogue training was provided in response to some groups of assistants. Several assistants also underwent external training in basic enquiry work, and it is planned to continue this in the future. Refresher training is required at the beginning of each academic session, and all new staff should have the core Guide training incorporated into their induction programme.

## Quality issues

As noted earlier, there were concerns from some librarians that the Guides might be tempted to exceed their remit, by trying to answer subject enquiries of which they had insufficient knowledge. In the event these fears proved largely unfounded, but managers need to be aware of possible tensions developing between staff whose roles may overlap.

## Resources

This type of scheme is staffing intensive. At the busiest times of the year we devoted ten hours a day to it, with two people on duty over the extended lunchtime period. At Huddersfield we were able to do this through making efficiencies elsewhere, specifically by freeing up staff previously deployed to issue and return books.

Having kept detailed statistics for a full year, we now feel able to better anticipate the periods of highest demand for the service, and to adjust staffing levels accordingly. Responsibility for making these adjustments on a day to day basis now resides with a single member of staff, who co-ordinates the Guide service.

## Conclusions

We acknowledge that the use of library assistants to field basic enquiries from students is not new. Nor is the expectation that library staff should be customer orientated and multi-skilled. But what this scheme has done is borrow and adapt practices more commonplace in the retailing and banking industries, where customers are welcomed on entrance to the building and given assistance with meeting their needs. It has proved highly successful in the context of a large academic library, and is now embedded, with some modifications, into our mainstream activity.

Whether or not the scheme has contributed to the improved retention rates now enjoyed by the University, is hard to say. But the feedback noted earlier indicates that the service is both valued and appreciated by students.

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