

Postcards from the (research) edge: staying in touch with students throughout their PhD travels



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BACKGROUND

The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) has around 9,000 students, of whom just over half are postgraduates. Students are drawn from around 140 countries and overall about two-thirds of LSE students come from outside the UK. LSE actively focuses on continuously developing and enhancing the research environment for this cosmopolitan student body.

Like many universities, LSE is taking action to respond to the feeling of isolation which is sometimes experienced by PhD students,¹ and a range of activities are being undertaken by the academic-support departments to address this concern. In the library, we believe we have a key role to play in supporting students' work and contributing to a sense of community amongst the PhD student group. The creation of a new post – liaison and service development manager – in June 2009 gave us the opportunity to review our research-support services, and we have developed a portfolio of tailored services specifically for PhD students. Having done this, we felt we needed to find new ways of making contact with research

students so that we could promote our services effectively. Our aim is to build a long-term relationship with these students which will develop as their research progresses throughout their programme. PhD students will be part of the LSE research community for anywhere between three and six years, and longer if they take up academic posts, and so it is both possible and beneficial for all concerned to have this sort of relationship.

MAKING CONTACT AND KEEPING IN TOUCH

Each LSE department, research centre and group has a dedicated professional librarian – known as a liaison librarian – who has knowledge of the subject and of the information resources available. We set ourselves the target of making personal contact with all PhD students at the beginning of their time at LSE, and to follow up this initial meeting to offer support in relation to their information needs throughout their programme. We believe that we have valuable help to offer, and we want to establish a meaningful two-way partnership – not simply a system where the library bombards the students with an indiscriminate and overwhelming plethora of information.

All relationships begin with an introduction and we needed to find an effective and attractive way of making contact with new PhD students. When the new liaison and service development manager took up her post in June 2009, she held a series of meetings with each liaison librarian. It became clear that liaison librarians used a range of techniques to introduce themselves to PhD students, and with a good deal of success, but what we lacked was an overall service focus which the liaison librarians could promote as a team.

Following some enjoyable brainstorming sessions, the idea of the research postcard emerged and snowballed. This idea was developed, refined and launched during PhD induction week in October 2009.

RESEARCH POSTCARDS

The postcards are a double-sized postcard which is detachable along a perforated line. One half of the postcard is for the student to keep and includes the contact details of the liaison librarian, and the other half is for the student to return to the library with their contact details and their research interests. They were created in time for the start of the 2009/10 academic year. The postcards are aimed at new PhD students and were launched at the school-wide PhD induc-

tion held the week beginning 12 October 2009 for new research students. The library attends the induction every year during the lunchtime break, and the research postcards proved to be an effective ice-breaker for liaison librarians to use to approach students and introduce themselves.

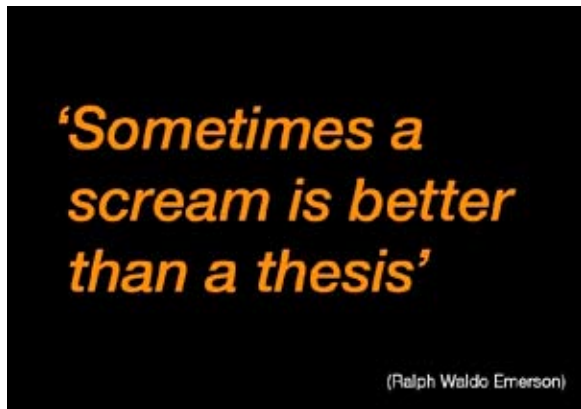


Figure 1: front of the postcard

The research postcards were designed with two purposes in mind. First, they are a way for liaison librarians to introduce themselves to new students. A very simple message on the postcard highlights the research-support services offered by the library and gives contact details for the liaison librarian. Secondly, the postcards ask PhD students to give brief details including their name, e-mail address, and academic department. They are also asked for information about their research topic and keywords. The students send these back to the library and the relevant liaison librarian responds with some initial feedback about their research topic. This includes information about resources the library has which may be useful (including archival material and print and electronic collections), search tips (for any tricky databases), help with keywords, and other libraries of relevance.

The postcard also asks research students if they would like to be linked up with other students who are doing similar research (known as 'PhD student link-up'). This is part of a wider initiative to help PhD students build a research community with their peers..

OUTCOMES

The postcards have proved to be very popular with students. To date the library has received 67 research postcards. Most of these were received at the new PhD induction lunchtime sessions, which the library attended. In addition, some postcards were received through departmental PhD training sessions (unfortunately the postcards did not

arrive in time for all of the departmental sessions), and some came via the library help desk on the first floor.

This year LSE had approximately 210 new PhD students. As mentioned above, 67 postcards have been completed by first year PhD students and this equates to a 32 per cent response rate. This is a very promising success rate and one which we know we can improve on in the future.

In addition, 85 per cent of students who submitted a postcard said that they would like to be linked up with other students doing similar research. Only two students (3 per cent) said they did not want to be linked to other students, while the remainder of students did not complete this question. The results indicate there is a clear appetite for this kind of initiative within the school.

The amount of time required for liaison librarians to complete the research-support feedback is being monitored but currently it is proving to be very cost-efficient.

We evaluated the success of the research postcards and this included a survey of the PhD students' responses to the service. We found that 76 per cent of students who returned a postcard felt that the

The image shows the back of the postcard. At the top left is the LSE Library logo with the text "British Library of Political and Economic Science". Below this is the headline "If screaming doesn't help then perhaps we can." followed by the text "Your liaison librarian can offer support, training and advice about library resources." and the URL "www.lse.ac.uk/library/services/liaison". The main body of the postcard is a form with the instruction "Please fill in this postcard so your liaison librarian can help you." The form includes fields for "Name:", "Email:", "Department:", "Topic:", and "Keywords:". At the bottom, there is a question "Would you like to be put in touch with other students doing similar research?" with two radio button options: "Yes" and "No (tick box)". The right edge of the postcard is decorated with a vertical strip of colorful, overlapping text related to various academic disciplines.

Figure 2: filling in the postcard

response they received from the liaison librarian was useful. One student commented:

'Thank-you so much for this document. This an excellent starting point – I was actually wondering where else I could find resources, after Google/Google Scholar/Google Books.'

In addition, over 90 per cent of respondents said that they already had contacted, or that they would contact, their liaison librarian again in the future. Another student said:

'Thank you very much for sending me this very useful document. I think I will spend a couple of weeks looking at all these databases and then request a meeting with you in order to sharpen my research.'

The feedback received from students as part of the survey has been useful in helping to further develop the service. One of the challenges for the liaison librarians was to pitch the information in their responses to the students at the right level. Obviously PhD students have varying degrees of knowledge and skills. It is important not to make the response too advanced but equally not too basic. There were some suggestions for other support that the library could provide and we are now following this up. Overall, research students were happy with the support services currently offered.

THE SNOWBALL EFFECT

There have also been a number of spin-off effects from the research postcards. After they were introduced, at the LSE research student consultative forum the library was approached by research students from the PhD steering group, who were very interested in learning more about the services the library can offer. This group is a grassroots organisation – set up by PhD students to help create a sense of community amongst them and to offer a way of exchanging ideas and information amongst themselves. As a result the library now has a very strong relationship with the PhD steering group and is supporting them in setting up several of their own initiatives. One of these is the creation of a PhD network using the school's VLE (Virtual Learning Environment), Moodle. Conversations are taking place with the steering group about how PhD student link-up information, gathered through the postcards, could be used within the PhD network.

Due to the collaboration with the PhD steering group, the library has also forged a stronger relationship with the academic registrar's division (ARD). The research degrees manager has already offered to hand out the research postcards to new research students next year, as all PhD students must go to her office to collect their institutional ID card. This will provide the perfect opportunity to ensure that all new PhD students receive a postcard. We will continue to give out the postcards at the new PhD student induction and at any departmental PhD sessions. They will also continue to be available from the library's help desk. In addition, individual departments have expressed interest in the postcards and are keen to publicise them to their own students.

FOLLOW-ON SUPPORT

The research postcard and the feedback the PhD student receives from the liaison librarian are not the end of the story. The replies and feedback received should encourage students to contact their liaison librarian again in the future as and when they encounter any problems, or if they just want advice relating to their information needs. This simple exchange of postcards provides the means of beginning a dialogue, and from there a working relationship can grow.

REFERENCE

- 1 There has been a lot of literature reporting on the feelings of isolation of PhD students, including Azah Ali and Fredrick Kohun, 'Dealing with isolation feelings in IS doctoral programs', *International journal of doctoral studies*, 1 (2006), available at <http://ijds.org/Volume1/IJDSv1p021-033Ali13.pdf> [accessed 17/2/10]; P. Hawley *Being bright is not enough*, Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 2003; and Chris Park, 'War of attrition: patterns of non-completion amongst postgraduate research students', *Higher education review*, 38 (1), 2005, pp 48–53, available at http://eprints.lancs.ac.uk/118/1/war_of_attrition.pdf [accessed 17/2/10].